Sacred Attributions: Implications for Marketplace Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Prior research in marketing has extensively examined attribution theory and how this influences product evaluations; however, such research has only examined secular attributions to a company, employees, other consumers, or one's self. Thus, through a series of three studies, the research herein examines a new category of attributions—sacred attributions—to determine when consumers make secular versus sacred attributions and how this influences product evaluations. Study 1 shows that religiosity is positively correlated with sacred attributions. Additionally, Study 1 finds that sacred attributions to God are more likely in positive consumption situations, while sacred attributions to Satan are more likely in negative consumption situations. Study 2 finds that God (Satan) attributions lead to positive (negative) product evaluations, and these effects are pervasive, regardless of religious priming. Study 3 increases external validity by using real businesses to show that sacred attributions are greatest for businesses with a sacred value system, although these effects differ based on situational affect. Findings build upon the literature on attribution theory and priming. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Imagine entering a store to purchase a product that is on sale. You get to the store just in time to get the last of the product on the store's shelves. Who do you attribute this perfect timing to? You could attribute the perfect timing to yourself, knowing just when you needed to leave your house to get the product. You could attribute the timing to others in the physical external environment around you, such as the company and employees for keeping the product in stock or other customers for not taking the last product. In addition to these physical attributions, you could also turn to the spiritual world to ascribe a cause to this situation. You could cite divine intervention as providing the product for you at just the time that you needed it.

Stated in another way, attributions in this situation could have been made to secular internal causes within one's self, secular external causes in the physical environment, or sacred external causes in the spiritual environment. Attributions and attribution theory have been extensively studied in the marketing literature (Folkes, 1988; Laczniak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001; Tsiros, Mittal, & Ross, 2004; Weiner, 2000), but absent from the discussion is the role of external attributions to the spiritual environment in consumer judgments and decision making (referred hereto forth as sacred attributions for ease). Kelley and Michela (1980) elaborate on attribution theory in a review paper to describe that antecedents (e.g., information, beliefs, motivation) influence a person's attributions (i.e., perceived causes), which then influence consequences of such attributions (e.g., behavior, affect, expectancy). In other words, a consumer's beliefs (inclusive of religious beliefs) should influence their attributions.

While research outside of the marketing literature has looked at sacred attributions, such research has largely explored major health maladies or everyday behavior extraneous to consumption experiences (cf. Hovemyr, 1998; Lupfer, Brock, & DePaola, 1992; Williams & Watts, 2014). Thus, the purposes of this paper are to: (1) identify if and when consumers make sacred attributions, (2) test the influence of religiosity, both measured and manipulated, on sacred attributions and resulting product evaluations, and (3) examine moderators influencing sacred attributions, such as the affect of an event and a business' sacred versus secular value system. The literature on attribution theory will be reviewed before discussing sacred and secular attributions and developing hypotheses.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory posits that people identify the cause of an event as either internal to one's self or external to the environment surrounding the self (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Initial research on attribution theory stemmed from helping behavior, asking participants to identify whether a person participated in a helping-related behavior because of internal motivation or external cajoling (Thibaut & Riecken, 1955).
In a review paper, Folkes (1988) describes that attribution theory in the context of marketing has been applied to “inferences about the consumer's own behavior, about a product's success or failure, and about a communicator's endorsement of a product” (p. 550). Weiner (2000) emphasizes that attribution theory is relevant to marketing particularly because attributions lead to blame placed on others when a product operates successfully or fails. Such consumer responses greatly influence how a company's customer service department is expected to respond to consumer compliments or complaints; in other words, such attributions influence a company's impression management process.

Most research in marketing has examined the locus of control with attributions, placing control either in the hands of the buyer or the seller (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Um, 2013), but never to the spiritual realm. Other research has explored specific issues with attribution, such as resolutions for negative attributions (Dunning, Pecotich, & O'Cass, 2004) or misattribution or attribution error (Woodside, 2006), though again only in the context of attributions within the physical realm.

Experimental research has shown that assigning responsibility either to a company or to other causes influences consumer satisfaction, such that attribution of negative events to the company decreases consumer satisfaction, although factors, such as a business' recovery efforts or deemed responsibility for the event, can moderate this relationship (Dunning et al., 2004; Folkes, 1984; Laczniak et al., 2001; Orth et al., 2012; Tsiros et al., 2004). Thus, attributions are important for marketers to understand because they influence consumer evaluations as well as how the company should handle positive and negative business situations.

**SACRED ATTRIBUTIONS**

**Religiosity and Sacred Attributes**

As previously mentioned, Kelley and Michela (1980) note in their review paper that one of the antecedents to attributions are a person's beliefs. One of the most fundamental sources of beliefs comes from religion (Hunt & Penwell, 2008; Minton & Kahle, 2014). Other authors (Proudfoot & Shaver, 1975; Spilka & Schmidt, 1983; Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985) posit a similar view to Kelley and Michela (1980), in that religious beliefs are a key influencer to attributions and more broadly, to attribution theory. Prior research has shown that religion influences a variety of aspects of consumer behavior from sustainable consumption (Leary, Minton, & Mittelstaedt, 2016; Minton, Kahle, & Kim, 2015) to ethics in the marketplace (Vitell, Paolillo, & Singh, 2005) to trust of advertisers (Minton, 2015) to materialistic tendencies (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). As a result of this previous research, it is expected that religion would also influence consumers' attributions in the marketplace.

Previous research, predominantly in the religion literature, has shown that consumers can make sacred attributions (Hovemyr, 1998; Lupfer et al., 1992; Lupfer, De Paola, Brock, & Clement, 1994; Mallory, Mallory, & Gorsuch, 2000; Miner & McKnight, 1999; Weeks & Lupfer, 2000; Williams & Watts, 2014), although this research has yet to examine marketplace attributions. In other words, consumers can attribute the cause of events to one of three sources: (1) internal to one's self, (2) external to the physical environment surrounding one's self, or (3) external to a God or other divine being. Related marketing research has emphasized the importance of distinguishing between the sacred and secular in marketing, given the power and influence of the sacred on consumer behavior (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). Thus, applying this sacred and secular distinction to attributions in marketing is a worthwhile area for research to explore.

Although discussed many years ago, Folkes (1988) stated a need that still applies today; attribution research in marketing needs to explore attributional biases that consistently influence attributions. Religion may be such a bias in leading consumers to attribute events in the marketplace more to sacred, spiritual causes rather than to secular factors that are internal to one's self or external to the physical environment surrounding one's self.

Research in the religion and psychology literature has shown that secular attributions are made more often than sacred attributions, regardless of religiosity (Hovemyr, 1998; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994). Although when comparing the religious and nonreligious, religious consumers are more likely to make sacred attributions. Additionally, more recent research has shown that for meaningful events, sacred attributions are more common than secular attributions among religious people (Williams & Watts, 2014).

Hovemyr (1998) summarizes prior sacred attribution research to state that four main categories of factors affecting sacred attributions have been explored: (1) characteristics of the attributor (e.g., religiousness of the person), (2) context of the attributor (e.g., is the event being judged a religious event), (3) characteristics of the event (e.g., are the actions congruent with the person's value systems), and (4) context of the event (e.g., did the event occur in a religious building). As previously stated, these categories have been explored in the context of general everyday behavior, but these have not been explored in the context of marketplace attitudes and behaviors.

Additionally, Weeks and Lupfer (2000) have identified that sacred attributions to God are greater when perceiving God working through indirect influences (e.g., God having another human help a person) rather than through direct influences (e.g., God directly helping a person). Note again that each of these assesses religious-related moderators, but these do not assess sacred attributions in a consumption situation.

Exploring sacred and secular attributions in the marketplace is particularly pertinent because
attributions may differ within and outside the marketplace. The marketplace is a clearly secular entity, and prior research on sacred attributions has been mostly conducted in sacred contexts (e.g., religious scenarios) or at most, neutral contexts (e.g., describing relationships with friends). Given that businesses are a clearly secular entity (for the most part—there are some sacred businesses), it is beneficial to know whether or not sacred attributions transfer to such clearly secular entities and related situations.

Prior research in marketing shows that religion should influence consumption attitudes and behaviors (cf. Minton, 2015). In the context of advertising, Minton (2015) found that highly religious consumers are more trusting of advertising and brands than less or non-religious consumers. This study shows that religiosity influences marketplace attitudes and behaviors, which may include the use of sacred attributions in consumption situations as well. However, attributions to sacred causes can vary based on the affective nature of an event. In the religion literature, prior research has found that positive events (e.g., a good first date) were more likely to be attributed to God, while negative events (e.g., a bad first date) were more likely to be attributed to Satan (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994). Thus, similar findings are expected in the context of consumption events:

H1a(b): Religiosity is positively correlated with sacred attributions to God (Satan) in consumption situations that exhibit positive (negative) affect.

Religious Priming and Sacred Attributions

While measuring religiosity can provide insight into correlations, it is also important to manipulate religiosity through priming techniques to isolate religion’s influence on attributions. Prior research on attributions using a religious priming technique has not found any difference in sacred or secular attributions between primed and nonprimed groups (Lupfer et al., 1992; Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, and Aarts 2008) found that sacred attributions to one’s self decreased when primed with religious words, although these authors did not explore the influence of the religious prime on sacred attributions.

Prior research on priming and spreading activation theory suggests that activating a node in memory should increase use of the node in follow-up responses (Collins & Loftus, 1975; McNamara, 1992). Additionally, a review of religious priming research shows consistent positive effects of religious primes (Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016). Thus, despite prior research finding no significant effects of religious primes in attribution making, it is expected that priming religion will produce more sacred attributions than when religion is not primed. Such significant priming effects are expected in the marketplace because of the secular nature of the marketplace, leading sacred primes to likely have a greater influence than in other environments that are already perceived as being somewhat sacred.

H2: Participants primed with religion will report more sacred attributions than nonprimed participants.

Sacred Attributions and Product Evaluations

For applicability to marketing, it is important to understand how secular and sacred attributions influence product evaluations. Given that prior research supports the relationship between sacred attributions and positive behaviors (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994), it is expected that sacred attributions to God will lead to more positive product evaluations, while sacred attributions to Satan will lead to more negative product evaluations. This expectation follows suit with prior research that shows that secular attributions to a company influence product evaluations, such that secular attributions to a company in positive situations lead to positive product evaluations, while secular attributions to a company in negative situations lead to negative product evaluations (Folkes, 1988).

Building off this, prior research has shown that only attributions related to the company lead to negative product evaluations (Dunning et al., 2004; Folkes, 1988). Thus, it could be expected that attributions to a spiritual third party should not influence product evaluations. However, recent research has shown a positive relationship between religiosity and trust of marketing activities, which leads to more positive product evaluations (Minton, 2015). Minton (2015) reasoned that trust in a higher being as well as commandments to love one’s neighbor lead to more positive evaluations of others, inclusive of marketers. Given these findings, it is likely that sacred attributions will produce similar positive associations with marketing activities, inclusive of more positive product evaluations.

H3a(b): More sacred attributions to God (Satan) lead to more positive (negative) product evaluations.

H3c: Secular attributions to a company in positive (negative) situations lead to more positive (negative) product evaluations.

Sacred Attributions with Sacred versus Secular Businesses

The influence of sacred and secular attributions on product evaluations is likely to differ based on the sacred or secular nature of a business. Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes (2010) have shown that religious
consumers respond more positively to businesses using sacred cues, so long as the business performs positively. However, these authors found that sacred cues from businesses can increase consumer expectations, thereby leading consumers’ evaluation of the business to be much lower in times of failure than if no sacred cues were used in the first place. It is expected that a similar pattern of effects would occur with businesses not just using a sacred cue but also integrating sacred values throughout the business. Thus:

H4: Highly religious consumers evaluate sacred businesses more positively (negatively) in situations of positive (negative) affect, in comparison to less religious consumers.

As discussed earlier, the literature on spreading activation theory (Collins & Loftus, 1975; McNamara, 1992) describes that concepts that have been activated in the mind should be more easily accessible, thereby influencing consumer response. Such reasoning also fits with the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), which describes that items more easily accessible from a consumer’s working memory are more likely to influence consumer response. Along this line of thinking, a business with sacred values should activate sacred concepts in the mind, which should then influence consumer response, inclusive of making attributions in consumption situations. Stated more simply, businesses with sacred values should influence consumers to be more likely to make sacred attributions. Thus:

H5: Sacred attributions are more likely to occur for sacred businesses than for secular businesses.

Study 1 will proceed to identify the correlation among religiosity and sacred attributions (Hypothesis 1) before Study 2 tests primed religion (Hypothesis 2) on sacred attributions and product evaluations (Hypothesis 3). Finally, Study 3 will examine how attributions differ for sacred versus secular businesses (Hypotheses 4 and 5).

STUDY 1: ATTRIBUTIONS IN CONSUMPTION SITUATIONS

This study explores consumer attributions to identify if more religious consumers are more likely to attribute consumption situations to God or Satan in comparison to less or nonreligious consumers (Hypothesis 1).

Methods

Participants and Design. Sixty adults ($M_{ages} = 36.12$, SD = 13.70, 51.7% female) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, which is valued for academic research (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive. Participants were 41.7% Protestant, 15.0% Catholic, 15.0% agnostic, 13.3% atheist, 10% spiritual but not religious, and 5% other. All participants answered all questions.

Procedure and Measures. Participants were presented three scenarios. The first scenario read, “You are going to the store on Black Friday. You are looking for a toy your kid has asked you for. You get to the aisle and notice there is only one left. You realize you arrived just in time.” The second scenario read, “You are starting off on a road trip across the country. After just 10 miles along the trip, you notice a strange smell coming from your car. Also, your left blinker is continuously blinking, even though you are sure you do not have it turned on.” The third and final scenario read, “You are excited that you are about to welcome a new baby into your family. You are ready, except you do not have a crib yet. You haven’t been able to find one you like at a good price. You randomly open up a magazine and find a great deal on the exact crib you wanted.” Each scenario was presented on a separate screen.

To determine attributions to various sources, participants were asked “How much do you think each of the following entities are the cause of the situation?” Following this question, participants were presented with six causes: one’s self, the company, other customers, God, Satan, or chance. For the purposes of categorization, internal attributions include sacred attributions to yourself; external sacred attributions in the physical environment include attributions to the company, other customers, or chance; and external sacred attributions in the spiritual environment include attributions to God or Satan. Participants were asked to rank each entity on a scale from 1 (not at all the cause) to 9 (definitely the cause).

After indicating attributions, participants were asked religiosity questions ($\alpha = 0.965$) from Minton’s (2015) religiosity scale designed for participants, regardless of their religious affiliation. Participants were then asked basic demographic questions.

Results

Linear regression was used to determine the influence of religiosity on attributions. Results showed a positive and significant relationship between religiosity and sacred attributions to God for the first toy scenario, $t(58) = 2.95$, $p = 0.005$, third baby crib scenario, $t(58) = 3.64$, $p = 0.001$, and directionally for the second car problem scenario, $t(58) = 1.94$, $p = 0.058$. Given the directional nature of Hypothesis 1a, full support for the relationship between religiosity and sacred attributions is found for all three scenarios. See Table 1 for a spotlight analysis for low and high religiosity consumers at ± two SDs from the mean for each attribution source.

While the first toy scenario, $t(58) = 2.23$, $p = 0.022$, and the third baby crib scenario, $t(58) = 0.30$, $p = 0.768$, were positive and therefore showed no significant difference in sacred attributions to Satan based on
Table 1. Spotlight Analysis of Attributions for Consumers Low and High in Religiosity (Study 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribution source</th>
<th>Scenario 1: Getting Last Toy</th>
<th>Scenario 2: Car Problems</th>
<th>Scenario 3: Baby Product Deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>0.478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>0.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satan</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance</td>
<td>7.22</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Response scores for low and high religiosity were determined using spotlight analysis at ± two SDs from the mean on religiosity. “Sig.” indicates the significance religiosity as a predictor of each cause (e.g., religiosity as a significant predictor of you, the company, or customers causing the issue).

religiosity, the second car problem scenario was negative and showed a significant difference in sacred attributions to Satan, t(58) = 2.50, p = 0.015. Attributions to chance were lower as religiosity increased in all situations, although only in the first toy scenario did religiosity significantly and negatively predict secular attributions to chance, t(58) = −2.06, p = 0.044. As expected, religiosity did not significantly influence sacred attributions to one’s self, the company, or other customers.

Discussion
Religiosity positively predicted sacred attributions to God in positive affect consumption situations, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1a. Additionally, religiosity positively predicted sacred attributions to Satan, although only in negative consumption situations, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1b. These finding support prior literature that positive affect events produce more sacred attributions to God, while negative affect events produce more sacred attributions to Satan (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994). Additionally, these findings build on the literature on attribution theory (Folkes, 1988; Kelley & Michela, 1980) to show that secular internal and external attributions as well as sacred external attributions are made in consumption situations.

STUDY 2: RELIGIOUS PRIMING AND SACRED ATTRIBUTIONS

This study seeks to replicate the findings from Study 1 as well as test Hypothesis 2 that priming religion will produce more sacred attributions. Additionally, this study examines the effect of secular versus sacred attributions on product evaluations (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants and Design. One hundred twenty adults (M_age = 36.89, SD = 12.62, 50.4% female) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive. Participants were 31.4% Protestant, 20.7% Catholic, 14.0% agnostic, 17.4% atheist, 9.1% spiritual but not religious, and 7.4% other. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (religious prime: yes, no) x 2 (situational affect: positive, negative) between subjects design.

Procedure and Measures. Prime conditions were presented as a writing task. In the religious prime condition, participants were instructed to “Please write about how your religious beliefs (or atheist beliefs) influence your daily life.” To increase similarity in cognitive effort at the beginning of the experiment, participants in the no religious prime condition were also presented with a writing task asking them to “Please write about what you had for breakfast this morning.”

Following the writing task, participants were exposed to a situation with either positive or negative affect and then asked to indicate attributions and related product evaluations. The scenario read, “You are starting on a plane trip from the US to Asia. You are hoping to buy access to the movies on the movie player in your seat to pass time. Shortly after takeoff, you hear an announcement that there is an issue with the movie players.” The positive affect situation ended with the following sentence, “The payment feature does not work. Now you will get free movies for the whole flight.” The negative affect situation ended with the following sentence, “The movie players do not work. Now you will not be able to watch any movies on your flight.”

Attributions were assessed in the same way as in Study 1 with the same six attributions sources: one’s self, the company/employees, other customers, God, Satan, or chance. Product evaluations were assessed with two 9-point, three-item bipolar scales: one assessing overall attitude (endpoints: unfavorable/favorable, bad/good, dislike/like; α = 0.986) and another assessing purchase intentions (endpoints: unlikely/likely, definitely would not/definitely would, not probable, probable; α = 0.983).

Two manipulation check questions were asked after assessing product evaluations. To assess manipulation of the religion prime, participants were asked, “What was the topic that you wrote about at the beginning of...
this study?” with answer choices of Animals, Breakfast, or Religion. To assess manipulation of positive or negative affect, participants were asked, “Did the scenario you just read have a positive or negative outcome?” with answer choices of Positive or Negative. After answering manipulation check questions, participants answered the same religiosity scale (α = 0.977) from Study 1 and filled in basic demographic information.

Results

Manipulation Checks. No participants failed to answer the priming manipulation check correctly. Five participants failed to answer the situational affect manipulation check correctly and were removed from the dataset, leaving the data from 115 participants for further analysis.

Predicting Attributions. Hierarchical linear regression was used to examine the influence of manipulated conditions and measured religiosity on sacred and secular attributions. In Step 1, the three main effects were added (measured religiosity, religion prime, situational affect). In Step 2, all two-way interactions were added. In Step 3, the three-way interaction was added.

For secular attributions to chance, the model with the three-way interaction was significant, $F(7, 107) = 2.86, p = 0.009$, with the three-way interaction significantly (albeit directionally) adding to the model, $t(107) = 1.96, p = 0.053$. For secular attributions to the company, the model with the three-way interaction was directionally significant, $F(7, 107) = 1.89, p = 0.078$. Although the full model was only directionally significant, the three-way interaction significantly added to the model beyond all two-way interactions and main effects, $F(1, 107) = 5.37, p = 0.022$. See Figure 1 for a spotlight analysis of the three-way interaction for secular attributions to the company using ± one SD from the mean on religiosity. A similar pattern of effects occurred for the three-way interaction for secular attributions to chance, such that the religious prime had little effect on attributions in the positive affect situation for highly religious consumers. No models were significant in predicting secular attributions to one’s self or to other customers.

Turning to sacred attributions, the model with all two-way interactions was significant for God attributions, $F(6, 108) = 5.56, p < 0.001$. There was a significant two-way interaction between measured religiosity and situational affect for sacred attributions to God, $t(108) = 3.16, p = 0.002$. The three-way interaction among measured religiosity, primed religion, and situational affect did not significantly add to the model, $F(1, 107) = 0.18, p = 0.672$. Thus, regardless of whether religion is activated in the consumer’s mind, highly religious consumers are more likely to make sacred attributions to God in positive affect situations in comparison to negative affect situations. For sacred attributions to Satan, only the main effects model was significant, $F(3, 111) = 3.01, p = 0.033$. Specifically, religiosity was the only significant main effect, $t(111) = 2.21, p = 0.029$, such that high religiosity led to more sacred attributions to Satan.

Predicting Product Evaluations. To determine the influence of attributions on product evaluations (both overall attitude and purchase intentions), two hierarchical linear regressions were run using the six sources of attributions as predictors in Step 1, and the interactions between situational affect and each attribution source in Step 2. The model of main effects in Step 1 predicting overall attitude was significant, $F(6, 108) = 3.96, p = 0.001$. Specifically, all attributions were nonsignificant predictors, except sacred attributions to God that led to more positive overall attitude, $t(108) = 3.38, p = 0.001$, and sacred attributions to Satan that led to more negative overall attitude, $t(108) = –3.00, p = 0.003$. The model with two-way interaction effects significantly added to the overall model, $F(6, 102) = 14.16, p < 0.001$. As expected, the interaction between secular attributions to the company and situational affect was significant, $t(102) = 3.64, p < 0.001$, such that secular attributions to the company in situations of positive affect led to higher overall attitude and vice
versus. Similarly, the interaction between secular attributions to chance and situational affect was significant, $t(102) = 2.33, p = 0.022$. All other interaction effects were nonsignificant.

Additionally, the main effects model predicting purchase intentions was significant, $F(6, 108) = 3.56, p = 0.003$. Similar to overall attitude, sacred attributions to God led to more positive purchase intentions, $t(108) = 3.13, p = 0.002$, while sacred attributions to Satan led to more negative purchase intentions, $t(108) = -3.13, p = 0.002$. Additionally, secular attributions to chance led to more positive purchase intentions, $t(108) = 2.19, p = 0.031$. All other attributions were nonsignificant predictors of purchase intentions. The model including all two-way interaction effects significantly added to the overall model, $F(6, 102) = 5.42, p < 0.001$. Again, the interaction between situational affect and secular attributions to the company was significant, $t(102) = 2.10, p = 0.038$, such that secular attributions to the company in positive affect situations led to more positive purchase intentions and vice versa. In comparison to overall attitude, the interaction between situational affect and secular attributions to chance was not significant, $t(102) = 1.30, p = 0.198$. All other interaction effects were nonsignificant.

Discussion

Similar to Study 1, sacred attributions to God were more likely to occur in positive affect situations and with more religious consumers, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1a. Additionally, sacred attributions to Satan were more likely to occur among highly religious consumers, although there were no significant interaction effects with situational affect, thereby partially supporting Hypothesis 1b. Prior research suggests that sacred attributions to Satan are most likely in negative situations (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994). The nonsignificant effect of situational affect for sacred attributions to Satan in this study may be due to the consumption scenario dealing with service failure and recovery. As such, all situations had a negative component when the movie player failed, opening every situation up to sacred attributions to Satan.

Just as prior research has found (Lupfer et al., 1992), results from this study showed that priming religion had no effect on sacred attributions, thereby not supporting Hypothesis 2. Interestingly, priming religion had significant effects on company and secular attributions to chance in situations of negative affect for consumers high in religiosity, such that these secular attributions increased when religion was primed. These results are possibly a sign that consumers feel more comfortable making sacred attributions in positive situations (i.e., attributions to God), but seek to make attributions to the external physical environment in negative affect situations (e.g., secular attributions to the company) rather than to the sacred external environment (i.e., attributions to Satan). A similar effect for situations of positive affect likely did not occur because secular attributions were already lower for consumers high in religiosity because such consumers were more likely to make sacred attributions to God in the positive affect situation. The opposite pattern of effects for consumers low in religiosity may be due to the religious prime leading consumers to think more about specific causes for an event, thereby dispersing attributions across sources, although further research would need to investigate this.

Additionally, results from this study confirm Hypotheses 3a and 3b to show that sacred attributions to God produce more positive product evaluations, while sacred attributions to Satan produce more negative product evaluations. Also, Hypothesis 3c is confirmed in showing that secular attributions to a company in situations of positive affect lead to more positive product evaluations, while such attributions in situations of negative affect lead to more negative product evaluations. Thus, both secular and sacred attributions influence product evaluations.

These findings build on attribution theory (Folkes, 1988; Kelley & Michela, 1980) to show the importance of both secular and sacred attributions in the marketplace. Extending these findings, it would be interesting to explore how sacred and secular attributions differ when evaluating consumption situations in religious or nonreligious businesses.

STUDY 3: SACRED ATTRIBUTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS AND NONRELIGIOUS BUSINESSES

This study seeks to strengthen the external validity of Study 2 by using real businesses. Additionally, this study examines how product evaluations (Hypothesis 4) and sacred attributions (Hypothesis 5) change when businesses operate with a sacred value system.

Methods

Pretest. A pretest of 44 adults ($M_{age} = 35.89, SD = 13.41, 50.0\%$ female) on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk was used to identify businesses within a product category that had similar overall attitude but different levels of religiousness (i.e., different adherence to a sacred value system). Results show no significant difference in overall attitude toward the fast food restaurants of Chick-fil-A ($M = 5.39, SD = 2.88$) and Arby’s ($M = 5.57, SD = 2.30$), $t(43) = 0.46, p = 0.652$. Additionally, results show a significant difference in religiousness between Chick-fil-A ($M = 6.80, SD = 2.17$) and Arby’s ($M = 4.11, SD = 2.10$), $t(43) = 6.09, p < 0.001$. Thus, Chick-fil-A is used as a religious business, and Arby’s is used as a nonreligious business in this study.

Participants and Design. One hundred twenty adults ($M_{age} = 35.74, SD = 12.01, 47.9\%$ female) from
Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive. Participants were 31.4% Protestant, 12.4% Catholic, 23.1% agnostic, 14.0% atheist, 9.9% spiritual but not religious, and 9.2% other. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (business value system: sacred, secular) x 2 (situational affect: positive, negative) between subjects design.

Procedure and Measures. Before exposure to the consumption situation, participants were asked to report their preexisting overall attitude toward and likelihood of purchasing from the fast food restaurant. Overall attitude ($\alpha = 0.989$) and purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.992$) were measured using the same scales from Study 2. Participants only reported restaurant evaluations for the business they were randomly assigned to, either Chick-fil-A (sacred value system) or Arby’s (secular value system).

Following these preexisting restaurant evaluations, participants were exposed to a situation with either positive or negative affect and then asked to indicate attributions and related restaurant evaluations. The scenarios for Chick-fil-A (Arby’s) read, “You are going to Chick-fil-A (Arby’s) for lunch. Right before you order your food, the power goes out.” The positive (negative) affect situation then ends with, “Because of this situation, Chick-fil-A (Arby’s) gives you your lunch for free (says you cannot order food).”

Attributions were assessed in the same way as in Studies 1 and 2 with the same six attribution sources: one’s self, the company/employees, other customers, God, Satan, or chance. Postsituation restaurant evaluations were assessed using the same scales for overall attitude ($\alpha = 0.996$) and purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.993$) as used for presituation restaurant evaluations.

Two manipulation check questions were asked after assessing postsituation restaurant evaluations. To assess manipulation of the business’ focus on sacred versus secular values, participants were asked, “Did the business you read about throughout this study have a religious value system?” with answer choices of Yes or No. To assess manipulation of positive or negative affect, participants were asked, “Did the scenario you just read have a positive or negative outcome?” with answer choices of Positive or Negative. Lastly, participants completed the same religiosity scale ($\alpha = 0.971$) from Studies 1 and 2 and then filled in basic demographic information.

Results

Manipulation Checks. Eight participants failed to answer the manipulation check for the business’ sacred/secular value system correctly. An additional seven participants failed to answer the situational affect manipulation check correctly and were removed from the dataset, leaving the data from 105 participants for further analysis.

Predicting Attributions. Hierarchical linear regression was used to examine the influence of situational affect, business values (sacred vs. secular), and measured religiosity on attributions. Models were run with three steps: Step 1 (main effects), Step 2 (two-way interactions), and Step 3 (three-way interaction). For secular attributions to one’s self, there was a main effect of situational affect, $t(103) = 2.22, p = 0.029$, with the full model directionally significant, $F(2, 103) = 3.00, p = 0.054$, such that participants in the positive affect condition made more secular attributions to their self in comparison to participants in the negative affect condition. No interaction effects were significant for secular attributions to one’s self.

For secular attributions to the company, the three-way interaction among religiosity, business values, and situational affect was significant, $t(98) = 2.45, p = 0.016$, with the full model significant as well, $F(7, 98) = 4.16, p < 0.001$. A spotlight analysis was conducted on the three-way interaction using ± one SD from the mean of religiosity; see Figure 2. There were no significant effects for secular attributions to other consumers or to chance.

For sacred attributions to God, the two-way interactions were significant predictors, $F(6, 99) = 6.45, p < 0.001$. There were significant interactions between religiosity and business values, $t(99) = 2.38, p = 0.019$, and directionally significant interactions between...
religiosity and situational affect, \( t(99) = 1.92, p = 0.057 \), and between situational affect and business values, \( t(99) = 1.80, p = 0.075 \). Specifically, high religiosity in the sacred business values condition, high religiosity in the positive affect condition, and the positive affect condition combined with the sacred business values condition all led to more sacred attributions to God. Lastly, there was a significant main effect of religiosity on sacred attributions to Satan, \( t(102) = 2.14, p = 0.035 \), although the full model with other main effects was not significant, \( F(3, 102) = 2.66, p = 0.181 \).

**Predicting Product Evaluations.** A hierarchical linear regression model was used to predict product evaluations using two steps: Step 1 (attribute sources) and Step 2 (two-way interactions between attribute sources and situational affect). In addition, preexisting product evaluations were controlled for. It is worth noting that results did not differ whether or not preexisting product evaluations were controlled for. For overall attitude, only sacred attributions to Satan, \( t(92) = -2.46, p = 0.016 \), and the interaction between sacred attributions to the company and situational affect, \( t(92) = 2.56, p = 0.012 \), were significant in the full model, \( F(13, 92) = 29.21, p < 0.001 \). Specifically, sacred attributions to Satan were negatively correlated with overall attitude, and secular attributions to the company were positively correlated with overall attitude in situations of positive affect and vice versa for situations of negative affect. For purchase intentions, there was only a significant two-way interaction between sacred attributions to Satan and situational affect, \( t(92) = 2.14, p = 0.035 \), with the full model also being significant, \( F(13, 92) = 72.85, p < 0.001 \). More sacred attributions to Satan, in the negative affect situation in particular, led to lower purchase intentions.

Additionally, the direct effect of conditions (situational affect and business values) and religiosity on product evaluations was tested. A significant three-way interaction emerged, \( t(99) = -2.15, p = 0.034 \), with the full model inclusive of all main effects and interaction effects significant, \( F(6, 99) = 55.12, p < 0.001 \). A similar three-way interaction emerged for purchase intentions, although directionally significant, \( t(99) = -1.68, p = 0.097 \), with the full model being significant, \( F(6, 99) = 126.01, p < 0.001 \). Highly religious consumers had higher (lower) product evaluations for religious businesses in positive (negative) affect situations in comparison to less religious consumers.

**Discussion**

Similar to Study 2, situational affect, religious cues, and religiosity have the greatest influence on secular attributions to the company and sacred attributions to God. Across both Studies 2 and 3, religiosity was positively correlated with sacred attributions to God, particularly in situations of positive affect, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1a. While religious priming had no significant effect on sacred attributions to God in Study 2, religious values integrated within a business in Study 3 significantly led to more sacred attributions to God, regardless of situational affect. These results may be due to increased prominence of sacred concepts in the mind, as would be suggested by spreading activation theory (Collins & Loftus, 1975; McNamara, 1992). Thus, religious cues need to be integrated within a business’ value system and marketing efforts to have an effect on sacred attributions to God. These findings, along with the findings from Studies 1 and 2 continue to build on the research on attribution theory in the marketing literature (Folkes, 1984; Laczniak et al., 2001; Orth et al., 2012; Tsiros et al., 2004) to show that consumers can make attributions to one of three main sources: (1) internal secular attributions to one’s self, (2) external secular attributions to the physical environment surrounding one’s self (e.g., to the company, other customers, or to chance), and (3) external sacred attributions to the spiritual environment (e.g., to God or Satan).

Also similar to Study 2, conditions (i.e., situational affect or a business’ value system) had no significant influence on sacred attributions to Satan, with the only significant effect being a positive correlation between sacred attributions to Satan and measured religiosity, thereby not supporting Hypothesis 1b. This finding, similar to Study 2, is likely a result of all scenarios containing negative affect components. Although manipulation check results show correct identification of overall situational affect, participants could still have attributed portions of the situation to Satan (e.g., the power going out in the restaurant right before placing an order).

Also similar to Study 2, sacred attributions to Satan led to more negative product evaluations, thus supporting Hypothesis 3b, and sacred attributions to the company in positive (negative) affect situations led to more positive (negative) product evaluations, thus supporting Hypothesis 3c. In contrast to Study 2, sacred attributions to God did not significantly predict positive product evaluations, thereby not supporting Hypothesis 3a. These results may be due to the low level of sacred attributions to God in Study 3 (\( M = 1.63, SD = 1.70 \)) in comparison to Study 2 (\( M = 2.36, SD = 2.44 \)).

Despite the nonsignificance of sacred attributions to God as a predictor of product evaluations, there was a significant direct effect of conditions (i.e., situational affect and a business’ value system) and religiosity on product evaluations. Specifically, highly religious consumers evaluated sacred businesses more positively in positive affect situations but evaluated sacred businesses more negatively in negative affect situations, in comparison to less religious consumers. These results fully support Hypothesis 4 as well as prior research by Taylor et al. (2010), which finds that religious consumers have higher expectations of businesses using sacred cues, thereby producing more polarizing responses to actions by such businesses. Lastly, the results from Study 3 also support Hypothesis 5 in that...
sacred attributions are more likely to occur with sacred businesses, although these effects are most pronounced for highly religious consumers. Given that this study only examined sacred businesses in the category of fast food with many potential confounds between the businesses (e.g., differences in employment practices, menu items, years of operation), further research is needed to replicate the findings of this study with a wider variety of business types.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Through three studies, this research builds on attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980) to show that consumer attributions can occur outside of the commonly accepted secular attributions to one’s self or to the external physical environment (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Dunning et al., 2004; Folkes, 1984; Orth et al., 2012; Tsiros et al., 2004; Um, 2013; Woodside, 2006). More specifically, the studies herein show that, in addition to sacred attributions, consumers make sacred attributions to God and Satan across a variety of marketplace situations.

This research fulfilled the three purposes set forth in the introduction. First, findings from the three studies identify when consumers most often make sacred attributions by showing that sacred attributions to God are more likely in positive affect situations, and sacred attributions to Satan are more likely in negative affect situations. This finding supports prior research in the religion and psychology literature showing the influence of situational affect on sacred attributions in a nonmarketplace context (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Lupfer et al., 1992, 1994). Second, the results herein tested the influence of religiosity on attributions, finding that sacred attributions are most likely to occur by consumers that are highly religious, and priming religion has no significant effect on sacred attributions, thereby supporting prior research in the religion literature (Lupfer et al., 1992). Third, the studies herein examined moderators to sacred and secular marketplace attributions, finding that both the situational affect and sacred versus secular nature of a business’ value system influence attributions and product evaluations.

While research in the religion and psychology literature has already established the use of both sacred and secular attributions (Mallery et al., 2000; Weeks & Lupfer, 2000; Williams & Watts, 2014), the research herein provides a meaningful contribution to the marketing literature. Specifically, the marketplace is often thought of as a secular domain, and thus sacred attributions could be thought to not influence practices in the secular marketplace. However, the results herein show that consumers pull from both sacred and secular sources to make attributions in the marketplace. Additionally, prior research has not explored the influence of key moderators, such as a business’ use of either a secular or sacred value system, on attributions and resulting product evaluations. Thus, the research herein provides new insights for the marketing and attribution literature by examining sacred and secular attributions in the marketplace, identifying how such attributions differ for businesses with a sacred versus secular value system, and understanding how sacred and secular attributions influence consumer evaluations.

Marketers can benefit from the findings of this research by understanding how different sources of attributions influence product evaluations. Given that sacred attributions to God generally increase product evaluations, marketers may want to encourage consumers to attribute positive situations to God (e.g., saying a positive company event was such a blessing), rather than taking personal credit for the positive situation. Additionally, the findings from this research build upon prior research (cf. Taylor et al., 2010) to show that religious consumers likely hold higher expectations of businesses operating with a sacred value system, thereby reporting lower company evaluations in negative affect situations. Thus, businesses operating with a sacred value system should specifically seek out religious consumers after situations of negative affect to identify ways to restore consumer confidence and the business’ relationship with the consumer.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research should build upon this research to better understand sacred attributions in the marketplace. First, the research herein focuses on the locus of control with attributions, which could be expanded to look at the stability of attributions (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000). For example, are sacred attributions stable across situations and businesses? Or rather are sacred attributions similar to luck attributions that are unstable and vary greatly from situation to situation? Understanding the stability of sacred attributions provides valuable insight into whether or not such attributions can be predicted as well as helps to describe how consumers are expected to behave in various situations.

Additional future research could explore other moderators to sacred attributions, such as the use of sacred symbols in advertising, marketing during times with religious significance (e.g., Christmas, Easter), or differences in attributions among product categories (e.g., attributions for a meditation yoga mat versus attributions for a pair of running shorts). Further research would also benefit from exploring mediators to making sacred attributions, such as the need for control, the ability to forgive, or feelings of pride in one’s self.

This research is limited by the sole use of participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk as well as the sole use of computer-based experiments. Future research would benefit from addressing these limitations with a field study. Additionally, the use of Satan as a negative force may be a misrepresentation of many consumer’s beliefs who either do not believe in Satan or do not feel that Satan represents a strong negative
force. Further exploration is needed to identify consumers’ views of Satan and resulting implications for Satan-related attributions in the marketplace. Related research could examine consumers’ views of God as either an entity to be loved or an entity to be feared (or a combination of the two) to identify how attributions to such a God influences product/company evaluations.

More importantly, the studies herein were limited by providing consumers with a set of attribution sources and asking consumers to rate to what extent they would attribute the locus of control to each of these attribution sources. By providing a list of sources, consumers may be primed to think more about sacred attributions than they normally would. Thus, future research should test sacred attributions in a way that does not have the potential to prime consumers with sacred attribution sources prior to making marketplace attributions.

CONCLUSION

Findings from the studies herein show that religiosity leads to more sacred attributions, both of a positive nature (to God) and of a negative nature (to Satan), as well as influences product evaluations differently for sacred versus secular businesses, thereby building on the literature on attribution theory. Even though religion is often seen as a taboo topic in business, these findings show that marketers of both secular and sacred businesses should be interested in sacred attributions. Particularly, marketers should take interest in situations where negative business scenarios are attributed to a spiritual entity, thereby saving face for the business. Similarly, marketers should take interest in situations where positive business scenarios are attributed to a spiritual entity, thereby taking away positive accolades that would normally be attributed to business. Thus, whether marketing for Chick-fil-A and Hobby Lobby (sacred businesses) or Arby’s and Jo-Ann (secular businesses), sacred attributions influence consumers’ interactions with a business.

Prior literature in marketing assumed consumers make secular attributions internally to one’s self or externally to the physical environment surrounding the consumer, such as to the business or to other consumers. The research herein shows an important third source of attributions by consumers—the spiritual environment. Given that over 70% of consumers worldwide adhere to some kind of religious belief (Hunt & Penwell, 2008), more attention needs to be afforded in the marketing literature and by marketing practitioners to understanding how sacred attributions influence marketplace attitudes and behaviors.

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