

Company Worth Keeping: Personal Control and Preferences for Brand Leaders

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Brand leaders possess tremendous agency, with the ability to shape a sweeping variety of outcomes. Does this fact confer psychological value to consumers? We posit that external conditions that undermine feelings of personal control cause consumers to affiliate more with brand leaders. This occurs because affiliating with such high-agency brands gives consumers a sense of personal agency and thereby restores feelings of control. An initial study using archival data from nearly 18,000 consumers reporting on over 1,200 brands documents real-world effects that are consistent with these propositions. Four follow-up experiments demonstrate the effect of low control on brand leader (vs. nonleader) purchase intentions using direct manipulations in controlled settings, capture the underlying process, and rule out alternative explanations. This research thus reveals that the psychology of personal control underlies a process that benefits brand leaders.

Keywords: compensatory control, brand leadership, brand agency, personal agency

The achievement and maintenance of personal control is a fundamental human motivation (Friesen et al. 2014; Kay et al. 2010c; Kelley 1973; Landau, Kay, and Whitson 2015; Whitson and Galinsky 2008). Accordingly, research has shown that lost control spurs a wide range of perceptual, affective, and behavioral responses in service of control restoration (see Landau et al. 2015 for a review). In

the present research, we focus on a novel response whereby low-control individuals indicate greater purchase intentions for brand leaders. We posit that this occurs because having high-agency entities (e.g., brand leaders) “on your side” serves as a cue for individuals’ belief that they possess personal agency, and such a belief restores feelings of control.

The present research advances the literature in various ways. First, it offers new insight into the relationship between personal control and brand preferences. This relationship derives from a brand’s advantageous market position (i.e., leadership) rather than marketing efforts (Cutright 2012; Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013; Cutright and Samper 2014). Modeling this relationship may be particularly relevant in today’s marketplace, as many individuals currently feel they lack control in what is perceived to be a chaotic world (e.g., most Americans describe the country as “chaotic,” “crazy,” and “challenging”; Clement, Guskin, and Tan 2017), and consumers increasingly have access to brands with notable marketplace leadership, whose market shares across categories have been increasing in recent decades (Economist 2016a, 2016b; Jennings 2016).

Second, this research advances the personal control literature by demonstrating that in addition to directly

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Editors: Darren W. Dahl and J. Jeffrey Inman

Associate Editor: Simona Botti

Advance Access publication August 28, 2019

possessing personal agency (Cutright and Samper 2014; Landau et al. 2015), merely affiliating with an entity who possesses high agency can facilitate control restoration. This is important because a key finding in past work is that low control can lead to greater endorsement of other entities, such as God and governments, that individually wield the unilateral power required to influence outcomes on one's behalf and thus provide control externally (a process known as *external agency*). Here, alternatively, the results reveal that affiliating with a high-agency entity may heighten the belief that one possesses the necessary personal resources to influence outcomes directly through one's own behavior (i.e., personal agency). This alternate process thus allows for affiliative benefits to be accrued by external entities, such as brand leaders, that are perceived to be highly agentic yet are nonetheless unlikely to take complete control over outcomes on one's behalf.

Finally, the current findings contribute to the literature on brand leadership by documenting a novel source of benefits to leadership—heightened purchase intentions by low-control individuals—that is not attributable to known sources of competitive advantage. Thus, the psychology of personal control underlies a process that benefits brand leaders.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Personal Control and Personal Agency

Through a synthesis of various aspects and definitions of personal control, Landau et al. (2015, 695) advance a formal definition of the construct that conceptualizes it as a “person's belief that he or she is capable of obtaining desired outcomes, avoiding undesired outcomes, and achieving goals” (Ajzen 1985; Burger 1985; Langer 1983; Thompson 2002). Personal control is important in that it allows individuals to psychologically defend against the anxiety associated with thinking that their environment is random or unpredictable (Tullett, Kay, and Inzlicht 2015). Therefore, personal control not only is considered to be a fundamental human motivation (Friesen et al. 2014; Kay et al. 2010c; Kelley 1973; Landau et al. 2015), but also has been shown to be associated with several indicators of well-being (e.g., health and happiness; Langer 1983; Luck et al. 1999). Given the importance of maintaining feelings of control, work on compensatory control theory demonstrates that when personal control feels lost, individuals respond by seeking to regain a sense of perceived control (Kay et al. 2008, 2010a; Landau et al. 2015; Shepherd et al. 2011).

Traditional accounts argue that personal control is rooted in sub-beliefs of personal agency, or beliefs that one holds the necessary resources to produce particular outcomes or achieve certain goals (Landau et al. 2015). Such resources “include skills, knowledge, and other capabilities

that enable the self to initiate action, expend effort in the service of goals, and persist in the face of adversity” (Landau et al. 2015, 695). As a result, personal agency can play a primary role in control restoration. For example, Cutright and Samper (2014) show that low personal control increases purchase intentions for products framed as empowering instruments rather than easy solutions, such as a golf putter that will “help you improve your game” rather than one that will “do the hard work for you.” Restoring control via empowering instruments represents a direct resolution to personal control deficiencies, as it aims to increase the objective level of personal agency resources one possesses (Mandel et al. 2017). Here, we explore an alternate route whereby individuals may indirectly resolve deficits in personal control via symbolically bolstering personal agency. We describe this in greater detail next.

Activating Personal Agency via Affiliation with High-Agency Entities

According to Mandel et al.'s (2017) Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model (CCBM), consumers may indirectly resolve self-discrepancies (i.e., incongruities between a current and desired self-perception) through various forms of symbolic self-completion, such as the acquisition and display of symbols that represent desired traits and abilities. Importantly, this form of resolution hinges on a cue-based process whereby individuals infer greater levels of a desired personal attribute by heightening factors that serve as a cue for the attribute. For example, the motive to restore perceptions of intelligence can cause consumers to choose products that are symbolically associated with intelligence, such as fountain pens, that serve as cues that one possesses personal intelligence (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). Comparably, the motive to restore perceptions of masculinity can cause male consumers to increase purchase intentions for SUVs (i.e., products that symbolize and thus serve as a personal cue of one's masculinity; Willer et al. 2013).

Given that personal control is rooted in sub-beliefs of personal agency, the preceding discussion suggests that one route through which low-control individuals may engage in control restoration involves the bolstering of personal agency beliefs through symbolic means. Personal agency presents a potentially fertile characteristic with which to engage in symbolic self-completion, as it has been shown to be highly malleable. For example, Fast et al. (2009) found that simply imagining oneself in a high-agency role (i.e., having high power) was sufficient to induce beliefs that one could steer the outcome of a random process, such as a dice roll. In our context, we suggest that one means by which an individual may indirectly bolster personal agency involves affiliation with external entities who themselves possess high agency (i.e., an ability to exert influence over widespread outcomes). Of course, this

notion that individuals may inherit the attributes of entities they affiliate with is not new. For example, Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) found that taking the perspective of a benevolent stranger can bolster self-perceptions of benevolence. Comparably, Cho and Knowles (2013) found that framing a student body as higher (vs. lower) in trait meticulousness caused students to believe they themselves possessed high (vs. low) levels of trait meticulousness. In each of these examples, individuals used the characteristics of others as a cue when judging their own traits.

In sum, we posit that individuals' degree of affiliation with external entities possessing high agency serves as a cue for their belief in their own possession of personal agency. In other words, individuals believe that they can better steer their own outcomes or accomplish their goals (i.e., engage in personal agency) when they have high-agency external entities psychologically "on their side." In the following section, we conceptualize brand leaders and illustrate how they may serve as high-agency entities worthy of affiliation for low-control individuals.

Brand Leaders as High-Agency Entities

The term *brand leadership* typically refers to brand superiority and corresponding scale within its category or industry (Aaker 1996; Huang, Li, and Zhang 2013; Kamins, Alpert, and Perner 2007). However, studying brand leadership with an exacting experimental approach requires a more precise definition. In this regard, MacInnis (2011) suggests that when the conceptual understanding of a term is vague or missing, researchers should turn to the experience of consumers to inform theory. We therefore conducted a pretest on 45 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participants, asking them to define what the term "brand leader" means to them in as much detail as possible. After coding responses into five emergent categories, we found that the majority (62.2%) of participants define brand leaders as those that lead their category in market share (see web appendix A for details regarding this pretest). Thus, we define brand leadership as a subjective perception of a brand's dominance related to category market share (Bronnenberg, Dhar, and Dubé 2007).

Consistent with our previous conceptualization of agency (Kay et al. 2010a), we characterize brand agency as a brand's ability to exert influence over widespread outcomes. Notably, this characterization closely corresponds to Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone's (2012) concept of brand ability, which specifies that brands differ in their levels of intentions and ability to enact those intentions; here, we posit that brand leaders are more agentic (i.e., able to exert influence). Past work has shown that brand leaders are indeed influential in a variety of domains, ranging from market-centric domains, such as channel negotiations (Boulding and Staelin 1990; Keller 2003), to more worldly areas, such as the development of consumer

culture (e.g., Starbucks and coffee drinking in the US; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Common hyperbole suggests their "size gives them great influence over the world" (Winston 2015, 1), with some even proposing that brand leaders are endowed with too much influence (Lynn 2010).

Of additional importance to the present research is that people are largely aware of brand leaders' agency by virtue of both their role as consumers in the marketplace and their exposure to the discourse surrounding these brands. Walmart, for example, has been a frequent topic in the popular press with regards to its influence over consumers, as well as small businesses, supporting industries, and suppliers (Fishman 2006). In the technology category, brand leaders such as Google, Facebook, and Apple have great influence over the way consumers work, interact, and socialize, and this influence has been strongly reinforced by the press (della Cava 2014; Gruman 2014; Poppick 2014). In contrast, nonleader brands sometimes even promote their *lack* of influence, as do underdog brands that highlight their paucity of resources (Paharia et al. 2011). To empirically verify the linkage between brand leadership and brand agency, we conducted two pilot studies (see web appendix B for pilot details and web appendix C for brand stimuli used across studies). Results confirm that consumers perceive brand leaders as having high agency (i.e., "has the ability to shape outcomes in the world," "can determine what happens to people," "can have an effect on society," and "has influence in the world"; 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .80$).

Brand Leader Affiliation as a Source of Control Restoration

We posit that affiliating with high-agency entities can serve as a means of restoring control. We further propose that this happens because people use their degree of affiliation with highly agentic entities as a cue for their belief in their own possession of personal agency, a belief that can help restore feelings of low control. Thus, low-control individuals should seek to affiliate with brand leaders, as brand leaders are perceived to possess high agency. Such affiliation should facilitate control restoration by enhancing personal agency beliefs.

Notably, the process described above differs from an alternative route to control restoration based on external agency. This alternative pathway involves the bolstering of all-powerful external agents that strengthens the sense that someone or something will influence outcomes on one's behalf (Kay et al. 2008; Kay et al. 2010a; Landau et al. 2015). For example, past work has shown that low control leads to enhanced belief in a controlling God and greater support of a benevolent government (Kay et al. 2008; Kay, Moscovitch, and Laurin 2010b). In the present research, we posit that the control-reduced individual does not

bolster brand leaders because such brands will influence outcomes on their behalf (as in previous work on God and government; Kay et al. 2008, 2010a; Landau et al. 2015), presumably because brand leaders are more limited in their motivation to control people's outcomes for them. Rather, we posit that affiliation with brand leaders restores control via personal agency. We tease these processes apart in studies 3 and 4.

OVERVIEW OF FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL PACKAGE

We test our framework in five studies. In study 1, we investigate our core effect in the real world using field data and uncover evidence that is consistent with the prediction that brand leader affiliation serves as a source of control restoration. Then, we examine this effect experimentally using a consequential choice between two real brands (study 2). The next two studies focus on direct evidence for process using moderation (study 3) and mediation (study 4). The final study (5) examines an alternative causal explanation based on powerlessness and brand luxury.

STUDY 1

This study had two primary objectives. First, we sought to test our conceptual framework using real-world data. **We proxied for low control using an environmental factor: crime.** As crime increases, an individual is confronted with senseless, seemingly random acts that reduce the perception that one can avoid negative outcomes, achieve positive outcomes, and overall, have meaningful influence over one's outcomes in life (Geis and Ross 1998; Ross and Mirowsky 2009), all of which are hallmarks of our personal control conceptualization. To examine the effect of crime on affiliation with brand leaders, we merged US county-level crime rate data with consumer-level brand evaluations from a national survey of nearly 18,000 consumers reporting on over 1,200 brands. According to our framework, consumers should report greater purchase intentions for brands higher (vs. lower) in leadership more when local crime levels are high (vs. low), and further, any effect should be robust to model specifications that parse out brand characteristics that are exogenous to, yet likely correlated with, brand leadership (i.e., brand quality, familiarity, brand status).

The second objective was to test the control-restoring nature of brand leader affiliation. Past compensatory control research suggests that one way to ascertain whether a factor is truly a source of control restoration is to test whether its effects diminish in the presence of other simultaneously available sources of control, as each source should be independently efficacious (Inesi et al. 2011; Kay et al. 2010c). Here, we accomplished this by accounting

for the salience of God via a proxy—concentration of religious organizations—as past work has demonstrated that God can serve as a source of control restoration (Kay et al. 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Laurin, Kay, and Moscovitch 2008).

Data and Model

Personal Control. From the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) we obtained county-level reports on property and violent crime rates (a proxy for personal control) across the US in 2011. The FBI reports incidences of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (FBI 2011). Based on these data, we computed an overall per-capita crime index by collapsing every available category.

Purchase Intentions. Brand ratings came from the Harris Interactive's 2011 EquiTrend survey, which includes consumer-level brand measures rated by a national sample. This sample comprised 516,833 observations from 17,829 consumers reporting on 1,272 brands. Consumers rated a randomly drawn subset of brands, covering a range of product categories from fast-moving consumer goods, fashion, and cars to services such as travel and entertainment. As our dependent variable, we extracted purchase intentions ("If price were not a consideration, how likely are you to purchase products or services of the following brands in the future?"; 1 = "never," 4 = "absolutely").

Brand Leadership. As our measure of brand leadership, we used EquiTrend survey responses to the item, "This brand is a leader compared to its peers in its category/market/industry" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree").

Demographics. We also extracted participant income, age, and gender from the EquiTrend survey, in addition to participant zip code, which we used to match consumers to 1,735 counties from the FBI crime data.

Model. The aim of our empirical analysis was to assess how county-level crime rates influence consumer-level purchase intentions for brands that were deemed high (vs. low) in leadership. To this end, we modeled consumers' purchase intentions as a function of their perceived leadership of a given brand (Leader) as well as the crime rates in their respective counties of residence (Crime), and the interaction (Leader \times Crime). As measures of observed heterogeneity, we included Income, Age, and Gender, and modeled remaining unobserved heterogeneity as well as characteristics of counties and brands using normally distributed random intercepts (see details in web appendix D).

Results

The model (marginal $R^2 = 30.47\%$; conditional $R^2 = 49.06\%$ [Nakagawa and Schielzeth 2013]) revealed a significant Leader \times Crime interaction ($b = .23$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.15$, $p = .002$). To probe this interaction, we used the Johnson-Neyman floodlight analysis technique (Johnson and Neyman 1936; Spiller et al. 2013), which revealed only one region of brand leadership (values at or above 4.46) where the effect of crime was significant and positive ($b = .61$, $SE = .31$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .049$). This corresponded to a Leader value that is .26 standard deviations below the mean. Thus, even in a dataset containing an overwhelming majority of national brands, the positive relationship between crime and purchase intentions emerged only for brands with at least average levels of perceived leadership. These findings were robust to a variety of alternate specifications, including those involving potential brand leadership confounds (i.e., brand quality, familiarity, brand luxury), which we detail in [web appendix E](#).

Next, we examine whether the salience of an alternate source of control restoration—God—attenuates our core effect, given that sources of control serve as substitutes in the process of control restoration (Kay et al. 2010a; Laurin et al. 2008). To test this, we gathered information from the US Religion Census (2010) and the US Census Bureau (2010) about the log number of religious organizations per 10,000 people, per square mile (Religiosity). We inserted Religiosity as a moderator in our primary model. Results yielded a significant Leader \times Crime \times Religiosity three-way interaction ($b = -.34$, $SE = .09$, $t = -3.71$, $p = < .001$). A floodlight analysis revealed a significant Leader \times Crime interaction in the region at or below a Religiosity value of .02 ($b = .16$, $SE = .08$, $t = 1.98$, $p = .047$), which corresponds to a Religiosity value that is .56 standard deviations above the mean. A further floodlight analysis at this level of Religiosity revealed that the simple-simple effect of crime was significant for any brand Leader value at or above 5.43 ($b = .63$, $SE = .32$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .050$). [Figure 1](#) illustrates the full set of regions of brand Leader and Religiosity where the effects of crime on purchase intentions are significant (i.e., a floodlight analysis).

Discussion

The results of this study speak to the external validity of our framework. Using crime rates as a proxy for personal control, we found that consumers in higher-crime areas showed greater purchase intentions for brand leaders but not nonleaders. A series of robustness tests indicated that these results also hold under a number of alternative model specifications. Moreover, the data suggests that the tendency for environmental conditions that threaten control to increase purchase intentions for brand leaders is reduced when there is simultaneously a larger presence of religious

organizations. This not only suggests that affiliation with brand leaders represents a source of control restoration but also that the effect may attenuate in areas with prominent alternatives (e.g., God) to control restoration.

STUDY 2

The primary objective of this study was to assess our core effect with a consequential outcome in a controlled setting. Here, we manipulated personal control and then asked participants to choose between two options for a gift card—one for a brand leader and one for a brand non-leader. This study also tests perceived quality of the brands and shows that the brand leader is not perceived as higher in quality, thereby eliminating a potential confound. This corroborates study 1's robustness results by demonstrating that low-control individuals do not merely prefer high-quality brands, thus further isolating brand leadership as the construct responsible for the effect.

Method

Participants, Design, and Procedure. Two hundred forty-six US adults (57% female; median age = 20) from a large midwestern university completed this study in exchange for course credit. This study was a single-factor (personal control: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Under the guise of separate studies, participants completed the personal control manipulation and then the brand choice task. Participants then completed post measures and were debriefed. Because the brand choice task involved real, American brands that varied in their level of market leadership, and because leadership was not made explicit, 33 international students who might have been less familiar with these brands were removed from the sample, resulting in a sample of 213.

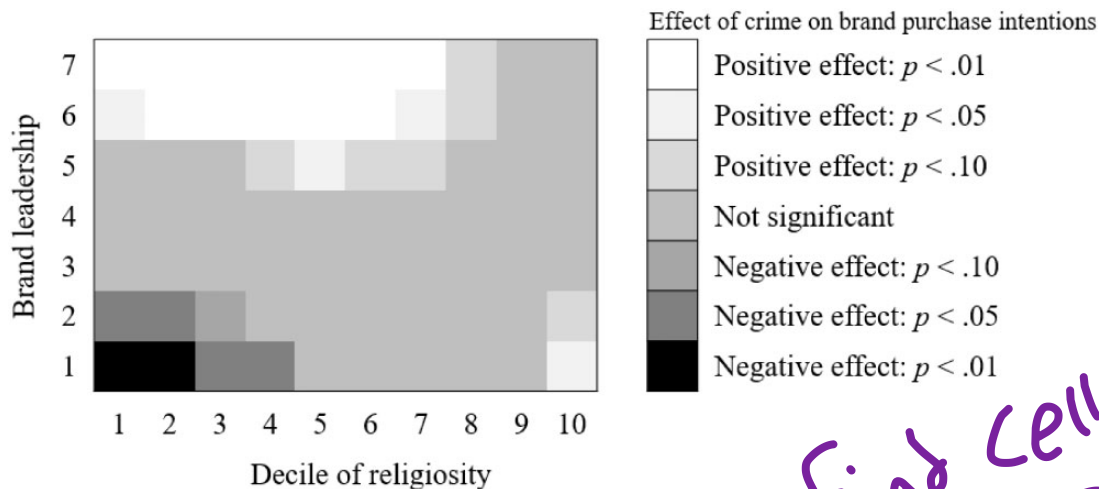
Personal Control Manipulation. We used a writing task to manipulate personal control. The task involved asking participants to remember and write about an incident in which they had either no control or complete control. All participants recalled a threatening or scary incident; negative valence was therefore held constant across condition (Cutright et al. 2013). Eight participants (3.8%) who provided nonsense or single-word responses (e.g., "none" or "NA") to the writing prompts were removed, resulting in a final sample of 205.

Incentive Compatible Brand Choice. Participants were informed that as part of the study, they would be entered into a drawing for one of two \$25 gift certificates to a restaurant near campus. They were then asked to choose which restaurant (Wendy's or McDonald's) they would prefer if they received one of the gift certificates. Choice between Wendy's and McDonald's was a logical means of operationalizing brand leader preference for several

WTF

FIGURE 1

STUDY 1: PARAMETER REGIONS WHERE THE EFFECT OF CRIME ON PURCHASE INTENTIONS IS SIGNIFICANT



NOTE.—The map depicts regions of religiosity and brand leadership where the crime parameter is significant.

Find Cell Sizes

reasons. First, both restaurants are national brands, but McDonald's is the clear market leader. Second, both brands have similar offerings (American-style fast food). Third, both brands have retail locations in close proximity (< 2 miles) to campus, and neither has a retail location on campus. Fourth, real money was at stake, and brand choice should have therefore reflected actual preference. We coded brand choice as: 1 = choice of leader (McDonald's), 0 = choice of nonleader (Wendy's).

Post Measures. As a manipulation check, participants rated their perceived level of control over the situation they described in the writing task on two measures: "I was in control of the situation" and "I had influence over what was happening" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $r = .81$). Participants rated perceptions of relative leadership on bipolar scales (1 = Wendy's, 7 = McDonald's) using two questions ("Which brand is more of a leader in its category/industry?" and "Which brand has higher market share in its category?", $r = .46$). Participants rated brand quality ("Which brand is higher quality?") on a seven-point bipolar scale (1 = Wendy's, 7 = McDonald's). Finally, participants provided demographics.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks and Additional Measures. An independent samples t -test on feelings of control revealed a significant main effect of personal control condition in the predicted direction ($M_{\text{low}} = 2.97$, $SD = 1.86$; $M_{\text{high}} = 5.34$, $SD = 1.19$; $t(203) = 10.78$, $p < .001$). Next, we

assessed perceptions of brand leadership by submitting leadership ratings to a one-sample t -test. Results revealed that mean leadership ratings ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.26$) were significantly higher than the midpoint (midpoint = 4; $t(204) = 21.00$, $p < .001$), indicating that McDonald's was perceived as significantly higher in leadership than Wendy's. Notably, these leadership perceptions did not significantly differ across personal control conditions ($M_{\text{low control}} = 5.95$, $SD = 1.14$; $M_{\text{high control}} = 5.73$, $SD = 1.37$; $t(203) = 1.29$, $p = .20$). Next, we assessed quality perceptions by submitting quality ratings to a one-sample t -test. Results revealed that mean quality ratings ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.47$) were significantly lower than the midpoint (midpoint = 4; $t(204) = -17.73$, $p < .001$), indicating that Wendy's was perceived as higher in quality than McDonald's. A t -test showed that quality ratings did not significantly differ by personal control condition ($M_{\text{low control}} = 2.26$, $SD = 1.55$; $M_{\text{high control}} = 2.09$, $SD = 1.38$; $t(203) = .84$, $p = .400$). Further, subgroup analyses showed that Wendy's was perceived as higher in quality among both those who chose Wendy's ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.05$; $t(118) = -24.01$, $p < .001$) and those who chose McDonald's ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.70$; $t(85) = -6.29$, $p < .001$), suggesting that participants were not simply selecting the brand that they believed had the highest quality.

Brand Choice. Overall, a chi-square test showed that choice frequency for Wendy's (58%) was higher than for McDonald's (42%; $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 5.31$, $p = .021$, $\phi = .16$). We tested whether this choice proportion varied by control conditions. Consistent with our prediction, we

found that 33% of individuals in the high-control condition chose the brand leader (i.e., McDonald's), whereas 50% of individuals in the low-control condition chose the brand leader ($\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 5.84, p = .016, \phi = .17$). This effect held with the inclusion of international participants and those who provided nonsense responses (i.e., all participants; $\chi^2(1, N = 246) = 4.77, p = .029, \phi = .14$). Notably, across the remaining studies, all findings were qualitatively similar when excluded respondents were included in the various analyses.

Discussion. The results of this study demonstrate the emergence of our effect for a consequential outcome and isolate personal control as the primary independent variable. Here, low- (vs. high-) control individuals were more likely to elect to receive a gift card from a brand leader (vs. a brand nonleader) if they were to win a drawing, despite rating the brand nonleader as the higher-quality option. Indeed, based on these results, we believe that product quality does not play a role in the effect and that it is individuals' inference that brand leaders have brand agency that allows such brands to be used in the cue-based process. We directly test this notion in the following study.

STUDY 3

This study had two primary objectives. The first objective was to isolate brand agency as the key feature of brand leadership that gives rise to the core effect. Thus, in addition to manipulating both personal control and brand leadership, we also manipulated brand agency. **If our theory is true, then the effect of low control on purchase intentions should replicate for brand leaders, and it should arise for nonleading brands only when they are framed as possessing high brand agency.** Also, the brand used in this study was "concealed" from participants in order to reduce the possibility that brand attributes other than leadership were playing a role in explaining the core effect.

The second objective of this study was to rule out two alternative explanations. The first is one's desire for consensus, as feelings of low control may enhance reliance on majority opinions (Burger 1987), which might be inferred from market share information. The second is one's external agency, which refers to relying on a brand to effect outcomes on one's behalf. Our framework specifies that low-control individuals affiliate with a high-agency brand because doing so restores personal control through heightened beliefs of personal agency, not external agency.

Method

Participants, Design, and Procedure. Five hundred seven US adults (49% female; median age = 32) from MTurk completed this study in exchange for a nominal fee. This study was a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand

leadership) \times 2 (brand agency) between-subjects design. Under the guise of separate studies, participants completed a personal control manipulation, brand evaluation task, and post measures and were debriefed. The brand leadership and agency manipulations were embedded in the brand task. The alternative account measures were then presented in counterbalanced order.

Personal Control Manipulation. We used the same negative-valence writing task to manipulate personal control as in study 2 (Cutright et al. 2013). Eleven participants (2.2%) provided nonsense answers (e.g., a single word such as "good" or "no") and were removed, resulting in a final sample of 496.

Brand Leadership and Brand Agency Manipulations. As part of an ostensibly unrelated brand evaluation task, participants were asked to read about a supposedly real retail brand that was "concealed for the purposes of this survey." Across all conditions, the brand was described as focused on quality and low prices, with distribution across the US. In the high- (low-) leadership condition, the brand was also described as having 64% (4%) market share. Then, in the high-brand-agency condition, the brand was described as "very influential within the retail industry and beyond." In the baseline condition, this information was omitted.

We pretested these manipulations on 205 MTurk participants who were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (brand leadership) \times 2 (brand agency) between-subjects design. After reading the brand description, participants rated brand agency as in the pilot studies (four items; $\alpha = .93$). Participants rated brand leadership using two items ("This brand has very high market share" and "This brand is a leader in its industry"; $r = .73$). A 2 \times 2 ANOVA on brand agency ratings revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 201) = 5.21, p = .023$). The brand leadership condition was associated with greater brand agency in the baseline ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.50, SD = 1.22; M_{\text{low}} = 3.27, SD = 1.41; F(1, 201) = 21.96, p < .001$) but not the high-agency condition ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.35, SD = 1.34; M_{\text{low}} = 3.97, SD = 1.30; F(1, 201) = 2.16, p = .143$). Looking at the interaction another way, the brand agency manipulation increased perceptions of brand agency in the low-leadership ($M_{\text{high agency}} = 3.97, SD = 1.30; M_{\text{baseline}} = 3.27, SD = 1.41; F(1, 201) = 6.91, p = .009$) but not the high-leadership condition ($M_{\text{high agency}} = 4.35, SD = 1.34; M_{\text{baseline}} = 4.50, SD = 1.22; F(1, 201) = .31, p = .579$). Also, as expected, a 2 \times 2 ANOVA on leadership ratings revealed only a main effect of leadership condition ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.30, SD = .96; M_{\text{low}} = 3.29, SD = 1.38; F(1, 201) = 152.86, p < .001$).

Purchase Intentions. Participants in the main study rated purchase intentions using one item: "How likely would you be to purchase a product from this brand instead

of any other brand?" (1 = "very unlikely," 7 = "very likely").

Alternative Explanations. We used several items to capture alternative explanations for the effect. Participants were instructed to reference their current state and reported desire for consensus on three items: "I desire consensus between my options and those of others," "I want to support popular options and opinions," and "I want to like things that others like" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .86$). Participants were instructed to reference the brand rating task and rated external agency using two items: "I want to hand over control to this brand" and "I want this brand to take control on my behalf" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $r = .80$).

Post Measures. Participants rated perceived level of control over the situation they described in the personal control writing task using two measures: "I was in control of the situation" and "I had influence over what was happening" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $r = .91$). Finally, participants provided their age and gender.

Results and Discussion

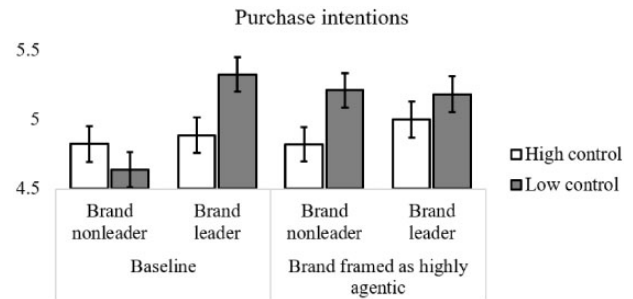
Manipulation Checks. Confirming the efficacy of the personal control manipulation, a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) \times 2 (brand agency) ANOVA revealed only a significant effect of control condition; participants perceived having less control in the low-control ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.96$) than high-control conditions ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.21$; $F(1, 488) = 268.53$, $p < .001$).

Purchase Intentions. To test the core effect, we submitted purchase intentions to a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) \times 2 (brand agency) ANOVA. Results revealed a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 488) = 5.74$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$). Decomposing this three-way interaction, we observed that in the baseline condition that omitted brand agency information, there was a significant personal control \times brand leadership interaction ($F(1, 488) = 5.94$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$). Further decomposing this interaction, we observed that within the high-leadership condition, there was a significant effect of control on purchase intentions ($M_{\text{low}} = 5.32$, $SD = 1.10$; $M_{\text{high}} = 4.88$, $SD = .83$; $F(1, 488) = 6.07$, $p = .014$, $d = .45$), whereas no such effect emerged in the low-leadership condition ($M_{\text{low}} = 4.64$, $SD = 1.21$; $M_{\text{high}} = 4.82$, $SD = 1.15$; $F(1, 488) = .98$, $p = .322$, $d = .15$).

Next, we examined effects at high brand agency when the brand was described as very influential (independent of its market share). Within the high-brand-agency condition, there was not a significant two-way (control \times leadership) interaction ($M_{\text{leader, low control}} = 5.19$, $SD = 1.00$; $M_{\text{leader, high control}} = 5.07$, $SD = .80$; $M_{\text{nonleader, low control}} = 5.20$, $SD = .94$; $M_{\text{nonleader, high control}} = 4.83$, $SD = .94$; $F(1, 488) = .94$, $p = .334$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$). However, there was a

FIGURE 2

STUDY 3: EFFECT OF PERSONAL CONTROL ON PURCHASE INTENTIONS FOR A BRAND NONLEADER VERSUS LEADER WITH BRAND AGENCY FRAMING



NOTE.—Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

marginal main effect of control ($M_{\text{low}} = 5.20$, $SD = .96$; $M_{\text{high}} = 4.94$, $SD = .88$; $F(1, 488) = 3.44$, $p = .064$, $d = .27$), indicating that low control marginally increased purchase intentions for brands framed as possessing high agency, regardless of the brand's leadership position (see figure 2). Important to our theorizing, when a nonleading brand was framed as highly agentic, there was a significant effect of control ($M_{\text{low}} = 5.20$, $SD = .94$; $M_{\text{high}} = 4.83$, $SD = .94$; $F(1, 488) = 4.32$, $p = .038$, $d = .39$). Curiously, when the brand leader was framed as highly agentic, the effect of control was only directional ($M_{\text{low}} = 5.19$, $SD = 1.00$; $M_{\text{high}} = 5.07$, $SD = .80$; $F(1, 488) = .37$, $p = .545$, $d = .13$); it is possible that emphasizing an inherent attribute (high agency for brand leaders) undermined its credibility (Koch and Zerback 2013).

Alternative Explanations. We ran alternate specifications of this model to test for evidence in favor of the alternative explanations described above; however, the results did not support the viability of these alternatives. With desire for consensus included as a covariate, the three-way (control \times leadership \times agency) ANOVA on purchase intentions remained significant ($F(1, 487) = 5.08$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$). Also, the three-way interaction effect on purchase intentions remained significant with external agency included as a covariate ($F(1, 487) = 4.95$, $p = .027$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$). Next, we examined the three-way (control \times leadership \times agency) ANOVA on consensus and external agency as dependent variables. We observed a nonsignificant three-way interaction effect on consensus ($F(1, 487) = .831$, $p = .362$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$). There were no other significant effects on consensus. For external agency, we also observed a nonsignificant three-way interaction effect ($F(1, 487) = 1.84$, $p = .176$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$). We did observe a significant main effect of brand agency on external

agency ($M_{\text{low}} = 2.84$, $SD = 1.45$; $M_{\text{high}} = 3.12$, $SD = 1.50$; $F(1, 487) = 4.35$, $p = .038$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$, $d = .19$). There were no other significant effects on external agency. We describe these analyses in greater detail in [web appendix F](#).

Discussion. The results of this study support our framework. In addition to ruling out desires for consensus and external agency as alternative mechanisms, the results also isolate brand agency as the key feature of brand leadership that gives rise to our effect. Consistent with this, we observed the core effect in a baseline condition where no information regarding brand agency was given. Critical to our theorizing, when a nonleading brand was framed as possessing high agency, there was a positive effect of low control on intentions to purchase the nonleading brand. We posit that this happens because affiliation with highly agentic entities serves as a cue for personal agency and thus restores control. In study 4, we test the role of personal agency via mediation.

STUDY 4

The objective of study 4 was to provide further insight into the process underlying our effect. The previous study establishes that low-control individuals seek affiliation with brand leaders because such brands are perceived as possessing high agency. The current study seeks to answer how specifically this restores control. Building on CCBM ([Mandel et al. 2017](#)) and cue-based models of personal agency ([Fast et al. 2009](#)), we suggest that this occurs because affiliation with highly agentic entities increases one's sense of personal agency (since the former is used as a cue for the latter), and this restores control. We also included measures of external agency to corroborate the null effects from study 3.

Method

Participants, Design, and Procedure. Four hundred fifteen US adults (44% female; median age = 34) recruited from MTurk completed this study in exchange for a nominal payment. This study was a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) between-subjects design. Under the guise of separate studies, participants completed the personal control manipulation and then read about two fictitious brands that varied in market leadership, and were randomly assigned to evaluate one of them. We counterbalanced the process (focal and alternative) and outcome (purchase intentions) measures. Participants then completed post measures and were debriefed.

Personal Control Manipulation. Participants completed the same writing task used in studies 2 and 3 that involved recalling and writing about a scary or threatening incident in which they had either no control or complete

control ([Cutright et al. 2013](#)). Ten participants (2.4%) who provided nonsense or single-word responses (e.g., "none") to the writing prompts were removed, reducing the sample to 405.

Brand Leadership Manipulation. Participants read a marketing report about two fictitious brands called GRB and K&L that were described as "US chemical companies that provide quality cleaning products for home and commercial use." Further, GRB was described as having "a much larger market share than K&L." Participants were then told that they would be asked to evaluate one of the two brands. Participants in the high- (low-) leadership condition were randomly assigned to evaluate GRB (K&L). An instructional manipulation check (IMC; [Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009](#)) that referenced this manipulation was included at the end of the study. Participants were asked to indicate whether the brand was a chemical company (correct) or financial services company (incorrect). Thirty-four participants who failed the IMC were removed, resulting in a **final sample of 371**.

Purchase Intentions. Participants rated purchase intentions using one item: "How likely would you be to purchase a [GRB/K&L] product?" (1 = "very unlikely," 7 = "very likely").

Process Measures. Personal and external agency items were adapted from the compensatory control literature ([Kay et al. 2008](#); [Lachman and Weaver 1998](#); [Shepherd and Kay 2018](#)). Participants reported feelings of personal agency on three items: "[GRB/K&L] makes me feel like I determine my outcomes," "[GRB/K&L] makes me feel like I have more responsibility for my outcomes," and "[GRB/K&L] makes me feel like my outcomes are more under my control" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .95$). Participants reported feelings of external agency on three items: "My outcomes seem determined by [GRB/K&L]," "[GRB/K&L] has responsibility for my outcomes," and "[GRB/K&L] has control over my outcomes" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .96$). Participants also completed the alternative measure of external agency used in study 3 ($r = .89$).

Post Measures. Participants rated brand leadership using two items: "The brand has very high market share," and "The brand is a leader in its industry" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $r = .90$). Participants rated feelings of personal control using the same two items from studies 2 and 3 ($r = .89$). Finally, participants provided their age and gender and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks. Confirming the efficacy of the personal control manipulation, a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) ANOVA on personal control ratings

revealed only a significant effect of control condition; participants reported less control ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.91$) in the low-control than high-control conditions ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.28$; $F(1, 367) = 212.99$, $p < .001$). Confirming the efficacy of the brand leadership manipulation, a 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) ANOVA on leadership ratings revealed only a significant effect of leadership condition; participants rated higher leadership in the brand leader ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.13$) than nonleader condition ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 367) = 214.04$, $p < .001$).

Purchase Intentions. A 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) ANOVA on purchase intentions revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 367) = 6.61$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.018$). In the high brand leadership condition, participants in the low-control condition ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.00$) reported significantly higher purchase intentions than in the high-control condition ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.17$; $F(1, 367) = 4.30$, $p = .039$, $d = .34$). Alternatively, in the low brand leadership condition, participants in the low-control condition ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.17$) reported directionally lower purchase intentions than in the high-control condition ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 367) = 2.39$, $p = .123$, $d = .21$).

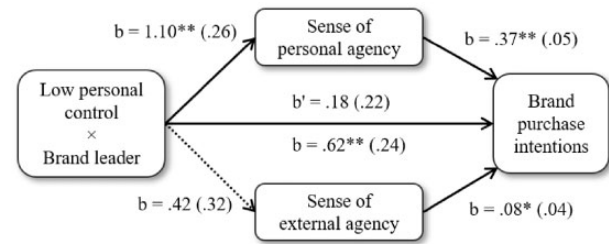
Process Measures. A 2 (personal control) \times 2 (brand leadership) ANOVA on personal agency ratings revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 367) = 17.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.045$). In the high-brand-leadership condition, participants in the low-control condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.16$) reported deriving significantly higher personal agency from the brand than those in the high-control condition ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.30$; $F(1, 367) = 12.15$, $p = .001$, $d = .54$). Alternatively, in the low-brand-leadership condition, participants in the low-control condition ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.30$) reported deriving significantly less personal agency from the brand than those in the high-control condition ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 367) = 5.74$, $p = .017$, $d = .34$).

A 2 \times 2 ANOVA on external agency ratings did not yield a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 367) = 1.68$, $p = .196$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.005$). We also conducted a 2 \times 2 ANOVA on the alternative external agency measure that was used in study 3, which produced a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 367) = 2.96$, $p = .086$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.008$). Notably, the contrast effects of personal control at both high brand leadership ($M_{\text{low control}} = 3.10$, $SD = 1.59$; $M_{\text{high control}} = 2.90$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 367) = .72$, $p = .396$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.002$) and low brand leadership ($M_{\text{low control}} = 2.52$, $SD = 1.37$; $M_{\text{high control}} = 2.88$, $SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 367) = 2.59$, $p = .108$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.007$) were not significant.

Moderated Mediation. We tested whether there was an indirect effect of personal control on purchase intentions via personal agency, and we also examined whether external agency played a mediating role in this effect. Specifically, using Hayes's (2017) PROCESS macro (model 8; 10,000 bootstrapped samples), we conducted a

FIGURE 3

STUDY 4: MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL



NOTES.—* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$; standard error reported in parentheses.

moderated mediation analysis with personal control as the focal predictor, brand leadership as the focal moderating variable, purchase intentions as the outcome, and personal and external agency as parallel mediators. Results revealed a significant index of moderated mediation for personal agency (index = .40, $SE = .12$, 95% CI = [.18, .65]). At high brand leadership, the positive effect of low control on purchase intentions was mediated by increased feelings of personal agency (indirect effect = .24, $SE = .08$, 95% CI = [.10, .42]). At low brand leadership, the directional negative effect of low control on purchase intentions was mediated by decreased feelings of personal agency (indirect effect = -.15, $SE = .07$, 95% CI = [-.31, -.02]). Figure 3 illustrates these effects.

The index of moderated mediation for external agency was not significant (index = .02, $SE = .03$, 95% CI = [-.03, .10]), and there were no significant indirect effects at high (indirect effect = .02, $SE = .03$, 95% CI = [-.03, .08]) or low leadership (indirect effect = -.002, $SE = .01$, 95% CI = [-.03, .03]). We also ran the above model with the alternate measure of external agency used in study 3 in place of the focal external agency measure used in this study. The index of moderated mediation for this alternate measure of external agency was not significant (index = .03, $SE = .04$, 95% CI = [-.02, .07]), and there were no significant indirect effects at high (indirect effect = .01, $SE = .02$, 95% CI = [-.02, .07]) or low leadership (indirect effect = -.02, $SE = .03$, 95% CI = [-.08, .02]).

Discussion. Results from this study provide additional support in favor of our framework. Low-control participants had higher intentions to purchase a leading brand's service, and the heightened beliefs in personal agency one would gain through this act of affiliation explained this effect. Importantly, their sense of external agency did not play a mediating role, indicating that low-control consumers do not pursue brand leaders because such brands might intervene on consumers' behalf. It is interesting to note that there was a directional (but nonsignificant) negative

effect of low personal control on purchase intentions for the nonleader brand, and this effect was mediated by a reduction in personal agency. A similar nonsignificant pattern was also evident in study 3. While it is possible that conditions exist under which low control reduces purchase intentions for brand nonleaders, results support a consistent positive effect of low control on purchase intentions for brand leaders. Having confirmed the core effect and the underlying process across studies 1–4, we now turn to ruling out an alternative account based on status and powerlessness.

STUDY 5

The overall goal of this study was to distinguish our framework from powerlessness and its effects. Personal power reflects perceived asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations, and past work has shown that when consumers lack personal power (i.e., feel powerless), they will seek out and purchase luxury brands to restore a sense of power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). The established effect of low personal power on desire for status products reflects a signaling mechanism whereby individuals can use status products to communicate their position in the social hierarchy to others, as this is a way by which one may acquire personal power (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker et al. 2012).

Brand leaders, by contrast, provide no such signaling value, as they are widely consumed by definition and therefore are unlikely to restore personal power. Conversely, the process we propose for the link between low control and brand leader affiliation reflects a cue-based mechanism whereby one affiliates with a brand leader because doing so serves as a cue of one's level of personal agency, as individuals feel like they can accomplish more with a highly agentic entity "on their side," and this restores control.

In this study, participants were randomly assigned to a low personal control, low personal power, or baseline condition and then rated their purchase intentions for a brand framed either as a luxury or a leader. This design allows us to distinguish our effect from the effect of powerlessness on the desire for status-oriented products (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). If they are not distinct, then one would expect both low-power and low-control conditions (vs. baseline) to similarly increase purchase intentions for a brand framed as a leader or a luxury. Alternatively, we expect low power to increase purchase intentions for luxury brands (but not leading brands) and low control to increase purchase intentions for leading brands (but not luxury brands).

Method

Participants, Design, and Procedure. Three hundred eighty-six US adults (61% female; median age = 33) from MTurk completed this study in exchange for a nominal fee. This study was a 3 (psychological state: low personal control vs. low personal power vs. baseline) \times 2 (brand frame: leader vs. luxury) between-subjects design. Under the guise of separate studies, participants completed the psychological state manipulations, brand framing manipulations, brand evaluations, and post measures. Participants provided their age and gender and were debriefed at the end of the study.

Personal State Manipulations. We manipulated low control using the same negative-valence writing task from studies 2–4. To manipulate low power, we asked participants to complete the writing task used by Rucker and Galinsky (2008), which involved recalling "a particular incident in which someone else had power over you. By power, we mean a situation in which someone had control over your ability to get something you wanted or was in a position to evaluate you. Please describe this situation in which you did not have power—what happened, how you felt, etc." In the baseline condition, participants were asked to "describe your most recent trip to the grocery store. Explain what happened, how you felt, etc." Two participants (0.5%) provided nonsense responses (e.g., "to the grocery store") and were removed, resulting in a final sample of 384.

Brand Manipulations. We adapted the task used by Rucker and Galinsky (2008). In a supposedly unrelated task, participants were asked to evaluate a picture frame. In the leader brand condition, the frame was described as being sold by a brand leader. In the luxury brand condition, the frame was described as being sold by a luxury brand. The image of the picture frame was held constant across conditions.

Purchase Intentions. Participants rated their intention of purchasing the picture frame (1 = "extremely likely," 7 = "extremely unlikely"; reverse-keyed).

Post Measures. Manipulation checks were presented in counterbalanced order. Participants rated their level of powerlessness felt in the situation they described on three measures: "Others had a great deal of power over me," "Even when I tried, I was not able to get my way," and "My ideas and opinions were ignored" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = .86$). Participants rated level of control felt in the situation using the same items from studies 2–4 ($r = .79$). As a check of the brand-framing manipulation, participants rated the attribute highlighted in the brand description using a single item (1 = "definitely leadership," 7 = "definitely status").

Results and Discussion

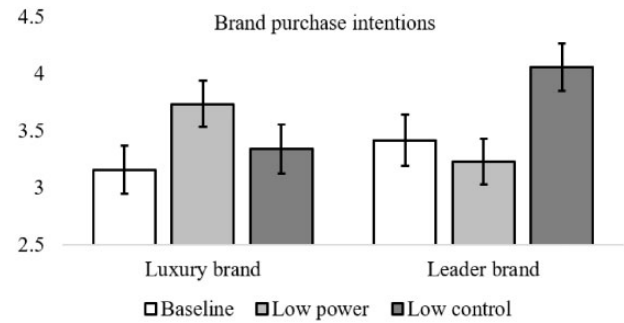
Manipulation Checks. To confirm the efficacy of the psychological state manipulations, we submitted powerlessness and control ratings to a 3 (psychological state) \times 2 (brand framing) ANOVAs. For powerlessness ratings, results revealed only a significant effect of state condition ($F(1, 378) = 48.55, p < .001$). Those in the low-power condition reported feeling more powerless than those in the baseline ($M_{\text{baseline}} = 2.92, SD = 1.66; M_{\text{low power}} = 4.96, SD = 1.60; F(1, 378) = 96.68, p < .001$) and low-control conditions ($M_{\text{low control}} = 3.90, SD = 1.70; F(1, 378) = 26.94, p < .001$). For personal control ratings, results revealed only a significant effect of psychological state ($F(1, 378) = 103.45, p < .001$). Those in the low-control condition reported feeling less control than those in the baseline ($M_{\text{baseline}} = 5.08, SD = 1.55; M_{\text{low control}} = 2.36, SD = 1.46; F(1, 378) = 189.52, p < .001$) and low-power conditions ($M_{\text{low power}} = 2.99, SD = 1.62; F(1, 378) = 10.98, p = .001$). Thus, those in the low-control condition felt like they had less personal control than those in the other conditions, whereas those in the low-power condition felt less powerful than those in the other conditions. Confirming the efficacy of the brand manipulations, a 2 (psychological state) \times 2 (brand framing) ANOVA on brand ratings revealed only a significant effect of brand condition ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 5.36, SD = 1.41, M_{\text{leadership}} = 4.26, SD = 1.19; F(1, 378) = 69.94, p < .001$).

Purchase Intentions. We tested our prediction that low control would increase purchase intentions for a leader (but not luxury) brand and low power would increase purchase intentions for a luxury (but not leader) brand by submitting purchase intentions to a 3 (psychological state) \times 2 (brand frame) ANOVA. As shown in figure 4, results revealed a significant state \times frame interaction ($F(2, 378) = 4.50, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = 0.023$). Comparisons revealed that for the luxury brand frame, low personal power ($M = 3.74, SD = 1.68$) resulted in higher purchase intentions relative to the baseline condition ($M = 3.16, SD = 1.68; F(1, 378) = 3.87, p = .050, d = .34$). Alternatively, purchase intentions for the luxury brand frame did not significantly differ between the low-control ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.52$) and baseline conditions ($F(1, 378) = 1.79, p = .182, d = .11$). Next, we examined the leader brand frame. The data revealed that for the brand leader, low control ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.77$) increased purchase intentions relative to the baseline condition ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.50; F(1, 378) = 4.43, p = .036, d = .39$). Alternatively, purchase intentions for the brand leader did not significantly differ between the low-power ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.86$) and baseline conditions ($F(1, 378) = .39, p = .530, d = .11$).

Discussion. These findings empirically distinguish personal power and its effects from our framework. Despite conceptual replications of both our core effect as well as

FIGURE 4

STUDY 5: EFFECT OF LOW PERSONAL POWER VERSUS LOW PERSONAL CONTROL ON PURCHASE INTENTIONS FOR A LUXURY VERSUS LEADER BRAND



NOTE.—Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

that of Rucker and Galinsky (2008), there was no spillover between them. Specifically, low power (vs. baseline) did not yield greater purchase intentions for brand leaders, and low control (vs. baseline) did not yield greater purchase intentions for a high-status brand. In other words, our core effect is not merely a conceptual replication of the powerlessness-status link discovered by Rucker and Galinsky (2008). Conceptually, we believe that this happens because consumption of or affiliation with brand leaders does not communicate one's position in the social hierarchy, which is the process by which status-oriented products restore power. Moreover, luxury brands are not inherently assumed to have high brand agency, and thus are unlikely to serve as a cue for personal agency, which is the process by which brand leaders serve as a source of control restoration.

Beyond establishing a distinction between our framework and that of Rucker and Galinsky (2008), the effects also address the separate question of whether brand leader affiliation restores control because affiliating with brand leaders makes individuals feel personally powerful. If this were true, then we would expect brand leaders to also be highly preferred by low-power consumers, but they were not. Instead, the results are more consistent with our proposed process whereby affiliation with brand leaders increases one's sense of personal agency via a cue-based process.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Many brands aspire to be leaders in their category or industry. The attainment of leadership often entails desirable outcomes, such as broad awareness and greater influence. Our findings show how this latter outcome confers windfall benefits to brand leaders. When individuals feel low in

personal control, they affiliate with brand leaders through purchase in order to gain a greater sense of personal agency.

Five studies support the propositions of our framework. The basic effects of low control on brand leader purchase intentions held for real brands (studies 1 and 2), unrevealed brands (studies 3 and 5), and fictitious brands (study 4). They were also robust to a variety of operationalizations of personal control (studies 1–5). Furthermore, the studies varied in their level of experimenter control, which allowed us to narrowly isolate the focal constructs (e.g., study 3) while also demonstrating external validity and robustness to the presence of both noise and divergent brand attribute profiles (studies 1 and 2). The studies also document the process underpinning the effect. We established the catalyzing role of brand agency using moderation (study 3) and the intermediary role of personal agency beliefs using mediation (study 4).

In addition to offering direct evidence in favor of our framework, the studies also rule out the possibility that the effect was created due to alternative processes or confounds. Specifically, our studies separated our framework from the established link between personal power and preference for luxury brands (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) and ruled out external agency beliefs (studies 3 and 4) and desire for consensus (study 3).

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, these findings are important in part because they broaden the literature on the link between personal control and brands. Past research has demonstrated that low (vs. high) control makes consumers more receptive to brands that explicitly appeal to personal agency (e.g., slogans suggesting hard works pays off; Cutright and Samper 2014). Here, we show that a particular subset of brands—brand leaders—may also indirectly enhance personal agency by their sheer nature of being perceived as influential (i.e., possessing high agency). These discoveries serve to further build the Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model (Mandel et al. 2017) by identifying an important feature of brand leadership (brand agency) that facilitates symbolic completion for consumers experiencing personal control deficits. Such a process may be particularly relevant in today's marketplace, as many individuals feel they lack control in a chaotic world (Clement et al. 2017), and consumers increasingly have access to brands with notable marketplace leadership (Economist 2016a, 2016b; Jennings 2016). These findings are consistent with a broader literature that identifies ways in which brands provide symbolic value to consumers (Mazodier, Henderson, and Beck 2018; Warren and Campbell 2014).

This research also provides a unique insight to compensatory control theory. A tenet of the compensatory control framework holds that individuals can bolster external

agency as a means of restoring feelings of personal control (Landau et al. 2015). This route to control restoration involves increasing one's reliance on an entity or system outside of the self that can influence personally relevant outcomes. Such bolstering of external agency to restore feelings of personal control explains why, for example, situations that reduce control cause individuals to strengthen their beliefs in a controlling God or support of a well-intentioned, capable government (Kay et al. 2008). One might reasonably assume that brand leaders serve as comparable sources of external agency that individuals lacking control will subsequently endorse as a means of restoring control. In contrast to this, our findings show a novel response in which a seemingly prime candidate for the activation of external agency (brand leaders) instead activates personal agency as the route to control restoration. This finding is consistent with symbolic completion theory and aligns with past work showing that consumers who lack control will typically avoid outsourcing control to brands (Cutright and Samper 2014). Hence, our findings suggest that affiliation with highly agentic entities can restore feelings of control by symbolically providing a sense of personal agency.

Moreover, these results have important implications for the area of brand leadership. Much research focuses on how to achieve and leverage brand leadership (Aaker 1996; Bronnenberg et al. 2007; Kamins et al. 2007); however, the consumer outcomes of leadership, be they negative or positive for brands, are relatively understudied. We show that brand leaders enjoy extra benefits that arise not from objective information regarding their activities, but merely through their perceived ability to wield influence in the world. Further research may uncover additional ways in which the perceived agency of brand leaders alters consumer perceptions and motivations, and what these shifts might mean for brand leader outcomes.

Further Research Directions

Our empirical approach in study 1 leads to more interesting questions into the potential for further application of our framework. For example, although crime is a highly proximal and widespread modulator of personal control, it would be interesting to investigate whether other societal events or conditions might have similar effects. Also in study 1, we found that the effect of crime on brand leader purchase intentions was weaker in areas with a higher concentration of religious organizations, suggesting that individuals were less likely to affiliate with brand leaders in areas with greater access to God, which presumably serves as a prominent substitute in the process of restoring control. Government is another natural substitute in the process of restoring control, and future work may consider ways in which reminders of government regulate the effect of low control on brand leader affiliation.

Another outstanding question is how our results might generalize to non-US populations. Highly agentic brands may play a more conspicuous role in more capitalist societies, whereas consumers in less capitalist settings may view brand leaders as a smaller part of the incumbent organizing system, which may alter affiliation when one experiences low personal control. Future work should study these and other issues (e.g., whether our effects hold if a brand's influence is malevolent) pertaining to the larger generalizability of our framework.

In closing, our research illustrates how consumers perceive brand leaders to be highly agentic societal entities, which benefit from low personal control in ways that are analogous to God and governments, yet for strikingly different reasons.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first and third authors jointly managed the collection and analysis of the secondary dataset (study 1). The first and second authors jointly managed the collection and analysis of the experiments (studies 2–5 and web appendixes G and H), which were collected via university subject pool and MTurk in the following temporal sequence: (1) study 5 and web appendix G, fall 2017; (2) study 3 and web appendix H, spring 2018; (3) study 2, fall 2018; and (4) study 4, winter 2018/19.

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