When Brands Reflect Our Ideal World: The Values and Brand Preferences of Consumers Who Support versus Reject Society’s Dominant Ideology

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In what ways can brands symbolize America’s defining values, and for whom do these values resonate? Drawing from research on values (Schwartz 1994), the symbolic power of brands (Holt 2004, 2006; McCracken 1986), and system justification theory (Jost and Banaji 1994), the current research explores (1) what values define America’s dominant ideology, (2) which consumers subscribe to these values, and (3) implications for brands that reflect versus do not reflect the dominant ideology. It is proposed that consumers vary in their satisfaction with American society and their endorsement of America’s defining values, and thus differ in the values they endorse versus reject in brands. Five experiments manipulate whether or not the values signaled by a brand are in alignment with the dominant ideology. Consumers more versus less satisfied with American society respond differently to the values a brand signals, affecting brand attitudes, perceptions of a brand’s status as a cultural icon, and purchase intentions. In a sixth experiment, those more versus less satisfied with American society respond differently to consumer-related policy (i.e., a ban on trans fat), depending on the values that the policy is framed as reflecting. Implications for branding and policy are discussed.

Keywords: ideology, branding, policy, values, culture, system justification

W hy do we work so hard? For what? For this? For stuff? Other countries they work, they stroll home, they stop by the cafe, they take August off. Off. Why aren’t you like that? Why aren’t we like that? Because we’re crazy driven, hard-working believers, that’s why. Those other countries think we’re nuts. Whatever! Were the Wright brothers insane? Bill Gates? Les Paul? Ali? Were we nuts when we pointed to the moon? That’s right, we went up there, and you know what we got? Bored. So we left. Got a car up there, left the keys in it. Do you know why? Because we’re the only ones going back up there. That’s why. But I digress .... It’s pretty simple. You work hard, you create your own luck, and you gotta believe anything’s possible. As for all the stuff, that’s the up-side of only taking two weeks off in August. N’est-ce pas?” (Cadillac “Poolside” commercial, 2014)

Brands and consumer goods have the potential to reflect various societal values and ideologies (Holt 2004, 2006; McCracken 1986), as evidenced by the television advertisement just quoted. Brands are increasingly aligning
themselves with various beliefs and issues, and consumers appear to desire this quality in brands (Brandford 2012; Johnson 2012). For example, 72% of respondents in a representative American poll thought that corporations should take a stand and address important social issues (Global Strategy Group 2012). The question of what values a brand should reflect and how different consumers respond to these values is increasingly important, but the answer is not intuitively obvious. Some consumers have responded positively to the pro-American message depicted in the Cadillac ad transcribed here, whereas other consumers have responded negatively to the ad’s focus on status and cultural superiority. Similarly, Coca-Cola may be viewed as standing for equality and multiculturalism (e.g., as portrayed in Coca-Cola’s classic “Hilltop” ad from 1971) or as a symbol of American capitalism and cultural dominance, with different consumers responding either positively or negatively to these messages. The potential for a brand to attract or alienate consumers depends not just on the brand’s messaging, but also on the ideological lens through which the brand is viewed. Brands may reflect different aspects of one’s society and its dominant ideology, and in so doing, they may reflect what consumers like or dislike about their society and what it represents.

We posit that a key defining component of the American dominant ideology is the relative emphasis placed on two values: power (status, wealth, control, and dominance over others and resources) and universalism (concern for all others, equality, and social justice). Certain consumers are going to endorse the dominant ideology more than others, which has implications for how they evaluate brands that reflect (vs. do not reflect) the dominant ideology. In the current research we draw from prior work on fundamental human values (Schwartz 1994) and on how consumers defend the structure and operation of their society (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004), to answer the following questions: (1) what values define America’s dominant ideology, (2) who supports versus rejects America’s dominant ideology, and (3) what are the implications for brands that do versus do not reflect the dominant ideology? By examining brands through multiple theoretical lenses, we provide a unique perspective on consumers’ evaluations of brands and brand-relevant public policy.

WHAT VALUES DEFINE AMERICA’S DOMINANT IDEOLOGY?

What are the core values that define the dominant ideology of the United States that a brand may choose to reflect (or not)? Schwartz and colleagues (Schwartz 1994, 1999, 2006; Schwartz and Bardi 2001; Schwartz and Boehnke 2004; Schwartz, Sagiv, and Boehnke 2000) have provided considerable evidence for 10 universal values across cultures that guide behavior and shape the structure of one’s society. These 10 values include power (social status, control, and dominance over people/resources), achievement (personal success through demonstrating competence), hedonism (pleasure and gratification), stimulation (excitement/novelty), self-direction (independent thought and action), universalism (understanding, tolerance, protecting the welfare of others), benevolence (preserving the welfare of the in-group), tradition (respect and acceptance of cultural customs), conformity (refraining from norm-violating or harmful impulses), and security (safety and stability of society). These values form a circumplex where values that are opposite each other in the circumplex conflict in some way. For example, valuing hedonism conflicts with valuing conformity and tradition. Societies generally prioritize certain values over others, which are then reflected in the dominant cultural ideology (Schwartz 2006).

In a comparison of values between the United States and 53 other countries (Schwartz and Bardi 2001), the United States stands out in the extent to which it values power (wealth, status, dominance over others, and resources) relative to universalism (tolerance, equality, concern for the welfare of others). The United States places relatively more emphasis on power as a meaningful value compared to other Western industrialized countries, which are instead much clearer in their preference for universalism over power. To this point, Schwartz and Bardi (2001, 286) cite others (Bellah et al. 1985; Etzioni 1993) in characterizing America as “entrepreneurial, acquisitive, and self-indulgent on the one hand, and lacking a commitment to the good of the community on the other.” Kitayama et al. (2010) propose that early experiences on the American frontier—characterized by a drive for wealth, low population density, and lack of centralized authority—helped to shape this dominant ideology and its emphasis on self-reliance and competitiveness for wealth and resources. This ideology was further promoted by government authorities as a means of fostering territorial expansion and economic growth (Kitayama et al. 2010). Today, this ideology can be observed in the United States; welfare socialism is not as prevalent in the United States as in other industrialized nations (Schwartz and Bardi 2001), and income inequality is more prevalent than in other industrialized nations (US Census Bureau 2011). Moreover, citizens of various social classes readily oppose policies that would reduce this inequality (Bartels 2005).

It is worth noting that Americans do not necessarily value power more than universalism; rather, Americans tend to value power more than citizens of many other countries, and power and universalism are more equivalent in the minds of many Americans (Schwartz and Bardi 2001). In short, the United States values power more than other Western industrialized countries that largely reject power as a meaningful value and are much clearer in their preference for universalism over power (Schwartz and Bardi 2001). Thus the dominant ideology in the United States appears to be (at least partly) defined by a relatively
increased emphasis on power at the expense of universalism, relative to other countries.

Some American consumers generally buy into America’s dominant ideology and favorably evaluate brands that reflect this ideology. Other consumers, in contrast, may feel disillusioned and dissatisfied with their society’s dominant ideology, and instead they want brands that reflect an opposing ideology (i.e., more clearly valuing universalism over power). Next, we describe a theoretical framework—system justification theory (Jost and Banaji 1994)—that allows us to identify these consumers.

**WHO SUPPORTS VERSUS REJECTS AMERICA’S DOMINANT IDEOLOGY?**

System justification theory posits that consumers are often motivated to have favorable evaluations of the social systems in which they live (i.e., how society is structured and operates; Jost and Banaji 1994). Because social systems satiate important psychological needs such as a need for safety, security, and certainty (Jost and Hunyady 2005; Kay et al. 2008, 2009), it can be psychologically comforting to view one’s society through rose-colored glasses. However, individual differences exist in one’s tendency to support and have confidence in one’s social system (i.e., system confidence), whereby some individuals are satisfied with their social system and how it operates (high system confidence), and others are dissatisfied with their social system and have little confidence in how it functions (low system confidence). For example, satisfaction with America’s social system predicts increased support for the free market (Jost et al. 2003).

Confidence in one’s social system has important consequences for consumer behavior. Banfield et al. (2011) and Cutright et al. (2011) find that in response to criticisms of one’s nation, those high in system confidence defend their system more directly by choosing branded products that signal explicit support for their system (e.g., a shirt with an American flag on it), whereas those low in system confidence choose domestic over foreign brands as a relatively subtle means of endorsing one’s system. Thus consumers high in system confidence are more unwavering in their support for their social system compared to those low in system confidence, and this support manifests in the kinds of brands and products these consumers prefer.

Although system confidence is a useful construct for understanding ideological consumption behavior, there has been no attempt to further identify the defining features of one’s system that consumers low (vs. high) in system confidence endorse. Social systems contain a complex set of beliefs and values, making it more difficult to predict precisely how the construct of system confidence is related to consumer behavior. For instance, how does system confidence correspond to perceptions and attitudes toward brands like Coca-Cola, which reflect a variety of values? Will consumers high in system confidence support bans on certain consumer goods (such as the 2013 ban on trans fat by the Food and Drug Administration [FDA] and New York City’s proposed ban on large-size soda) because these policies are implemented by the system, or will they reject them because they violate aspects of the American system, such as personal liberty? Our current understanding of the way consumers interact with their brands does not allow us to make clear predictions regarding these questions.

We propose that understanding the values that define America’s dominant ideology clarifies our understanding of what the US system is, and thus what brands those low versus high in system confidence will endorse as part of that system. As previously outlined, current evidence suggests that placing increased value on power relative to other countries is a defining feature of US dominant ideology. Therefore, it follows that those who are high in system confidence—who are satisfied with their social system and how it operates—will value power as a part of this dominant ideology. In contrast, those low in system confidence, who are dissatisfied with their social system and how it operates, will reject this dominant ideology and place less importance on power.

Again, based on previous research, we do not predict that those high in system confidence will necessarily value power more than universalism. Rather, we predict that universalism and power approach equivalence in the minds of those high in system confidence, whereas those low in system confidence are much clearer in their preference for universalism over power. Formally stated,

H1a: Consumers high in system confidence will more positively evaluate brands that reflect power compared to those low in system confidence.

H1b: Consumers low in system confidence will more positively evaluate brands that reflect universalism as opposed to power.

These predictions regarding what those low versus high in system confidence value as a part of their system should also apply to brand-relevant policy. Namely, if those low versus high in system confidence differ in their support for the values of the dominant ideology, then framing policy as reflecting one value or another should also have a predictable effect on how those low versus high in system confidence evaluate that policy. Specifically,

H2a: Consumers high in system confidence will be more persuaded by policy rhetoric that reflects power compared to those low in system confidence.

H2b: Consumers low in system confidence will be more persuaded by rhetoric that reflects universalism as opposed to power.

We test these hypotheses in six studies using (1) a variety of brands and real-world ads, (2) numerous ways of
signaling a brand’s values (both directly and indirectly), and (3) a number of topical brand-related policies.

The merging of basic human values research and system justification theory advances each framework in relation to our understanding of consumer behavior. First, defining system confidence as the endorsement of the dominant ideology’s values allows researchers to make clearer predictions with system justification theory, for example, predicting the symbolic content (i.e., values) of brands and policies that consumers low versus high in system confidence prefer. Second, the current research expands on earlier work (Allen 2002; Allen, Gupta, and Monnier 2008; Allen and Ng 1999; Chakraborty, Steger, and Sukhdial 1995) by looking at values in a broader sociocultural context to understand how brands reflect one’s society and become so-called cultural icons. Furthermore, although it has been shown that the dominant culture has implications for both businesses and consumer behavior (Aaker and Williams 1998; Hewett, Money, and Sharma 2006; Roth 2005; Tse et al. 1988), consumers may not always fit with that dominant culture. The current research investigates those whose values are in conflict with the dominant ideology and the implications for consumer behavior. In this way, we shed light on Holt’s (2004) proposal that consumer preferences are shaped by conflicts between consumers’ everyday experiences and the dominant ideology.

**PRETEST**

A pretest was conducted to test if those high in system confidence value power more those low in system confidence, and if lows have a clearer preference for universalism over power. It also offers an opportunity to differentiate system confidence from political orientation, as was previously reported (Hennes et al. 2012; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008).

**Method**

**Participants.** A total of 102 American Mechanical Turk users participated online in exchange for a small payment. Information on sex and age were not collected.

**Procedure.** Participants’ level of system confidence (i.e., satisfaction with their society and how it operates) was assessed using the eight-item system justification scale (Kay and Jost 2003). Sample items include “In general, American society operates as it should,” “In general, the American political system operates as it should,” and “American society needs to be radically restructured” (reverse coded). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.23$).

Participants then rated their endorsement of 10 values by completing the Schwartz Values Survey (SVS; Schwartz and Boehnke 2004 for items). Participants were asked to rate the importance of each item as a guiding principle in their life, using the scale structure recommended by Schwartz (1994) and Schwartz and Bardi (2001) ($-1 = \text{Opposed to my values}$, $0 = \text{Not important}$, $3 = \text{Important}$, $6 = \text{Very important}$, $7 = \text{Of supreme importance}$). Most relevant to our current hypotheses, power was measured using the following items and short explanatory phrase in parentheses: authority (the right to lead or command), social power (control over others, dominance), wealth (material possessions, money), preserving my public image (protecting my “face”); $\alpha = .79$. Universalism was measured using the following items: broad-minded (tolerant of different ideas and beliefs), wisdom (a mature understanding of life), social justice (correcting injustice, care for the weak), equality (equal opportunity for all), a world at peace (free of war and conflict), a world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts), unity with nature (fitting into nature), and protecting the environment (preserving nature); $\alpha = .89$.

Finally, we asked participants to rate their political orientation on a 9-point scale (1 = Very liberal, 5 = Moderate, 9 = Very conservative).

**Results and Discussion**

As recommended by Schwartz (1994, 2009), we controlled for scale use by computing participants’ average across all SVS items and include this average as a covariate in our analyses. Second, the labels low and high for system confidence scores are used for ease of discussion; all analyses in the current research treat this variable as continuous. Participants higher in system confidence endorsed power more so than those lower in system confidence ($\beta = .22$, $t(99) = 2.39$, $p < .02$). Furthermore, those lower in system confidence endorsed universalism more than those high in system confidence ($\beta = -.18$, $t(99) = -2.82$, $p < .01$). Notably, when plotted, this pattern of effects looks very much like Schwartz and Bardi’s (2001) comparison of the US national average to the average of 53 other nations (figure 1). This finding suggests that those high in system confidence support the dominant ideology (valuing power at the expense of universalism), whereas those low in system confidence are more inclined to reject this ideology and are much clearer in their preference for universalism over power.

The only other value that approached significance in its relation to system confidence was security ($\beta = .12$, $t(99) = 1.88$, $p = .06$). All others were nonsignificant ($p > .10$). Thus system confidence most closely mapped onto power versus universalism. These effects hold when controlling for political orientation. Furthermore, political orientation showed a different pattern in its relation to the SVS. Political orientation was unrelated to endorsement of power ($\beta = .08$, $t(98) = .91$, $p = .37$) but was related to endorsement of universalism ($\beta = -.26$, $t(98) = -4.33$, $p < .001$), such that liberals scored higher on universalism.
stimulation, and self-direction ($\beta_s = -.18$ to $-.25$, $t_{(98)} = -2.22$ to $-2.96$, $ps < .02$) and positively related to tradition, conformity, and security ($\beta_s = .19$ to $35$, $t_{(98)} = 2.99$ to $6.04$, $ps < .01$). This pattern is consistent with past research (Schwartz 1994). Finally, system confidence and political orientation were not redundant with each other ($r = .28$, $p < .01$), consistent with past research (Hennes et al. 2012; Jost et al. 2008).

As predicted, (1) those high in system confidence valued power more than those low in system confidence, and (2) those low in system confidence were much clearer in their preference for universalism over power compared to highs. What implications does this relation have for how consumers low versus high in system confidence evaluate brands? We explore this in study 1.

 STUDY 1

On the one hand, Coca-Cola reflects power through its status as a symbol of American patriotism, capitalism, and a global ambassador of American culture. On the other hand, Coca-Cola is also often marketed as reflecting universalism by valuing diversity and multiculturalism. These different depictions of the brand may be differentially perceived by different consumers. In study 1 we expose participants to promotional images that reflect these two sides of the Coca-Cola brand and test how these different images are received by those low versus high in system confidence.

Method

Participants. Overall, 256 American participants completed the study online via Mechanical Turk for a small payment. Two participants showed evidence of a response pattern (selecting “1” for every item); three participants were missing critical data. This left 251 participants in the current study. Information on sex and age was not collected.

Procedure. System confidence ratings were collected using the same scale (Kay and Jost 2003) from the pretest ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.17$). Participants then viewed eight Coca-Cola images (appendix A). Based on the results of a pretest, three of these images were selected to reflect power, and three were selected to reflect universalism (this pretest also yielded a similar pattern of effects as in the current study). Two value-neutral images were added to control for general liking toward Coca-Cola images. Participants then viewed all eight images one at a time in random order, with power versus universalism images serving as a within-subjects factor. Participants rated the extent to which each image reflected power (“social status, wealth, prestige, authority, control or dominance over people and resources”) and universalism (“understanding, tolerance, equality, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature”). Descriptions of each value were taken directly from Schwartz (1994). Ratings were made on a 9-point scale (1 = Does not at all reflect this value, 9 = Extremely reflects this value). Finally, participants rated the extent to which they liked each image on a 9-point scale (1 = Do not like it at all, 9 = Like it very much). As a control variable, participants were asked “To what extent do you have positive feelings and associations with Coca-Cola?" (1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely).

Results and Discussion

Power and universalism ratings. First, the images selected to reflect power did indeed reflect power ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 2.15$) over universalism ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 2.09$), $t_{(250)} = 3.33$, $p = .001$, whereas the images selected to reflect universalism scored higher on universalism...

FIGURE 1

ENDORSEMENT OF POWER AND UNIVERSALISM AMONG US CITIZENS VERSUS AVERAGE OF 53 OTHER NATIONS FROM SCHWARTZ AND BARDI (2001) AND AS A FUNCTION OF SYSTEM CONFIDENCE SCORES (PRETEST)
liking the universalism images, related to liking the power images, support of hypothesis 1, system confidence was positively scored lower on universalism ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 2.15$), $t(250) = 14.78$, $p < .001$, and scored lower on universalism ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 2.11$) than the neutral images ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(250) = 6.78$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the power images scored higher on power than did the universalism images, $t(250) = 25.77$, $p < .001$. Thus the neutral images did not dominantly reflect any one particular set of values.

_Liking of images._ The two-way interaction between image type (power vs. universalism: within subjects) and system confidence (continuous variable) was tested using a repeated measures analysis of covariance. Ratings of the neutral images and positive feelings toward Coca-Cola were entered as control variables. The two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 246) = 51.80$, $p < .001$ (figure 2). In support of hypothesis 1, system confidence was positively related to liking the power images, ($\beta = .41$), $t(246) = 8.12$, $p < .001$. System confidence was also negatively related to liking the universalism images, ($\beta = -.12$), $t(246) = -1.94$, $p = .054$.

Following procedures outlined by Spiller et al. (2013), we conducted a floodlight analysis to identify the level(s) of system confidence at which the effect of image type (universalism vs. power) is significant (i.e., the Johnson-Neyman [1936] point; using cutoffs of $\pm 1$ SD does not change conclusions drawn from our studies). This approach has been advanced as having advantages over testing the effect of condition at set levels of the moderator (typically $\pm 1$ SD). Spiller et al. (2013) provides further details on this analysis. In support of hypothesis 1, universalism images were rated more positively than the power images at system confidence scores at or below $4.43$, $t(246) = 1.96$, $p = .05$. Conversely, power images were rated more positively than universalism images at system confidence scores at or above $5.29$, $t(246) = -1.96$, $p = .05$. Regions of significance are indicated in figure 2 (and subsequent figures) by vertical lines and arrows.

_Mediation analysis._ We explored whether or not the values reflected in the images mediated the effect of system confidence on image liking. A difference score indicating the extent to which each image type (universalism vs. power images) was seen as reflecting one value over the other was computed. A difference score for image liking was also computed. Using Hayes’s (2015) PROCESS macro for SPSS, we tested the indirect effect of system confidence on image liking, through perceived values depicted by the images (model 4). The results of this analysis showed evidence of mediation through universalism (lower limit confidence interval [LLCI] = -.48, upper limit confidence interval [ULCI] = -.19) but not power ratings (LLCI = -.01, ULCI = .07). In other words, those low in system confidence perceived more universalism in the universalism images (vs. power images), and this in turn predicted their preference for the universalism images over the power images.

These results suggest that consumers low versus high in system confidence prefer promotional materials that reflect their preferred values. What are the potential downstream consequences of this effect? We investigate this in study 2 in the context of brand-relevant policy.

**STUDY 2**

In 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s proposed a ban on the sale of large (16 ounces or greater) soda in New York City proved to be unpopular among the public, with 60% of New Yorkers opposing the ban (Grynbaum and Connelly 2012). Might consumers’ attitudes toward this ban vary based on whether or not a key brand affected by the ban (i.e., Coca-Cola) reflects the values that the consumer wants for society? We explore this question in study 2.

Method

Participants. A total of 293 American Mechanical Turk users completed the study. One participant was missing critical data, and two others correctly guessed the purpose of the study, leaving 290 participants (159 men, 130 women, 1 unidentified; $M_{\text{age}} = 33$).

Procedure. As in study 1, participants completed the Kay and Jost (2003) system justification scale ($x = .88; M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.16$). Participants were then randomly assigned to view either two Coca-Cola images that reflect power or two images that reflected universalism (the first
two power and universalism images in appendix A, respectively. Participants rated how much each image reflected power (“social status, wealth, prestige, authority, control or dominance over people and resources”) and universalism (“understanding, tolerance, equality, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature”) using the same response scale from study 1. Participants then rated how much they liked each image (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much).

Next, the proposed ban on large soda in New York City was explained to participants, and they were told that many US cities are considering implementing bans like this, so as to make it more relevant to all participants. Participants then rated their attitude toward the ban: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with this ban?” “Overall I support the idea of banning the sale of large soda,” and “This ban is bad policy” (1 = Strongly disagree, 9 = Strongly agree); α = .93. Items were coded such that higher scores mean increased rejection of the soda ban, so as to keep the direction of our effects consistent across studies. Finally, health consciousness (1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely) and how much the participant liked soda (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much) were measured as relevant covariates.

Results and Discussion

Because those high in system confidence embrace the dominant ideology and value power (vs. those low in system confidence), we predicted that they will reject the soda ban more than those low in system confidence when Coca-Cola reflects power. In contrast, those low in system confidence, who more clearly value universalism over power, will reject the ban more when Coca-Cola reflects universalism as opposed to power. We also expect to replicate the pattern of effects from study 1 regarding image liking.

Image liking. The two-way interaction between condition (power vs. universalism images) and X system confidence (low vs. high, continuous factor), with soda liking and health consciousness entered as covariates, used to predict image liking, was significant, (β = −.26), t(284) = −3.29, p = .001 (figure 3). In support of hypothesis 1, system confidence was positively related to liking the power images more, (β = .39), t(284) = 4.89, p < .001. System confidence did not predict ratings of the universalism images, (β = .01), t(284) = .21, p = .83. Floodlight analysis revealed that the universalism images were liked more than the power images at system confidence scores at or below 2.51, t(284) = 1.97, p = .05, LLCI = .00, ULCI = 1.17, and had the opposite effect and system confidence scores at or above 4.23, t(284) = −1.97, p = .05, LLCI = −1.07, ULCI = −.00. Thus those low in system confidence liked the universalism images more than the power images, whereas the reverse was true of those high in system confidence.

Mediated moderation. Given the mediation effect in study 1, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis testing whether or not the effect of condition X system confidence on universalism ratings mediated the effect of condition X system confidence on image liking. First, the two-way interaction between condition and system confidence was a significant predictor of universalism ratings, (β = −.25), t(286) = −3.35, p = .001. The universalism images were seen as reflecting universalism significantly more than the power images, (β = .35), t(286) = 6.35, p < .001, and floodlight analysis revealed that this was particularly the case for system confidence scores at or below 4.69, t(286) = 1.97, p = .05, LLCI = −.00, ULCI = −.129, but not above 4.69. This effect somewhat mirrors the effect of condition X system confidence on image evaluations. Thus we tested for mediated moderation using model 8 in Hayes’s (2015) PROCESS macro for SPSS with both power and universalism ratings entered as possible mediators. The indirect effect of condition X system confidence
on image evaluations through universalism ratings was significant (LLCI = −.72, ULCI = −.21). As in study 1, power was not a significant mediator (LLCI = −.07, ULCI = .03). In other words, those low in system confidence liked the universalism images more than the power images, which can be explained by their perception that the universalism images reflected universalism more than the power images.

Attitude toward policy. The predicted condition X system confidence interaction on attitudes toward the soda ban was significant, (β = −.21), t(284) = −2.63, p < .01 (figure 3). Higher system confidence scores were associated with more negative attitudes toward the ban in the power condition, (β = .25), t(284) = 3.13, p < .01, but not in the universalism condition, (β = −.05), t(284) = −.62, p = .54. In addition, floodlight analysis revealed that the ban was evaluated more negatively in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 2.65, t(284) = 1.97, p = .05, LLCI = .00, ULCI = 1.34, and had the opposite effect at system confidence scores at or above 5.37, t(284) = −1.97, p = .05, LLCI = −2.13, ULCI = .00. In other words, consumers increasingly rejected (supported) a ban on large soda when presented with Coca-Cola images that were congruent (incongruent) with the values that they want for society. For this particular dependent variable, no evidence of mediated moderation was found.

Study 2 finds that consumers high in system confidence, who are supportive of the dominant ideology, like and defend brands that convey power more than lows. In contrast, those low in system confidence, who are not supportive of the dominant ideology, place little emphasis on power values and more emphasis on universalism, and thus they like and defend brands that reflect this prioritization of values (hypothesis 1). Are these results idiosyncratic to one particular brand or outcome? Study 3 explores this in the context of a recent (2014) Cadillac commercial.

STUDY 3

As of August 2014, Cadillac’s recent “Poolside” ad for the Cadillac ELR electric car (see the opening of this article for the transcript) had received over 2.3 million views on YouTube and is quite divisive based on viewer comments and ratings. Perhaps part of its divisiveness comes from its appeal to materialism and American cultural superiority (i.e., power). In study 3 we test whether or not this framing leads those high but not low in system confidence to like the brand more and see it as more of an American icon (hypothesis 1a). We also test whether or not this alignment of the brand and its electric car with the dominant cultural ideology leads to increased purchase intentions (in the product category) among those high in system confidence.

Method

Participants. Overall, 198 American participants (105 men, 93 women; M_age = 34) completed the study via Mechanical Turk.

Procedure. Participants completed the same system confidence scale as in earlier studies (α = .88; M = 3.60, SD = 1.13). They were then randomly assigned to either the no-ad condition, where they did not view any ad, or the power condition, where they viewed the previously mentioned “Poolside” ad for the Cadillac ELR electric car.

Participants then rated the extent to which Cadillac reflected power and universalism using items from the SVS (Schwartz 1994). Ratings were made using a similar 9-point scale as in our pretest (−1 = Opposed to the values represented by the brand, 0 = Not important to the brand, 3 = Important to the brand, 6 = Very important to the brand, 7 = Of supreme importance to the brand). Power was measured with the following items: “Social power (control over others, dominance),” “Authority (the right to lead or command),” and “Wealth (material possessions, money);” α = .74. Universalism was measured with the following items: “Broad-minded (tolerant of different ideas and beliefs),” “Wisdom (a mature understanding of life),” “Social justice (correcting injustice, care for the weak),” “Equality (equal opportunity for all),” “A world at peace (free of war and conflict),” “A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts),” “Unity with nature (fitting into nature),” and “Protecting the environment (preserving nature);” α = .92.

Participants were then asked to evaluate Cadillac on the following items: “Right now, to what extent do you, personally, see Cadillac as representing your ideal values for America?” (1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely), “Right now, to what extent would you, personally, say that Cadillac is a symbol of America?” (1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely), “Right now, based on what you know about the brand, how ethical do you think Cadillac is as a brand?” (1 = Very unethical, 9 = Very ethical), and “Right now, how do you feel about Cadillac?” (1 = Very negative, 9 = Very positive). These four items formed a reliable (α = .88) single-factor index of brand evaluations.

Participants then rated the importance of society adopting electric cars on three items (e.g., “How important is it to you that the purchase of electric cars is encouraged by government and policy?”; 1 = Not at all, 9 = Very; α = .85). We then measured future purchase intentions by asking how likely they are to buy an electric car in the next five years, or if they own one, how likely they are to continuing buying electric cars in the future (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very).

Results

We predicted that those high in system confidence would evaluate Cadillac and electric cars more positively after
viewing the power ad relative to the no-ad condition, whereas lows would, if anything, show more negative brand evaluations upon viewing the power ad (hypothesis 1a).

**Power and universalism ratings.** In predicting power ratings, there was only a main effect of condition, with Cadillac reflecting power more in the power condition than in the no-ad condition, \( (\beta = .21), t(194) = 2.96, p < .01 \). In predicting universalism ratings, two main effects were observed; those high in system confidence rated Cadillac higher in universalism, \( (\beta = .30), t(194) = 4.44, p < .001 \), and unexpectedly, Cadillac also reflected universalism more in the power condition than in the no-ad condition, \( (\beta = .17), t(194) = 2.52, p = .01 \). In hindsight, this effect may be due to our universalism measure containing items about protecting the environment, and that the ad was for an environmentally friendly product. When excluding the environment-related items from the measure (e.g., “Protecting the environment”), an insignificant effect of condition on universalism ratings was found, \( (\beta = .11), t(194) = 1.67, p = .10 \).

**Brand evaluations.** In predicting attitudes toward the brand, the condition X system confidence two-way interaction supported hypothesis 1a, \( (\beta = .22), t(194) = 2.54, p = .01 \) (figure 4). System confidence was positively associated with brand evaluations in the power condition, \( (\beta = .61), t(194) = 6.39, p < .001 \), but this effect was attenuated in the no-ad condition, \( (\beta = .28), t(194) = 3.32, p < .001 \). The power condition led to more positive brand evaluations (vs. no-ad condition) at system confidence scores at or above 4.40, \( t(194) = 1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = .00, ULCI = .14, and had the opposite effect and system confidence scores lower than 1.48, \( t(194) = -1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = −1.99, ULCI = .00. Thus those high in system confidence evaluated Cadillac more favorably upon viewing the ad relative to lows, and relative to when highs did not view the ad.

**Importance of electric cars and purchase intentions.** In predicting ratings of the importance of society adopting electric cars, the two-way interaction was not significant, \( (\beta = .05), t(194) = .50, p = .62 \). However, the predicted interaction predicting future purchase intentions was marginally significant, \( (\beta = .17), t(194) = 1.81, p = .07 \) (figure 4). System confidence was marginally associated with increased purchase intentions in the power condition, \( (\beta = .18), t(194) = 1.71, p = .089 \), and critically, floodlight analysis revealed that the power condition (vs. no-ad condition) led to increased purchase intentions at system confidence scores at or higher than 3.57, \( t(194) = 1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = .00, ULCI = 1.38, with no significant effects at system confidence scores lower than 3.57.

**Mediated moderation.** Unlike studies 1 and 2, perceptions of the brand’s universalism did not mediate the moderated effect of condition X system confidence on brand attitudes. Further evidence of mediated moderation is found in studies 4 through 6.

**Replication.** An earlier iteration of this study (205 American participants via Mechanical Turk; 149 men, 56 women; \( M_{age} = 31 \)) only included our brand evaluation measure. The two-way interaction between condition and system confidence was significant \( (\beta = .38), t(201) = 2.35, p = .02 \). Brand evaluations were higher in the power condition (vs. no-ad condition) at system confidence scores at or higher than 2.93, \( t(201) = 1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = .00, ULCI = .83.

**Discussion.** Study 3 supports the prediction that an ad reflecting power is favored by consumers high as opposed to low in
system confidence (hypothesis 1a). This finding is notable in the context of an electric car because system confidence is negatively related to environmentalism (Feygina, Jost, and Goldsmith 2010). Therefore, although it is more conventional to frame an environmentally friendly product around universalism, appealing to different values can increase the product’s appeal among a new set of consumers.

Thus far we have tested how brands intentionally signal certain values to consumers via advertising. How might a brand’s values be more subtly or unintentionally signaled to consumers, with consequences for brand perceptions? We explore this in studies 4 and 5.

STUDY 4

News and social media often communicate information about a brand that signals its values. For example, as of August 2014, an article entitled “These 6 Corporations Control 90% of the Media in America” in Business Insider (Lutz 2012) had been viewed over 930,000 times and was widely shared on social media. The article states that “232 media executives control the information diet of 277 million Americans,” and it presents Disney as one of six companies with a combined revenue of $275.9 billion in 2010, which suggests that the brand values power. At the same time, Disney World theme park has (passively) hosted one of the world’s largest gay pride events since 1991 (Cloud 2010) and has offered health benefits to same-sex couples since 1995 (“Disney Co. Will Offer Benefits to Gay Partners” 1995), which suggests that the brand values universalism. Study 4 tests the effects of this kind of incidental brand information on those low versus high in system confidence. In line with hypothesis 1, we predict that those high (vs. low) in system confidence will evaluate the brand more positively when it reflects power, and that those low in system confidence will show more favorable evaluations when the brand reflects universalism as opposed to power.

Method

Participants. Overall, 203 American participants (118 men, 85 women; $M_{age} = 30$) competed the study via Mechanical Turk.

Procedure. Participants were first given the same system confidence measure from studies 1 to 3 ($\alpha = .90$; $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.23$). Participants were randomly assigned to read four facts about the Disney brand that either reflected power or universalism, depending on condition. This information can be found in appendix B. Participants rated their familiarity with the information as a cover story for why they were viewing it. Participants then rated the extent to which Disney reflected power and universalism using the same items as in study 3 ($\alpha = .78$ and $\alpha = .93$, respectively). The Disney brand was then evaluated using four items almost identical in wording to that of study 3 ($\alpha = .80$).

Results and Discussion

Power and universalism ratings. We first tested the effect of condition (power vs. universalism) and system confidence (low vs. high, continuous) on participants’ power and universalism ratings. In predicting power ratings, only two main effects were observed: Disney reflected power more in the power condition, ($\beta = -16$, $t(199) = -2.45$, $p = .02$), and system confidence was negatively associated with seeing Disney as reflecting power, ($\beta = -.27$, $t(199) = -4.05$, $p < .001$). In predicting universalism ratings, the two-way interaction was significant, ($\beta = -.29$, $t(199) = -3.52$, $p < .001$ (figure 5). In addition to a main effect of condition, ($\beta = .38$, $t(199) = 6.38$, $p < .001$,}
floodlight analysis revealed that Disney was seen as reflecting universalism more in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 4.80, t(199) = 1.97, p = .05, LLCI = .00, ULCI = 1.14.

**Brand evaluations.** Because those high in system confidence endorse the dominant ideology and value power more than those low in system confidence, we predicted that system confidence will be positively related to brand evaluations in the power condition, and that those low in system confidence will evaluate Disney more positively in the universalism (vs. power condition) (hypothesis 1). The predicted two-way interaction was significant, (β = −.20), t(199) = −2.31, p = .02 (figure 5). Supporting hypothesis 1, system confidence was positively associated with brand evaluations in the power condition, (β = .60), t(199) = 7.10, p < .001. This effect was attenuated in the universalism condition, (β = .32), t(199) = 3.67, p < .001, and floodlight analysis found that brand evaluations were significantly higher in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 3.90, t(199) = 1.97, p = .05, LLCI = .00, ULCI = .91.

**Mediated moderation.** We tested whether or not the effect of condition X system confidence on universalism ratings mediated the effect of condition X system confidence on brand evaluations (model 8 in Hayes’s [2015] PROCESS macro for SPSS). The indirect effect of condition X system confidence on brand evaluations through universalism ratings was significant (LLCI = −.66, ULCI = −.17), but not for power ratings (LLCI = −.15, ULCI = .01). In other words, those low in system confidence showed more positive evaluations of Disney in the universalism condition compared to the power condition, which can be explained by lows perceiving the brand as reflecting universalism more in the universalism condition than in the power condition. In short, when Disney’s power (i.e., revenue, control over resources) was made salient, those high in system confidence evaluated Disney more favorably than those low in system confidence, and those low in system confidence instead evaluated Disney more positively when Disney’s concern for universalism was salient (i.e., equality and concern for the environment) as opposed to power.

**STUDY 5**

Brands routinely create premium versions of basic functional products including paper towels, dishwashing detergent, tampons, and bottled water (Gray 2013; Ng 2013; Stock 2013). Brands also often engage in versioning, where the production of two products is essentially identical, but certain functions are made exclusive to one version (Gershoff, Kivetz, and Keinan 2012). Approaching these phenomena from our current framework, we propose that these practices signal power to consumers. Thus those low in system confidence should respond negatively to these practices, perhaps seeing them as antigalitarian and symbolic of inequality (Ng 2013; Popken 2013), and instead they prefer brands that do not cater to affluent consumers in this way. In contrast, those high in system confidence (who value power more than those low in system confidence) will be relatively tolerant of a brand catering to affluent consumers.

**Methods**

**Participants.** A total of 220 American participants completed the study online via Mechanical Turk. One participant showed evidence of response bias (responding with a “5” to every item), leaving 219 participants (124 men, 95 women; Mage = 31).

**Procedure.** Participants first completed our measure of system confidence (α = .88; M = 3.43, SD = 1.15). They were then randomly assigned to read one of two descriptions of a brand of toothpaste. In the “power” condition, the brand was presented as shifting its focus toward making a more expensive premium product at the expense of less affluent consumers.

Uniclean is a brand of toothpaste that has traditionally focused on offering a high quality, low cost toothpaste for all Americans. In the past few years they have shifted their strategy by focusing on making premium products. Many of the original features in their low cost toothpaste are now found in their new premium “Platinum” brand of toothpaste (4 oz. for $5.99), with twice the cleaning and cavity fighting power of their now simplified and low cost “Basic” brand of toothpaste (4 oz. for $1.99). Upon announcing this shift in their focus as a company, a representative of Uniclean stated that, “While we remain committed to providing basic oral care to all Americans, we think that our brand has a place in the market of premium health care products, available to those who are willing to pay more for the absolute highest quality of dental health. This shift in focus reflects that.

In contrast, in the universalism condition, the brand is described as shifting toward making the health benefits of its premium product available to everyone at a lower cost:

Uniclean is a brand of toothpaste that has traditionally focused on offering a high quality, premium toothpaste available to those who are willing to pay for the absolute highest quality of dental health. In the past few years they have shifted their strategy by focusing on making their products available to all Americans. Many of their “Platinum” (4 oz. for $5.99) brand toothpaste’s features can now be found in their new “Basic” brand of toothpaste (4 oz. for $1.99), with both brands offering comparable cleaning and cavity fighting power. Upon announcing this shift in their focus as a company, a representative of Uniclean stated that, “While we remain committed to providing the absolute best taste and sensory experience for those who are willing to pay for
we think that our brand has a place in the market of high quality, low cost health care products available to everyone for their health. This shift in focus reflects that.

Participants then rated the extent to which the brand reflects power and universalism with the same items and scale from studies 3 and 4 (α = .70 and 91, respectively), and then they evaluated the brand using items nearly identical to those of studies 3 and 4 (α = .95).

Results and Discussion

Power and universalism ratings. In predicting power ratings, only a main effect of condition was observed, such that power ratings were higher in the power condition (β = −.18), \( t(215) = -2.70, p < .01 \). In predicting universalism ratings, the two-way interaction (condition X system confidence) was significant, (β = −.19), \( t(215) = -2.18, p = .03 \) (figure 6). Floodlight analysis revealed that universalism ratings were significantly higher in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 3.78, \( t(215) = 1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = .00, ULCI = .32. Based on this finding, we later test whether or not universalism ratings mediate the effect of condition X system confidence on brand evaluations.

Brand evaluations. The predicted two-way interaction was significant, (β = −.19), \( t(215) = -2.18, p = .03 \) (figure 6). As predicted (hypothesis 1), system confidence was positively related to brand evaluations in the power condition, (β = .49), \( t(215) = 5.61, p < .001 \), and brand evaluations were significantly higher in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 4.66, \( t(215) = 1.97, p = .05 \), LLCI = .00, ULCI = 1.32.

Mediated moderation. We tested whether or not the effect of condition X system confidence on universalism ratings mediated the effects observed on brand evaluations. As in earlier studies, the indirect effect of condition X system confidence on brand evaluations through universalism ratings was significant (LLCI = −.54, ULCI = −.04), but not for power (LLCI = −.13, ULCI = .09). In other words, those low in system confidence showed more favorable brand evaluations in the universalism condition (vs. power condition), which can be explained by lows perceiving the brand as reflecting universalism more in the universalism condition than in the power condition.

The results of study 5 mirror those of earlier studies and provide further support for hypothesis 1. When the brand reflected power by catering to affluent consumers at the expense of lower income or cost-sensitive consumers, those higher in system confidence (who value power more than those low in system confidence) evaluated the brand more favorably. Those lower in system confidence instead preferred the brand when it reflected universalism by making the health benefits of its product available to everyone.

STUDY 6

Thus far we have shown that consumers low versus high in system confidence differ in their support for the dominant ideology and its values, which then shapes their evaluation of brands. However, this effect should not be limited to brands alone; that is, consumers’ attitudes toward consumer-related policy should also vary by aligning versus misaligning the policy with one’s preferred values. In the context of the FDA’s 2013 ban on trans fat in food in the United States, we predicted that a policy argument that appeals to power will be more persuasive to those high (vs. low) in system confidence, and that those low in system confidence will find arguments appealing to universalism more persuasive than arguments appealing to power (hypothesis 2).
Method

Participants. Overall, 398 American Mechanical Turk users participated in the study. Five participants showed evidence of response bias, leaving 393 participants (205 men, 187 women, 1 unidentified; \( M_{\text{age}} = 31 \)).

Procedure. Participants first completed our measure of system confidence from studies 1 to 5 (\( \alpha = .87; M = 3.49, \text{SD} = 1.14 \)). After explaining the trans fat ban to participants, they were asked to give their thoughts on an argument against the ban. In the “power” condition, the argument against the trans fat ban appealed to concerns about protecting American corporate profits and affirmed the free market and the power of companies over government initiatives:

Banning trans fat violates the right of Americans to make choices for themselves and not the government. The ban could increase costs and decrease profits for American food manufacturers and restaurants as they seek trans fat-free alternatives. Consumers have already decided for themselves that they wish to consume less trans fat, as daily consumption of trans fat has decreased over the past decade. The free market has responded as many major food companies have led the way in eliminating trans fat from their foods. People who still eat trans fat do so knowing the risks, and the market will determine whether or not companies that don’t change will survive. This ban is an example of the nanny-state dictating for us what we can and cannot consume.

In contrast, the “universalism” argument against the trans fat ban appealed to concerns about equality and tolerance (content inspired by Pelet and Hepburn 2013):

Banning trans fat ban will affect thousands of small, largely ethnic bakeries and restaurants, run by immigrants who service their communities by offering people either a taste of their home culture, or the opportunity to experience a new culture through food. Having to change the ingredients and oil used can increase prices, and can also change the taste and texture of food, offering a less authentic product. Even companies offering local and organic options, and are otherwise healthy and sustainable, will have to absorb the cost and risk of changing their products. Meanwhile, large corporate brands can easily afford to change their processing and figure out how to best replicate the taste of their products, and can also afford legal teams to help them duck around the rules.

Participants rated how much they thought the argument reflected power and universalism, using the same items and similar scale as in studies 3 to 5 (\( \alpha = .51 \) and 84, respectively).

As our dependent variable, participants were asked, “How much do you agree with this argument?” “To what extent do you think that the argument that you read makes a good point?” (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much), “How convincing is this argument?” (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very), “To what extent do you agree or disagree with this ban?” “This ban is bad policy” (1 = Strongly disagree, 9 = Strongly agree), and “Which of these two values do you consider more important?” (1 = Maximizing society’s health at the cost of freedom of choice, 9 = Maximizing freedom of choice at the cost of society’s health). All seven items formed a highly reliable measure of argument persuasiveness (\( \alpha = .92 \)), with higher scores reflecting increased agreement with the anti-trans fat ban article (in other words increased rejection of the trans fat ban). Finally, because the policy at hand deals with a health-related issue similar to study 2, we measured how health-conscious the participant was (1 = Not at all, 9 = Extremely) as a covariate.

Results and Discussion

Power and universalism ratings. In predicting power ratings, two main effects were observed, such that the anti-trans fat ban argument reflected power more in the power condition, (\( \beta = .24, t(389) = 4.89, p < .001 \), and system confidence was positively related to seeing the argument as reflecting power, (\( \beta = .11, t(389) = 2.34, p < .05 \)). As in studies 2, 4, and 5, the two-way interaction was a significant predictor of universalism ratings, (\( \beta = .23, t(389) = 3.36, p < .001 \) (figure 7). The anti-ban argument reflected universalism more so in the universalism condition than in the power condition, (\( \beta = -.24, t(389) = -5.02, p < .001 \), and floodlight analysis revealed that this was particularly the case at system confidence scores at or below 4.37, \( t(389) = 1.97, p = .05, \text{LLCI} = -.69, \text{ULCI} = .00 \).

Persuasion. The same interaction as earlier was conducted (controlling for health consciousness) to test hypothesis 2, predicting that those high (vs. low) in system confidence will be more persuaded by the power argument, whereas those low in system confidence will be more persuaded by the universalism argument (vs. power argument). The two-way interaction was marginally significant, (\( \beta = .12, t(389) = 1.76, p = .079 \) (figure 7). Critically, system confidence was positively related to persuasion in the power condition, (\( \beta = .16, t(389) = 2.23, p = .03 \), but not in the universalism condition, (\( \beta = -.02, t(389) = -25, p = .80 \). Floodlight analysis revealed that the argument was more persuasive in the universalism condition (vs. power condition) at system confidence scores at or below 3.76, \( t(389) = 1.97, p = .05, \text{LLCI} = -.80, \text{ULCI} = .00 \).

Mediated moderation. Consistent with earlier studies, the indirect effect of condition X system confidence on persuasion through universalism ratings was significant (\( \text{LLCI} = .05, \text{ULCI} = .29 \)) but not for power ratings (\( \text{LLCI} = -.08, \text{ULCI} = .01 \)). Thus those low in system confidence were more persuaded by the argument in the universalism condition (vs. power condition), which can be
explained by their perception that the argument in the universalism condition appealed to universalism more than in the power condition.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Brands and consumer goods have the potential to reflect various societal values and ideologies (Holt 2004; 2006; McCracken 1986) and thus may either symbolize all that a consumer likes, or dislikes, about society and how it operates, depending on the ideological lens through which the consumer views and evaluates the brand. Across six studies we show that consumers vary in how satisfied they are with their sociocultural setting, and that this satisfaction (1) maps onto the values that these consumers prioritize, and (2) has implications for how these consumers respond to different ads, packaging, brand information, marketing practices, and consumer-related policy. American consumers low in system confidence largely reject the dominant ideology of placing increased value on power compared to other nations (Schwartz and Bardi 2004), and thus they respond negatively to brands that reflect this ideology and respond more positively to brands and policy that reflect power’s opposing value, universalism. In contrast, those high in system confidence (who support the dominant ideology) prefer brands and policies that reflect power more so than those low in system confidence.

Theoretical Contributions

The current research advances our understanding of how culture, national identification, and branding intersect. Brands can reflect the values and dominant ideology of one’s social system, and the current research offers a framework for understanding how different consumers respond to brand messaging that is consistent (or not) with that dominant ideology. By merging system justification theory with basic values research, we isolate a critical dimension that sheds light on what leads consumers low versus high in system confidence to see a brand as a cultural icon (i.e., including it as part of their system), and adds considerable clarity to the predictions that can be made with system justification theory in understanding consumer behavior.

The current research also advances our understanding of how basic values relate to consumers’ brand preferences. Past work has shown that different products inherently reflect certain values (Allen and Ng 1999) and that descriptive information about the values of a product’s typical consumer influences product evaluations (Allen 2002). The current research builds on this earlier work by illustrating how, in an externally valid way (i.e., using real ads, packaging, and brand information), even the same brand can signal different values to consumers. We also show the consequences of reflecting certain values on novel outcomes such as attitudes toward brand-relevant policy. Moreover, past research shows that the dominant culture has an impact on the behavior of consumers and firms (Aaker and Williams 1998; Hewett, Money, and Sharma 2006; Roth 2005; Tse et al. 1988); however, there will be those who support and those who reject the dominant ideology with in any given culture. The current research helps to illustrate who these consumers are and the values they desire in brands. In a broad sense, the current research begins experimentally to test aspects of Holt’s (2004) theory of iconic brands, which posits that a brand’s symbolic content can resolve cultural tensions among consumers who are disenchanted with the dominant ideology.

Future Directions and Managerial/Policy Implications

A cross-cultural application of the current research may be fruitful because the current research was conducted solely within the United States. For example, Scandinavian
countries tend to endorse universalism and reject power, whereas China and India place considerable emphasis on power and less on universalism (Schwartz 2006). The growing popularity of luxury goods in China (Chang 2014; Frank 2013) may be partly explained by the cultural emphasis on power, but low system confidence consumers in China may instead eschew materialism. However, because social systems may be inherently structured in a way that maintains privilege for some over others (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), power may be an inherent part of high system confidence. Another important question is how iconic brands in one culture transition into other markets with a different ideology, with implications for adopting a standardization or adaptation marketing strategy. Does a brand in the United States appealing to consumers low in system confidence appeal to high system confidence consumers in a culture where universalism is more valued? The current theoretical framework lends itself to testing these questions.

The current research identifies who finds certain brands more or less appealing and why, with implications for the effectiveness of a brand’s messaging. For example, although environmentally friendly products lend themselves well to a universalism framing, study 3 found that with the right framing, these products can be more appealing to consumers who may not be traditionally targeted or interested in them (i.e., those who value power and support the dominant ideology). However, brands may signal values in ways that are not anticipated by managers. Social media and other information outlets may spread information relevant to a brand’s values, with either positive or negative consequences. As illustrated in the current research, versioning products (Gershoff et al. 2012) and catering to affluent consumers may also lead some consumers to see these actions as antithetical to the values they want for their social system.

Concluding Remarks

Our research speaks to the benefits of having a brand that is in alignment with consumers’ values and social system. In a historical example, Coca-Cola’s iconic status was perhaps influential in its being exempt from sugar rations during World War II (Pendergrast 2000). Having an iconic brand may also contribute to an image of being an essential or lasting part of the system, which may in turn contribute to perceptions of reliability or being defended when policy would impact that brand. The attempt at banning individual servings of large servings of soda in New York City serves as one recent example. In terms of shaping consumers’ attitudes toward such policy, our research suggests that persuading consumers who feel estranged from the dominant ideology may be achieved by appealing to the collective good and concerns about equality (i.e., universalism), whereas persuading those who are supportive of the dominant ideology may be achieved by emphasizing national strength and concerns about securing resources for America (i.e., power).

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

Data for the pilot study were collected in fall 2013. Data for studies 1 and 3 were collected in spring 2014. Data for study 2 were conducted in fall 2013. Data for studies 4, 5, and 6 were collected in winter 2014. All data were collected and analyzed by the first author.

APPENDIX A

Brand information, power condition:
- Disney is one of largest media influences on America’s youth and has played a considerable role in shaping our culture.
- Disney had revenues of $42 billion in 2012, more than the gross domestic product of over a hundred countries including Jamaica, Serbia, Iceland, and Latvia.
- Disney is the largest media and entertainment corporation in the world. It is one of six US companies that own and control 90% of the media
in America. In addition to the Disney brand itself, Disney owns ABC, ESPN, Pixar, Miramax, Lucasfilm, and is part owner of A&E networks and its associated channels (e.g., A&E, History Channel, etc.).

- Mickey Mouse is instantly recognizable to most of the world, and the brand is present nearly everywhere.

Brand information, Universalism condition:

- Disney has celebrated tolerance and acceptance throughout its history: the “It’s a Small World” ride and Epcot Center Park have celebrated different cultures and diversity for decades.

- Disney World has hosted one of the largest gay pride events in the world since 1991, with over 150,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) attendants each year. It has offered health benefits for same-sex partners since 1995.

- For the past 20 years, all of the lead female characters in Disney movies have either been nonwhite (e.g., Asian, Native American, African American, etc.) and/or assertive and intelligent women who in different ways challenge traditional gender roles.

- Disney is generally considered to be an environmentally friendly company. Their three core values of citizenship and sustainability are to “act ethically, champion happiness and well-being of kids and families, and inspire kids and families to make positive changes in the world.”

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