Finding Brands and Losing Your Religion?

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Religion is a powerful force in many people's lives, impacting decisions about life, death, and everything in between. It may be difficult, then, to imagine that something as seemingly innocuous as the usage of brand name products might influence individuals' commitment to religion. However, we demonstrate across 6 studies that when brands are a highly salient tool for self-expression, individuals are less likely to report and demonstrate strong religious commitment. We suggest that a desire to maintain consistency among self-identities is one important driver of this relationship and find that the effect is mitigated when the perceived distance between brands and religious values is minimized.

Keywords: religion, brands, self-expression, self-consistency

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In this research, we explore the notion that when individuals use brands to express the self, they will exhibit lower levels of religious commitment, defined as the degree to which they adhere to religious values, beliefs, and practices in daily life (Worthington et al., 2003). Although religious commitment is a broad topic and multiply determined, we suggest that brands play an interesting role based on individuals’ need to maintain consistency among different aspects of the self. Specifically, we suggest that brands and religion can activate distant, and at times, conflicting aspects of the self. Combining this insight with a long history of research suggesting that individuals desire to have a coherent, consistent view of self (e.g., Heider 1958), we expect that individuals will avoid the discomfort of simultaneously expressing these conflicting identities by minimizing their religious commitment when brands are an active tool for communicating one’s identity.

In sum, we aim to provide the first empirical investigation of the impact of branding on religious commitment, a relevant topic given the ubiquity of brands in everyday life and the esteem with which many hold their religious commitment. In doing so, we provide a novel perspective on the psychological impact of branding and enhance our understanding of when and why religious commitment may often be deprioritized in individuals’ lives.

Brands, Religion, and Identity

Research suggests that what we consider to be the “self” actually reflects a constellation of multiple, context-dependent identities that capture a host of diverse roles, relationships, traits, goals, values, and experiences (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius 1986; McConnell, 2011; Roberts & Donahue, 1994). Consumers organize these identities within an associative network and identities vary in their degree of associations to one another; some identities are tightly connected with one another, whereas others are highly distant and dissociated from one another (Amiot, De La...
Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Greenwald et al., 2002; Lane & Scott 2007; Luna et al., 2008; McConnell, 2011; Roccas & Brewer 2002). Of interest to the investigation at hand, religion and brand-name products both serve as contributors to an individual’s network of identities (although they often represent a fairly dissociated pair of identities—as is later discussed).

With respect to religion, research suggests that it is an important means by which many individuals discover and reaffirm who they are, “whose” they are, and where they belong in the world (Damon, 1983; King, 2003; Mol, 1976; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). It not only allows individuals with a purpose for their existence but also offers prescriptions for how to live and what goals to pursue (Baumeister, 1991; Pargament, 2001). Religion also allows people to experience an identity that is connected to a higher power and a community of believers (Gebauer & Maio, 2012; Granqvist et al., 2010; King, 2003; Krause & Wulff, 2005) and ultimately enhances individuals’ feelings of self-worth (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

As individuals affirm religion as a part of their identity, they have many tools for signaling this identity to themselves and others. For example, attendance at religious services and participation in various religious rituals (e.g., ceremonies celebrating birth, coming of age, marriage, death, etc.) are ways by which individuals affirm and express their identities (Hammond, 1988; Seul, 1999). Moreover, material symbols of religion (e.g., art, literature, dress, etc.) serve as important forms of identity expression (Gaines, 1985; Keenan & Arweck, 2006; Sandikci & Ger, 2010). In fact, some researchers have equated religion to an art form given its expressive tendencies (Beit-Hallahmi, 1986; Pruys, 1976). Others have highlighted how religious language itself is a powerful and unique form of expression that allows individuals, even in public (nonreligious) groups, to communicate their place in civic landscapes (Lichterman, 2008).

Importantly, just as religion represents an important aspect of individuals’ identities, so do brand-name products. Building on William James’ (1890) contention that possessions can be regarded as integral aspects of one’s identity, a great deal of research has demonstrated that people often construct their self-concepts and express their identities through their relationships with products (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011; Reed, 2004; Richins, 1994; Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Within this tradition, research further suggests that brand-name products are especially well suited for constructing and expressing aspects of the self due to the distinctive images and personalities that they possess (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Wu, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2011). Aaker (1999), for example, demonstrated that consumers use different brands to express their identities, depending on the personalities of the brands (e.g., ruggedness, excitement) and the particular situations. Relatedly, Escalas and Bettman (2003) demonstrated that individuals connect to brands that allow them to express identities that are consistent with their desired ingroups. Research also suggests that people often spend lavishly on branded products to create and “show off” identities related to financial wealth and particular aspects of culture, style, or taste (Amaldoss & Jain, 2003; Twitchell, 2002). It is important to note, however, that brands function not only in allowing individuals to signal their identity to others but also in reaffirming who they are to themselves (Bodner & Prelec, 2003; Loewenstein, 1999).

**Brand and Religion: Distant Aspects of Identity?**

Although the prior research suggests that both religion and brands are important aspects of individuals’ identities, the underlying goals and values that they communicate may be perceived by consumers as being quite distant from one another. To illustrate, we turn to value systems research. Schwartz (1992), for example, identified what is considered to be a foundational set of 10 basic human values and articulated how they relate to one another as either complements or competitors within a two-dimensional circumplex model. The first dimension of this circumplex focuses on how values that highlight an “Openness to Change” (i.e., hedonism, stimulation, self-direction) directly conflict with values related to “Conservation” (i.e., security, conformity, tradition). It is the second dimension, however, that is most informative for the present research. It suggests that values related to “Self-Enhancement” (i.e., hedonism, power, achievement) conflict with those focused on “Self-Transcendence” (i.e., benevolence, universalism). Or as Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) summarized, the self-oriented values conflict with the more communal-oriented values, respectively. Important to the present work and discussed next, the findings of prior research imply that a focus on religion best reflects a self-transcendent, communal orientation, whereas a focus on brands best reflects a self-enhancement, self-focused orientation.

With respect to religious values, researchers find that a key theme across the world’s major religions involves encouraging people to seek meaning beyond their everyday existence and to revere the fascinating universe (Schwartz & Hui smans, 1995). Moreover, in encouraging people to think beyond the self, religions generally highlight the importance of benevolence and advise against self-indulgent tendencies. Accordingly, in a study involving individuals across four major Western religions (Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Judaism), Schwartz and Hui smans (1995) found that religiosity is positively correlated with benevolence (a key element of the communal-oriented, self-transcendent dimension of values in Schwartz’s circumplex). The authors also found strong negative correlations with the self-oriented, self-enhancement dimension of Schwartz’s values (power, achievement, hedonism). As discussed next, it is within this latter dimension that values associated with brands seem to most typically reside.

As noted previously, a substantial body of research suggests that individuals often use brands for identity purposes. Incorporating brands into aspects of their identity, consumers often rely on brands to complement, bolster, or defend desired aspects of self, that is, to enhance the self. Even when brands are used to express one’s connection and membership within a desired group (e.g., Apple community, Harley-Davidson riders), a primary benefit of affiliation is the articulation of one’s own identity. As the design agency Fitch (2003) suggested on behalf of the consumer, “participation in a mass consumer experience is in some way, ironically, a reflection of my discerning individuality.” More specifically, and building on the specific aspects of self-enhancement that Schwartz (1992) refers to as being particularly distant from self-transcendence motives, brands are often used to enhance feelings.
of power and achievement. For example, MBA students with lower levels of academic achievement have been shown to compensate for their mediocrity with fancier watches, shoes, and the like (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Similarly, individuals who feel low in power, or those (men) seeking to attract mates by signaling status, are more likely to prefer high-status goods, usually prestigiously branded (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Rucker & Galinsky 2008). Additionally, research suggests that individuals with low control seek to partner with brands for a sense of help and empowerment while pursuing desired goals (e.g., greater health, better academic performance) (Cutofft & Samper, 2014).

Importantly, the communal and self-transcendent focus of religion often directly opposes such incorporation of goods into the self for self-enhancement. For example, one of the seven deadly sins in the Judeo-Christian tradition (and often deemed the “deadliest”) is pride/vanity. Pride, as Belk (1983) summarized, involves excessive admiration of self and perceptions of self-sufficiency such that the self replaces God and/or other people as the focus of one’s concern. The risk with brands, then, is that as they enhance the self and perpetuate pride, God and others will become less central in individuals’ lives.

The idea that individuals may perceive brand-related aspects of self to be distant and incongruent from religious aspects of self is also consistent with recent research by Shachar et al. (2011). The authors found that when religious people are given a choice between branded and nonbranded products, they are less likely to choose brands than their nonreligious counterparts. This suggests that when consumers are able to express themselves with their religious identity, brand-related aspects of identity are relegated to a lower priority. Importantly, the results are strongest when religion is considered to be an extension or expression of self, highlighting the importance of individuals’ identity in the relationship between religion and brands. Moreover, the results hold even after controlling for materialism (measured as the desired acquisition and expected happiness from material objects; Richins 2004), suggesting that the choice of brands versus nonbrands involves more than a desire to acquire (utilitarian or expressive) material objects and is more specifically about the degree of identity expression that is involved. Finally, although this prior research is focused on the effects of religion on consumption choices and the present research focuses instead on the less intuitive effects of brands on religion, the demonstration of a basic link between religion and brands is encouraging for the present hypotheses.

The Desire for Consistency

The notion that brands and religion may reflect highly distant and inconsistent aspects of self has interesting implications, particularly in light of research that reveals that consumers seek to maintain cognitive consistency within their network of self-associations (Greenwald et al., 2002; Heider, 1958; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Specifically, research suggests that when individuals perceive inconsistencies among salient identities, it leads to feelings of dissonance or tension that people typically attempt to avoid or quickly resolve (Festinger, 1957). When individuals are unable to successfully maintain or regain perceptions of consistency across values and other aspects of self, their satisfaction with self and well-being suffers (Rokeach & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). As one example, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) found that individuals who hold high levels of collective-oriented values, such as religiosity, in combination with a self-oriented focus on material goods, experience higher levels of internal conflict and lower levels of well-being.

Building on this prior research, we suggest that because expressing the self through religion and brands often highlights distant and conflicting aspects of the self that can create tension when coactivated, individuals will avoid expressing themselves with both brand-name products and religion. More specifically, we hypothesize that when expressing the self through brands, individuals will be less likely to prioritize religion as an important aspect of identity and will thus show lower levels of religious commitment. Importantly, we expect that this will only be the case when individuals are using brands to express an aspect of their identity and not when using brands in a functional, nonidentity expressive manner.

In what follows, we test our basic hypothesis that the salience of (identity-expressive) brands leads to lower levels of religious commitment than the lack thereof by using a combination of implicit and explicit attitude measures (Studies 1–3) as well as real behavior (Studies 4 and 5). Additionally, we demonstrate that maintaining consistency in one’s expressions of self is one underlying driver of the proposed relationship (Studies 4–5) by using individual differences in the preference for consistency and manipulations that vary perceptions of incongruity between brands and religion.

Study 1A

Study 1A was designed to test the basic hypothesis that religious commitment is lower when brands are a salient means of expressing one’s identity than when they are not. Participants were given the opportunity to make several choices among branded or nonbranded items and then reported their levels of religious commitment. We used this basic choice procedure to manipulate the salience of brands versus merely priming brands because “choice” provides a means by which individuals can express themselves and say who they are (Kim & Drolet, 2003). This is significant because we expect the salience of brands to lead to lower religious commitment only when brands are incorporated into one’s expressions of self. In this context, the brands provide the content with which individuals express their identity, and the exercise of choice provides the method by which such content is communicated.

Method

Participants were 60 adults recruited from a market research firm (27 women; ages 21–69; one participant failed to complete
the dependent variables). The experiment consisted of two between-subject conditions: high versus low brand salience. Upon beginning the survey, participants read that we were interested in understanding individuals’ product preferences. They were then assigned to either a condition in which brands were highly salient or a condition in which brands were not. In the high-brand salience condition (i.e., the “brand” condition), participants chose between two branded products, in four different sets. For example, in one choice, they decided between a Nike duffle bag and a New Balance duffle bag. In another, they chose between a Caribou coffee mug and a Starbucks mug. In the low-brand salience condition (i.e., the “nonbrand” condition), participants chose between the same pairs of products except the brand names were removed (see the supplemental material).

After making their choices, participants completed a brief filler exercise to reduce suspicion about the study’s purpose. Next, participants were told that we would begin a separate investigation. They were then asked to complete the dependent measures. Because religious commitment is a multidimensional construct that can be assessed on the basis of (a) religious beliefs and (b) religious activities (Glock & Stark, 1968; Worthington et al., 2003), we leverage measures that address both of these dimensions to test our hypotheses. Specifically, the first dependent measure 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 agreement on a 5-point Likert scale to 10 statements such as “My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life” (α = .94, M = 2.92, SD = .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 religious. 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-point scale, not at all important—extremely important) and how often they should attend religious services (6-point scale: never—more than once a week) (Inglehart, 2000). Responses were formed into a standardized religious service attendance index (α = .91, M = −.02, SD = 1.82).

We then collected a variety of measures to understand whether our results could be explained by any unexpected differences in the manipulations, such as mood, feelings of uncertainty, or level of effort required to process product information. Specifically, participants indicated how the choice exercise made them feel via the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). They also indicated how much they enjoyed making the choices (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely), how much they liked the products that they chose between (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely), and whether their choices made them feel uncertain (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants also reported how deeply they thought about their choices (1 = not at all, 7 = very deeply), how much information they gathered about their choices from the pictures (1 = none, 7 = extreme amount), and how tired they were after making their choices (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely tired). We collected additional measures to ascertain whether simple perceptions of wealth or feeling materialistic, considered in lay terms to reflect a thirst for acquiring (usually high-quality) goods (Fournier & Richins, 1991), would be influenced by our manipulations and drive religious commitment (or whether—as explored in subsequent studies—our results are better captured by explicitly accounting for perceptions of conflict between brands and religion). Specifically, participants were asked to indicate whether their choices made them feel materialistic and wealthy (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly disagree for each item).

Finally, participants reported demographics, including age, gender, and religious affiliation. No significant interactions with such demographic measures 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 = 2.66, SD = 1.08) than participants in the nonbrand condition (M = 3.18, SD = .80), F(1, 57) = 4.50, p = .04, Δ = .55. The brand condition also reported lower importance of religious service attendance (M = −.49, SD = 1.99) than the nonbrand condition (M = .43, SD = 1.55), F(1, 57) = 3.96, p = .05; Δ = .52. No differences in positive or negative mood emerged as a function of the brand salience manipulation (Fs < 1) (see the supplemental material for PANAS and other auxiliary variable means for Studies 1–2). Moreover, there were no reported differences in individuals’ enjoyment in making their choices or their overall liking of the items (Fs < 1). Individuals did not report significant differences in feeling wealthy, F(1, 57) = .71, p = .40, or materialistic, F(1, 57) = 1.49, p = .23. One can also use these variables as covariates in our statistical analyses and the prior results hold. Of note, the fact that the effects on the dependent variables hold even after controlling for materialism is interesting, as it suggests that it is not merely a desire for material goods that drives the relationship between brands and religion. Instead, as we later demonstrate, it is likely the conflict that arises when considering both religion and brands as expressions of identity that best captures the relationship. Finally, participants did not report thinking more deeply about their choices, gathering more information, or feeling more tired or more uncertain between the brand and nonbrand conditions (Fs < 1). Thus, this set of results provides initial support for the hypothesis that religious commitment is lower when brands are a salient means of expression than when they are not.

Study 1B

Although Study 1A provides early support for our hypothesis, one might wonder whether manipulating brand salience by asking individuals to choose between items from different brands may have caused individuals to focus on differences that are difficult to control for across brands such as brand image, familiarity, pricing,

2 Participants were asked to find two words in a crossword puzzle.
3 For example, the effect of brand salience on religious commitment is significant when “materialistic” (p = .05) and “wealthy” (p = .04) are used as covariates.
or quality when making their choices. Although we attempted to minimize the plausibility that such factors would influence our results by using a variety of brand pairs and by asking participants to choose between very similar items from the different brands, we replicated this prior study in Study 1B by asking participants to choose between items of the same brand. Thus, the expressive content of brands would still be salient, but other differences minimized. Importantly, as one might expect identity expression to be greater when choosing between different brands, this study provides a more conservative test of our hypothesis by demonstrating that even choosing from among the same brands enables individuals to express themselves with the traits and personalities of the brands strongly enough to influence religious commitment.

Method

Participants were 71 university students (34 women; ages 18–32). The experiment consisted of two between-subject conditions: high versus low brand salience. Upon entering the lab, participants were assigned to either a condition in which brands were highly salient or a condition in which brands were not. In the high-brand salience condition (i.e., the “brand” condition), participants chose between two branded products (from the same brand) across 10 different pairs. 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 “nonbrand” condition), participants chose between the same pairs of products, except the brand names were removed (see the supplemental material). Of note, as choosing between the same brands may be a more conservative or weaker opportunity for self-expression than choosing between different brands (Study 1A), we conducted a pretest (see the supplemental material) to confirm that individuals in the brand condition felt better able to express their identities with their choices than those in the nonbrand condition.

After making their choices, participants completed the dependent measures—the Religious Commitment Scale (Worthington et al., 2003) (α = .97, M = 1.73, SD = 1.01) and the importance of attending religious services index (α = .93, M = −.15, SD = 1.79). Participants then indicated how the choice exercise made them feel via the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988). No significant differences in positive or negative mood emerged (Fs < 1).

Results and Discussion

Replicating the results of Study 1A, participants in the brand condition reported lower religious commitment (M = 1.31, SD = .42) than participants in the nonbrand 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 nonbrand condition (M = .35, SD = 1.88), F(1, 69) = 6.25, p = .01; d = .60.

Together, Studies 1A and 1B suggest that religious commitment is lower when brands are salient than when they are not. Importantly, this result has been revealed in a context in which individuals are not only exposed to brands but also able to communicate something about themselves with these brands because of the “choice” component. This is consistent with our notion that religious commitment is lower when brands are salient than when not, but only when brands serve an identity expression role. In Study 2, we explicitly investigate the importance of this identity link in the relationship between brands and religious commitment.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to provide stronger support for the notion that religious commitment declines when individuals use brands as a means of expressing aspects of their identity relative to when they do not. We did so by asking individuals to think about one of two different kinds of brands—either a brand that allows them to express some aspect of their identity or one that does not (but is highly regarded and very functional). We expect that religious commitment will be lower among individuals who focus on a self-expressive brand than those who do not. This design, by comparing conditions that were both focused on brands, not only allows us to identify the importance of self-expression in the link between brands and religious commitment but also provides greater confidence that the shifts in religious commitment that were observed in Studies 1A and 1B were driven by the presence of brands versus the presence of generics (given that generics are not present in this study). This design also allows us to minimize concerns that differences in brands versus nonbrands that are not necessarily related to identity expression (e.g., perceived quality, price, etc.) were driving the effects.

Method

Forty-one participants were recruited online (21 women, ages 20–67) and randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the identity expression brand condition, participants were asked to “think of a brand that you really like that is helpful in allowing you to express aspects of your personality” or to “think of a brand that you really like that is highly functional, but doesn’t say anything about your personality” and to write a statement describing how the brand serves a self-expressive or functional role in their lives, respectively. Participants were then asked to complete the Religious Commitment Scale and the importance of religious service attendance index. Participants were then asked to report their mood (using standard PANAS measures). Additionally, to ensure that there were no unexpected differences in the ways that people viewed the expressive or functional brand that they selected, we asked participants to indicate the overall enjoyment of writing about the brand (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely); their overall liking of the brand (1 = dislike extremely, 7 = like extremely); and the degree to which the brand they selected could be considered prestigious, expensive, and of high quality (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, for each item). They also indicated whether they felt materialistic, wealthy, and uncertain (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, for each item). Finally, participants completed demographic measures.

Results and Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, individuals in the self-expressive brand condition reported lower religious commitment than those in the functional brand condition, F(1, 39) = 3.99, p = .05 (M_{expressive brand} = 2.83, SD = 1.23; M_{functional brand} = 3.14, SD = 1.20, d = .62). We also see a similar pattern of results on the
importance of religious services, although not significant, $F(1, 39) = 2.26$, $p = .14$ ($M_{\text{expressive brand}} = -.27$, $SD = 1.74$; $M_{\text{functional brand}} = .66$, $SD = 1.99$, $d = .50$). As with the prior choice manipulation, there were no differences in positive mood ($F < 1$) or negative mood, $F(1, 39) = 2.62$, $p = .11$. There were also no differences in enjoyment ($F < 1$) or liking ($F < 1$). Finally, the items that individuals chose to write about did not differ in terms of being prestigious, expensive, or high quality ($F$s < 1).

And, individuals did not report differences on feeling materialistic ($F < 1$), wealthy, $F(1, 39) = 2.16$, $p = .15$, or uncertain, $F(1, 39) = 1.89$, $p = .18$. These results build on our prior findings by suggesting that it is not simply being primed with brands that impacts religious commitment, but it is more specifically related to the degree to which one can express one’s identity with the brand. When individuals discussed expressive brands, religious commitment declined relative to those who discussed functional brands.

### Study 3

In Studies 1–2, we investigated the relationship between brands and religious commitment by using direct, explicit measures of religious commitment. In Study 3, we sought to provide convergent validity by using a more implicit proxy for religious commitment. By leveraging an implicit measure, we can also begin to assess whether individuals are interested in only “looking” consistent to others (e.g., the researchers) or whether there is a more intrinsic, automatic desire to maintain consistency among one’s cognitions, even if just for one’s self. We reason that seeing lower levels of religious commitment on implicit measures would provide support for the latter idea.

Research suggests that individuals are quite efficient at inhibiting or blocking conflicting thoughts and beliefs (Perloe, 1960; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002) in order to maintain a sense of personal consistency. With respect to identity research in particular, research reveals that when a specific identity is active, identities that are dissociated or highly distant from that active identity experience greater inhibition (e.g., Hugenberg & Bodenhauzen, 2004). Accordingly, we reason that when the brand-related aspects of one’s identity are salient, the religious aspects of one’s identity will become inhibited and, thus, religious constructs will be less accessible. We therefore expect that when brands are salient in our experimental context, people’s tendency to think of religious-focused words in a word-completion activity will decline. Further, given that this proxy for religious commitment involves a more objective result (number of religious words formed) than the prior studies, and depends on individuals’ current knowledge of religious terminology, we expected to find the greatest impact of brand salience among people for whom religious words were normally very salient: frequent religious service attendees. More specifically, we expected that when brands were not salient (and thus, religious constructs uninhibited), individuals who attend religious services regularly (and are consequently exposed to religious constructs more often) would show greater activation of religious constructs than those who do not. In other words, at baseline, individuals who attend religious services should demonstrate greater accessibility of religious words than those who do not attend religious services. We expected, however, that making brands salient would dampen this heightened activation of religious constructs among high-religious service attendees.

(Individuals who do not normally attend religious services should have low accessibility of religious words at baseline, and thus have little room for further inhibition of these words when brands are salient.)

### Method

To test our hypothesis, we recruited 120 adults (84 women; ages 18–81; one person failed to complete the dependent measures) online via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The experiment’s design was a 2 (brand salience: high vs. low; manipulated) × 2 (religious service attendance: high vs. low; measured). Participants were first randomly assigned to the high-brand salience or low-brand salience condition in the product choice task described in Study 1B. After making their choices, participants completed the dependent measure—a word-stem completion exercise, which is a standard measure of concept activation (e.g., Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Tulving, Schacter, & Stark, 1982). Participants saw eight strings of letters that could be completed as religious or nonreligious words (10 filler words). Participants then completed demographic measures and reported their past religious service attendance behavior. Specifically, participants indicated whether they attended religious services: more than once a week, once a week, once a month, specific holidays only, once a year, less than once a year, or never. Individuals were labeled high attenders if they attended religious services at least once per month; otherwise, they were labeled low attenders.⁴

### Results and Discussion

Results revealed no significant main effects, but did reveal an interaction of brand salience and religious service attendance on the accessibility of religious words, $F(1, 115) = 6.23$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 1). As expected, among high church attenders, the accessibility of religious words was dampened in the brand condition relative to the nonbrand condition, $F(1, 115) = 4.15$, $p = .04$ ($M_{\text{high attenders/brand}} = 1.60$, $SD = 1.05$; $M_{\text{high attenders/nonbrand}} = 2.48$, $SD = 1.78$). Among low church attenders, the difference between the brand and nonbrand conditions was not significant, $F(1, 115) = 2.08$, $p = .15$ ($M_{\text{low attenders/brand}} = 1.90$, $SD = 1.26$; $M_{\text{low attenders/nonbrand}} = 1.43$, $SD = 1.43$). Viewed differently, among those in the nonbrand salience condition (i.e., at baseline), those who attended religious services frequently were more likely to generate religious words than those who did not ($M_{\text{high attenders}} = 2.48$, $SD = 1.78$; $M_{\text{low attenders}} = 1.43$, $SD = 1.43$), $F(1, 115) = 7.09$, $p = .01$; $d = .65$. However, in the brand condition, this pattern disappeared, $F(1, 115) = 6.5$, $p = .02$, as the religious words of high attenders were inhibited. These results suggest that the self-reported declines in religious commitment revealed in the prior studies (when brands were salient relative to when they were not) is also manifested more implicitly via the inhibition of religious constructs.

### Study 4

Whereas the focus in Studies 1–3 was on establishing the basic impact of identity expression through brands on individuals’ levels

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⁴ The results discussed next also hold if attendance is treated as a continuous variable.
of religious commitment, in Study 4, we sought to explore the underlying drivers of this relationship. Specifically, we investigated whether the perceived distance and conflict between brands and religion helps to explain the relationship. A second objective was to use real behavior in our assessment of religious commitment. Toward this end, we gave participants a real opportunity to donate to faith-based and nonfaith-based organizations in addition to using our standard dependent measures.

In order to understand whether the perceived incongruity between religion and brands is an important driver of our results, we asked some of our participants to choose among brands under a self-focused, self-enhancement orientation, similar to the prior studies. Others, however, were given the opportunity to choose brands in a context that will also benefit others, thus bringing brands in line with a more communal orientation and rendering them more consistent with values perceived to be associated with a religious identity. We expect to replicate our standard effects when individuals choose among branded t-shirts and the choice of brand is designed to only benefit the self. That is, participants in the brand condition will demonstrate lower levels of religious commitment (i.e., our standard variables). We reason that because brand-related values are often inconsistent with religion, individuals will dampen religious commitment when brands are salient (and benefit only the self) in order to avoid feelings of inconsistency. However, when individuals believe that their choice will benefit someone other than themselves and is thus more in line with religious values, the effect of brands on religious commitment (e.g., faith-based donations) should disappear.

To provide further insight into the psychological mechanisms, we also include measures that assess individuals’ perceptions of the incongruity between their choices and religious identity.

Finally, we sought to understand how specific the effects of brands are. Does brand salience decrease commitment to many different types of identities, or is the impact of brands specific to religion? We expect that the explicit disconnect between values associated with religion and brands makes the relationship fairly unique. We would not expect brands to reduce commitment to other expressive behaviors that do not represent the same level of disconnect (e.g., supporting a sports team).

Method

To test our hypothesis, we recruited 260 adults (179 women; ages 18–65; one person ended the survey before completing the dependent variable) online via a market research firm. The study was a fully crossed 2 (brand salience: brands vs. nonbrands) × 3 (beneficiary: self only, other only, self and other) experiment. In the brand condition, individuals were exposed to a set of 12 branded t-shirts. In the nonbrand condition, people were exposed to the same set of 12 t-shirts, except the brand names were removed. All individuals were then asked to make a choice, but the instructions varied as to who would benefit from their choices: one’s self only, one’s self and another individual, or another individual only. Within the “self-only” condition, participants were told to select the t-shirt that they would most like to wear and were informed that they would be entered into a lottery for a chance to receive the shirt that they chose. In the “self and other” condition, participants were also told to select the t-shirt from the list that they would most like to wear, but were told that they would be entered into a lottery for a chance to receive the chosen shirt and to donate one t-shirt to a well-deserving charity on their behalf.6 Finally, in the “other-only” condition, participants were told to select a t-shirt that they would most like to wear, but were told that after making their selection, they would be entered into a lottery for a chance to donate a t-shirt to a well-deserving charity. Thus, in each condition, participants were given the opportunity to indicate the t-shirt that they liked. Accordingly, individuals in the brand condition were especially able to use their selection to say something about themselves (based on the attributes and associations of the brands) relative to those in the nonbrand condition. Importantly, when layering on the “beneficiary” conditions, those in the other-only and self and other conditions could use their choices to benefit others, bringing them more in line with religious values.

Of note, we use the two different comparison conditions—other-only and self and other—as opposed to just one or the other, for several reasons. First, we wanted to ascertain whether the benefits of brands needed to be completely “other” focused in order to mitigate the effects on religious commitment or whether some level of self-benefit would be acceptable and reconcilable with religious commitment (e.g., the self and other condition). Second, we wanted to ensure that the weaknesses of either control condition would be less plausible as drivers of the results given that we witness a similar pattern of behavior with both control conditions. (For example, whereas the self and other condition differs in the sheer number of beneficiaries versus the self-only

3 Nonfaith-based charities can reflect a variety of secular issues and fit with one’s brand-focused identity.

6 It was not explicitly stated what t-shirt would be given to the charity (i.e., whether the charity would choose its shirt, receive it at random, or receive the exact t-shirt that the participant chose).
condition, this is not true for the other-only condition. Similarly, whereas individuals in the self-only condition could become more invested in the self-expression exercise than individuals in the other-only condition because they have an opportunity to receive their desired shirt, this should not be true within the self and other condition, in which individuals also have an opportunity to receive their desired shirt.

After selecting their t-shirts, we assessed reactions to the dependent measures. All participants were first given the opportunity to donate to charity. They were told that the university sponsoring the research would be supplementing payment for the survey and giving each participant $1 (in addition to their normal payment). They were asked how much (if any) of this $1 payment they would like to donate to charity. They were able to allocate this payment between faith-based charities (“200 well-respected charities that span a wide array of religious affiliations and address a variety of important issues”) or nonfaith-based charities (“200 well-respected charities that address a variety of important issues, but are not affiliated with a religion”). They could also choose to keep some or all of the money for themselves. Our objective with this charity measure was therefore to understand the following: When people are given the opportunity to actually demonstrate religious commitment (when real costs are involved) as a function of brand salience, will we replicate the differences that we have seen previously on attitudinal measures? Moreover, will patterns of religious commitment differ on the basis of whether or not brands are salient in a communal (and religiously consistent) manner versus a self-focused manner?

After completing this new dependent variable, participants also completed the dependent variables from our prior studies, including the standard religiosity scale and the church attendance index. Next, to explore whether and when individuals perceive incongruity between expressing the self with brands and religion, we used two fairly subtle measures that asked individuals to indicate their agreement with the following, which form our congruity index: “Wearing this t-shirt would help me communicate religious values” and “I would feel comfortable wearing this t-shirt to a casual, religious-based event” where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Lower scores indicate greater perceived incongruity. We hypothesized that individuals who expressed themselves with brands would perceive lower congruence between their t-shirt choice and religion, unless their t-shirt choice facilitated a benefit to someone else (i.e., those in the other-only or self and other condition). Accordingly, we expected that this measure of incongruity would mediate the relationship between the brand salience conditions and religious commitment.

Finally, to assess whether brand expression has a unique impact on religion or instead impacts all forms of identity expression equally, we asked participants to indicate how important different forms of expression are to them. In addition to assessing the importance of “Engaging in faith-based activities,” participants indicated the importance of “Supporting my favorite sports teams,” “Supporting my favorite artists and musicians,” “Making things myself,” and “Discussing my perspectives with others.” All items were measured on a 7-point scale where 1 = not at all important and 7 = extremely important.

Results

Donation to faith-based charities. Investigating the impact of the brand salience conditions (brand vs. nonbrand) and beneficiary conditions (self only, other only, self and other) on donations to faith-based charities, we found no main effects, but a significant two-way interaction, \(F(2, 253) = 3.01, p = .05\) (see Figure 2). Upon probing this interaction, we replicate our standard effect in the self-only condition such that individuals in the branded t-shirt condition donated less to the faith-based set of organizations than individuals in the nonbranded t-shirt condition, \(F(1, 253) = 8.22, p = .005\) \(M_{brand} = \$0.18, M_{nonbrand} = \$0.47, d = .65\). This contrast was not significant, however, when individuals were in the self and other condition \(p = .98\) or the other-only condition \(p = .83\). Moreover, the two-way interaction of brand salience and beneficiary conditions was not significant when evaluating nonfaith-based donations \(p > .17\).

Religious Commitment Scale. The results using the standard Religious Commitment Scale were consistent with those found above. There were no main effects, but a significant interaction of the brand salience conditions (brand vs. nonbrand) and beneficiary conditions (self only, other only, self and other) emerged, \(F(2, 253) = 4.86, p = .01\) (see Figure 3). We replicate our standard effect in the self-only condition whereby individuals in the brand condition reported lower religious commitment than individuals in the nonbrand condition, \(F(1, 253) = 8.86, p = .003\) \(M_{brand} = 2.74, M_{nonbrand} = 3.47, d = .78\). This contrast was not significant, however, when individuals were in the self and other condition \(p = .32\) or the other condition \(p = .52\).

Standardized church attendance index. When assessing church attendance, we found similar results as with the prior measures. There were no significant main effects, but a significant interaction of the brand salience (brand vs. nonbrand) and beneficiary conditions (self, other, self and other) emerged, \(F(2, 253) = 8.85, p = .002\). Individuals in the brand condition indicated lower importance of church attendance than individuals in the nonbrand.
condition, $F(1, 253) = 15.63, p < .001$ ($M_{brand} = -.42$, $M_{nonbrand} = .35, d = .97$). This contrast was not significant, however, when individuals were in the self and other condition ($p = .23$) or the other condition ($p = .20$).

**Incongruity between religion and brands.** In order to assess the idea that one of the reasons that individuals are less likely to commit to religion after expressing themselves with brands is the distance and perceived incongruity between brands and religion, we measured the degree to which individuals experience a sense of incongruity between brands and religion. We first found a main effect of brand salience condition, $F(1, 253) = 4.10, p = .04$, on the congruency index such that individuals in the brand condition perceived less congruence between brands and religion than individuals in the nonbrand condition ($M_{brands} = 3.68, M_{nonbrand} = 3.98$). This main effect was qualified by an interaction of brand salience and beneficiary conditions on perceptions of congruence, $F(2, 253) = 4.51, p = .01$. Within the self-only condition, individuals in the brand condition showed lower feelings of congruence than individuals in the nonbrand condition, $F(1, 253) = 10.90, p = .001$ ($M_{brand} = 3.35, M_{nonbrand} = 4.22, d = .74$). This contrast was not significant, however, when individuals were in the self and other condition ($p = .36$) or the other condition ($p = .28$).

Notably, we found that such perceptions of incongruity mediate the effect of the “self-focused” conditions on the key dependent variables relative to the self and other condition and the other-only condition. Exhibiting a pattern of moderated mediation, this is true only when individuals express themselves with brands (and not generics). More specifically, leveraging 5,000 bootstrapped samples in the procedure recommended by Hayes (2013), we found that incongruity mediates the reactions of the self-only condition relative to the self and other condition (among those who expressed themselves with brands) on each of the dependent variables, with 95% confidence intervals exclusive of zero.\(^7\) Similarly, perceptions of incongruity mediated the reactions of the self-focused condition relative to the other-only condition (among those who expressed themselves with brands) on the dependent variables.\(^8\)

**Uniqueness of the impact of brands on religion versus other expressions of identity.** Finally, to assess whether consumers’ reactions to religion (faith-based activities) is unique from other types of expression (sports teams, art and music, making things, talking with others), we analyzed the interaction of brand salience, beneficiary, and type of activity on individuals’ perceptions of the importance of the specific forms of expression. A significant three-way interaction emerged, $F(8, 1012) = 2.74, p = .01$.

Probing this interaction, we found that the two-way interaction of Brand Salience $\times$ Beneficiary is significant when the measure of expression relates to faith-based activities, $F(2, 253) = 10.47, p < .001$. Specifically, within the self-only condition, individuals considered religious expression to be less important in the brand condition than in the nonbrand condition, $F(1, 253) = 15.63, p < .001$ ($M_{brand} = 3.02, M_{nonbrand} = 5.02, d = 1.22$). This was not true in the self and other condition ($p = .99$) or the other-only condition ($p = .18$). Importantly, the two-way interaction for the nonfaith-related activities was not significant ($p > .22$).

**Discussion**

Study 4 suggests that expressing aspects of one’s identity through brands can lead to lower levels of religious commitment, as demonstrated not only by attitudes but also by actual (donation) behavior. This study also provides insight by introducing an important boundary condition. Results indicate that when the perceived identity conflict between brands and religion is minimized by giving brands a more communal orientation, the effects on religious commitment are mitigated. Finally, this study suggests that the effects of brand expression on religious commitment may be unique from its effects on many other forms of expression given the particularly high level of distance and conflict between values related to brands versus religion.

**Study 5**

In Study 5, the primary objective was to further understand how the need to minimize conflict and perceive consistency within the self contributes to the relationship between brands and religious commitment. We took several steps toward this end. First, we provided some participants with an opportunity to express the self with brands; others were given the opportunity to do so with their favorite sports team. Using sports teams in lieu of nonbranded products enables us to further assess the notion that brand expression is unique in its impact on religious commitment, presumably because of the heightened perception of conflict and distance with respect to religious values than what appears for other forms of expression, such as sports team support. (A pretest confirmed

\(^7\) Faith-focused charitable giving ($B = -0.05 [-0.11, -0.003]$); religious commitment scale ($B = -0.15 [-0.32, -0.002]$); the church attendance index ($B = -0.09 [-0.21, -0.007]$).

\(^8\) Faith-focused charitable giving ($B = -0.07 [-0.14, -0.02]$); the religious commitment scale ($B = -0.22 [-0.43, -0.05]$); the church attendance index ($B = -0.12 [-0.27, -0.03]$).
that individuals perceive greater distance and conflict in the relationship between religion and brands than between religion and sports.\footnote{Forty participants from the same population were asked to indicate how congruent or consistent with their religious beliefs it would be to express themselves through support for their favorite sports team and their favorite brand (where 1 = highly incongruent, 7 = highly congruent). Participants indicated that expression through sports ($M = 3.82$) would be more congruent than expression through brands ($M = 3.02$), $t(39) = 3.48, p = .001$.} We then assessed how the effect of brands on religious commitment can be mitigated when individuals are given the opportunity to associate brand expression with more communal benefits. Finally, we assessed individuals’ chronic needs for consistency as a further indicator of the underlying process. Specifically, we expect that the impact of brand expression on religious commitment (when individuals cannot justify their behaviors with communal benefits) should be strongest for people who have the strongest need to feel and appear consistent in their thoughts and actions in everyday life.

**Method**

To test our hypotheses, we recruited 160 participants (68 women, ages 19–74) through Amazon Mechanical Turk. The study was designed as a 2 (brand salience: brands vs. sports) × 2 (beneficiary: self vs. others) × (preference for consistency, continuous measure) experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to write about their relationship with a favorite brand or a favorite sports team. To manipulate the “beneficiary” factor in the experiment, individuals were assigned to write about how the brand/sports team enables them to either express who they are (“self” condition) or give of themselves for others (“others” condition). Next, we asked participants to complete our set of religious commitment dependent measures. Similar to Study 4, we first include a behavioral measure of religious commitment by assessing individuals’ donations to faith-based and nonfaith-based charities (as described in Study 4\footnote{As participants were told to allocate the full $5 across the charities, this was done simply to minimize the executional challenges that would be involved with giving each participant different amounts of money back through Mechanical Turk.}). Participants were informed that the university would allocate $5 per participant for charitable donations and that they must indicate how they would like the donation allocated on their behalf (between the faith-based and nonfaith-based choice). In addition, participants completed the Religious Commitment scale and importance of church attendance measure.

Finally, in order to assess individuals’ preferences for consistency, the Cialdini et al. (1995) Preference for Consistency scale was included after a filler exercise. We chose to include the scale as an ostensibly “separate study” after the independent and dependent variables so as to not unfairly contaminate individuals’ thoughts with a focus on inconsistency beforehand. The scale results were not impacted by either of the independent variables or their interaction ($ps > .48$). The scale includes items such as “I don’t like to appear as if I am inconsistent,” where individuals indicate their agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree). Scale reliability was high ($\alpha = .90$).

**Results**

**Donations to faith-based charities.\footnote{As participants were told to allocate the full $5 between the two charities, the results for donations to nonfaith-based charities do not provide additional information.}** There were no main effects, but the two-way interaction of brand salience (brands vs. sports) and recipient conditions (self vs. others) on donations to faith-based charities was significant. $F(1, 156) = 10.59, p = .001$; see Figure 4, replicating the results of Study 4. This was then qualified by a three-way interaction when incorporating individuals’ preferences for consistency ($\beta = .85, t = 2.18, p = .03$). Probing this interaction (Aiken & West, 1991), we found that at high levels of the preference for consistency measure (1 SD above the centered mean), the two-way interaction between brand salience and beneficiary was significant ($\beta = 2.92, t = 4.00, p < .001$). Within this interaction, when individuals focused on benefits to the self, the brand condition donated less to faith-
based charities than the sports condition ($\beta = -2.52, t = -4.50, p < .001$). When individuals focused on benefits to others, there was no significant difference in donations to faith-based charities ($p = .40$). At low levels of the preference for consistency (1 SD below the centered mean), the two-way interaction of the brand salience and beneficiary conditions was not significant ($p > .44$).

**Religious Commitment Scale.** As with the charity measure, there were no main effects, but the two-way interaction of brand salience and beneficiary conditions on the Religious Commitment Scale was significant, $F(1, 156) = 4.34, p = .04$ (see Figure 5). This was then qualified by a three-way interaction between the brand salience conditions, beneficiary conditions, and the continuous preference for consistency scale ($\beta = .85, t = 2.18, p = .03$). At high levels of the preference for consistency, the two-way interaction between brand salience and beneficiary was significant ($\beta = 1.63, t = 2.92, p = .004$). Within this interaction, when individuals focused on benefits to the self, the brand condition reported lower religious commitment than the sports condition ($\beta = -1.60, t = -3.76, p < .001$). When individuals focused on benefits to others, there was no significant difference in their reported religious commitment based on brand salience ($p = .95$). At low levels of the preference for consistency, the two-way interaction of brand salience and beneficiary was not significant ($p > .89$).

**Importance of church attendance.** Unlike the prior measures, the three-way interaction between the brand salience conditions, beneficiary conditions, and the continuous preference for consistency scale on the church attendance index was not significant ($\beta = .33, t = 1.46, p = .14$). However, probing this interaction, we found that at high levels of the preference for consistency, the two-way interaction between brand salience and beneficiary was significant ($\beta = .92, t = 2.17, p = .03$). Within this interaction, when individuals focused on benefits to the self, the brand condition reported lower religious commitment than the sports condition ($\beta = -.84, t = -2.59, p = .01$). When individuals focused on benefits to others, there was no significant difference in their reported religious commitment based on brand salience condition ($p = .78$). At low levels of the preference for consistency, the two-way interaction of brand salience and beneficiary was not significant ($p > .98$).

**Discussion**

Together, the results of Study 5 provide several important insights. First, by revealing that expression through sports teams does not lead to the same declines in religious commitment as expression through brand name products, Study 5 suggests that brands can be quite unique from other sources of self-expression on their impact to religious commitment. Second, we can now more confidently articulate the role of self-consistency in this process after finding that (a) the effect of brands on religious commitment is strongest among those for whom self-consistency is most important and (b) the effect of brands on religious commitment is mitigated when individuals are given the opportunity to reconcile brands and religion by focusing on the communal benefits that arise from brand expression.

**General Discussion**

Taken together, this set of findings implies that religious commitment may be less stable than previously assumed, given that it can be deprioritized by something as seemingly trivial as branding. To summarize, in Studies 1A–1B, we found that expressing the self by choosing brands leads to lower religious commitment than choosing nonbranded products. In Study 2, we demonstrated that this effect of brands on religious commitment is specific to the use of brands for self-expressive, but not utilitarian, purposes. Study 3 provides convergent validity by demonstrating decreased religious commitment after brand expression through an implicit assessment of such. The final studies demonstrate that the impact of brands on religious commitment is mitigated when brands provide communal benefits that minimize the distance to religious values (Studies 4 and 5). They also provide additional process-oriented evidence to support the role of self-consistency in the relationship between brands and religion, relying on state-based measures of perceived distance (Study 4) and individual differences in the chronic desire for consistency (Study 5).
Such findings provide new insights into our understanding of religion, as they illustrate that though religion is often an important aspect of identity, individuals are willing to forgo this aspect of identity when conflicting aspects of identity are salient. This is important and surprising because, unlike many aspects of identity and forms of expression, religion is thought to embody sacred properties among believers and be more resistant to change than other aspects of identity. This research also provides new insights into the psychological power of brands. Although prior work acknowledged the role of brands in expression, the present research is novel in investigating how expression with brands influences downstream commitments and behaviors. It begins to provide support for the growing speculation that commercialization in society (and brands as one manifestation of such) can impact individuals’ commitments to their values and belief systems.

Of course, many questions are raised by these findings. For example, how might different types of brand-name products lead to different results? Brands that are communally oriented, even religious in nature (e.g., Newman’s Own, Chick-Fil-A, Hobby Lobby, Forever 21, etc.) might generate a different pattern of results. It is reasonable to think that when brands have such a communal focus, expressing one’s identity with these brands would not feel particularly distant to religion and thus should not lead to decreases in religious commitment.

One might also wonder whether our pattern of results should be attributed to satiation as opposed to a concern for self-consistency. In other words, perhaps individuals reduce their religious commitment because brands have completely satiated their need for self-expression, rendering religion useless on this dimension. Although we believe that brands’ ability to satiate self-expressive needs may certainly play a role in their impact on religious commitment, it is not likely the full story. If it were the full story, then one might expect to see declines not only in religious commitment but also in the stated importance of other means of expression when asked (e.g., Study 4; sports, music/art, etc.), which we did not find.

There are also important questions regarding the ultimate implications for society. Although the present research is unable to speak to how long the effects of brands on religious commitment endure, it is plausible that the constant barrage of brands that individuals encounter on a daily basis could lead to sustainable changes in religious commitment over time. If true, one must also wonder about the impact on society given the self-regulation benefits that are often associated with God and religion (e.g., greater prosocial behavior, less depression, decreased substance abuse, reduced sexual promiscuity, etc.) (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Pearce, Little, & Perez, 2003; Shariﬁ & Norenzayan, 2007; Wills, Yaege, & Sandy, 2003). Still, we are careful to avoid resembling or adopting secularization theories of the past wherein several researchers promised a near end to religion. This has certainly not come to fruition, nor does it seem likely (e.g., Stark, 1999, for a review). Moreover, although our research points to a decline in religious commitment when brands are salient, it does not necessarily mean that individuals’ actual beliefs in the existence of God change.

Finally, the present research leverages a general population (and students) in the United States, with largely Christian backgrounds. Future research might explore how differences in cultures and religions (e.g., denominations, intensity of beliefs) impact the degree to which brands influence religious commitment. For example, given our finding in Study 3 regarding the inhibition of religious constructs after brand choice, it may be the case that brands are most likely to influence religious commitment among those who are highly religious (given that they have more room to decline in commitment by definition). It is also worth considering, however, that individuals who are at extreme levels of commitment (and not adequately reﬂected in our general population samples) may not view secular brands as a source of expression to begin with and would therefore be less prone to see brands as a potential threat to their expression of identity. It would also be interesting to consider how different religious teachings would influence the impact of brands on religion. Notably, although the use of brand-name products as expressions of identity may not fit within mainstream religious values, there are segments of religious populations that view the ability to afford brand-name products and other luxuries as a sign of one’s hard work and obedience to God. Such views gained traction with the rise of the Industrial Revolution (Weber, 1958) and can be seen in various forms today. For example, “Prosperity Theology” or the “Faith movement” represents one area of religion in which obedience to God is believed to enhance financial wealth. It is believed to be “God’s will” that people experience (material and ﬁnancial) prosperity (Harris, 1981; Hunt, 2010; Jackson, 1987).

In sum, this research should provide a useful starting point for future work that explores these and other important questions pertaining to how the basic elements of our environments and everyday life inﬂuence religious commitment—what many consider to be a hallmark of human life.

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