By the Grace of Brands: the Role of Brand Leadership in the Process of Restoring Control

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Gods and governments provide people with an external sense of control. Can brands serve a similar role? The authors explore how the motive to restore control causes consumers to see and value high market position (brand leaders) as a source of external agency.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1022425/volumes/v44/NA-44

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The world can sometimes appear chaotic. When it does, individuals try gaining control via two primary pathways. The first, personal agency, involves self-reliant goal pursuit, whereas the second, external agency, involves relying on powerful others to gain a sense of control (Landau, Kay, and Whitson 2015). This latter path explains why lack of control increases endorsement of dominant gods and governments that seem able to influence personal outcomes (Kay et al. 2008; Kay et al. 2010; Laurin, Kay, and Moscovitch 2008). In the present investigation, we explore whether and how brands can provide external agency to consumers who feel control is lost.

Past research has demonstrated that lack of control increases desire for particular product attributes. This research has focused on the personal agency route to control restoration and found that lack of control increases pursuit of products that serve as useful tools rather than easy solutions (Cutright and Samper 2014; Shepherd et al. 2011). We compliment this research by considering how brand attributes may facilitate control restoration via external agency.

Ostensibly, brands may appear to lack the qualities of known external agents. After all, brands’ abilities to influence outcomes in a free economy are considerably limited, and consumers should not attribute specific brands with similar powers to that of a ruling government or controlling god. Or should they? Strikingly, our research finds just that: leading brands are more greatly endorsed by consumers under conditions of low personal control. Evidence from four controlled experiments indicates that despite the inability of brands to directly structure the world or influence personal outcomes, low-control consumers imbue leading brands with a heightened ability to provide order. This motivated belief subsequently leads to more positive evaluations and greater purchase intentions for leading brands when personal control is low. A field study supports these findings. Across counties of the United States, higher crime rates, as proxies for consumers’ lowered control (Geis and Ross 1998), predict increased purchase intentions, word of mouth, and use for brands higher in leadership. Notably, this effect is specific to brand leadership and not conceptually similar constructs such as familiarity.

Evidence from five studies supports our theorizing. Study 1 revealed that temporary reductions in personal control significantly increased likelihood of choosing a gift card redeemable for a brand leader (vs. non-leader). Study 2 provided a conceptual replication: low (vs. high control or a baseline condition) increased attitude toward a fictitious brand framed as a leader (vs. non-leader). Studies 3 and 4 provided insight into the underlying mechanism. The effect of low control on brand leader endorsement was mediated by motivated beliefs that brand leaders provision order (study 3). Furthermore, reducing the perceived influence of a brand leader attenuated this mediation (study 4), indicating that order-provisioning beliefs are predicated on the plausibility that brand leaders might wield influence in the world. Finally, study 5 highlighted the real-world implications of our theorizing using a national sample of U.S. consumers. Rather than manipulate personal control, in this study we examined crime as an environmental factor that correlates with lower feelings of personal control (Geis and Ross 1998). We merged data on crime rates of counties across the U.S. with consumers’ ratings of actual brands and employed a multilevel random effects model to examine whether consumers in areas with higher crime were more likely to endorse brand leaders. As expected, we found a significant crime × leadership interaction that, when decomposed, revealed a significant positive effect of crime level on purchase intentions, brand usage, and word-of-mouth intentions when brand leadership was high (vs. low). An estimation of average purchase intentions for brands across counties illustrated the considerable differences in the extent to which consumers in areas with differing crime rates seek out brand leaders. These findings provide important insights for managers to better allocate their marketing efforts across promising target markets.

Overall, our research contributes to a better understanding of brands and personal control in two important ways. First, we show that a certain type of brands—leaders—can act as external agents of indirect control who are imbued with an ability to provide control to consumers who lack it. Second, we reveal important consequences of industry leadership. Research has documented how and why benefits accrue to brands with industry influence (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006; Shapiro and Varian 1999). We take a consumer-centric perspective and pinpoint specific circumstances (i.e., low control) under which individuals confer benefits to brand leaders and find them increasingly desirable. We therefore provide fresh insight into ways brand leadership can self-perpetuate.

REFERENCES


