A social identification approach to the effects of religious disclosures in business communication

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ABSTRACT

This research expands on prior research into the effects of religious disclosures on interpersonal attraction by drawing from social identification theory to explain attributions stemming from religious disclosures in professionals' e-mail signature blocks. Participants ($N = 268$) were randomly exposed to one of three experimental conditions (a Christian, Islamic, or secular quotation in a signature block) and completed measures of social identification and perceptions of professionalism. Results indicate that, contrary to prior research, merely disclosing one's religion does not increase attributions; rather, attributions of a sender's professionalism are positively derived from the receiver's social identification with the sender's religion. Implications of these findings are discussed with regard to social identity theory, as well as for professional practice in developing signature blocks as a means of self-presentation.

If the popular press, career centers, manners guides, and business communication faculty are to be believed, it is inadvisable to discuss religion in a professional context,[1] given the potentially divisive nature of religion and the potential for conflict—both interpersonal and organizational—to arise from such disclosures (Gibson, 2013). And yet, a large number of professionals disclose their religious affiliations each time they send an e-mail via religious text in their signature blocks— lines of text automatically attached to the end of senders' emails. These signature blocks account for millions of religious disclosures in professional contexts each day (Rains, Tumlin, & Knapp, 2009); yet, mixed empirical results make the effects of these disclosures unclear. This research explores the effects of religious disclosures on receivers' perceptions of a sender, specifically attributions of the sender's credibility due to religious disclosures in signature blocks.

The majority of extant literature suggests religious disclosures result in positive attributions, both personal and professional, a phenomenon known as the *halo effect* (Bailey & Garrou, 1983). This halo effect can manifest as the perception that religious individuals are more likable and romantically desirable (Bobkowski & Kalyanaraman, 2010), credible (Stewart, 1994), trustworthy (Gregory, Pomerantz, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2008), and more trustworthy, moral, and intelligent (Bailey & Doriot, 1985) than nonreligious individuals. However, this research has systemic limitations, gen- erally conflating "religion" as "Christian" and utilizing predominately Christian participants, poten- tially confounding conclusions by not carefully considering the effect of the subject's own religion on attributions due to religious disclosure.

Alternately, social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978, 1979) considers religions as salient and powerful social identities (see Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Considering religion as a social identity, SIT then predicts positive perceptions and attributions occur when a receiver

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interacts with a sender with a shared social identity, such as religious affiliation (Diab, 1979; Swan, Heesacker, Snipes, & Perrin, 2014). The present research reconsiders the dominant perspective that any religious disclosure results in social benefit, applying social identity theory as an alternate explanatory mechanism to explore the effects of disclosing one of several religious affiliations. Moreover, this work explores religious disclosures specifically within professional contexts, seeking to understand how even small cues about a sender may affect perceptions in business settings. Experimental results support the social identity approach, finding perceptions of a sender's professionalism are positively related to a receiver's social identification with the sender's religiosity.

Professionals' self-presentation and religion

Presenting the professional self via signature blocks

Individuals seek to strategically present and maintain their selves to others so as to achieve strategic interpersonal goals via that identity (Goffman, 1959). Goffman distinguished between cues *given*—things we strategically do seek to positively influence others' attributions and beliefs of us—and cues *given off*—unintentional behaviors that may make undesired impressions—to articulate self-presentation efforts. Such self-presentation efforts are particularly important in professional context, as individuals seek to foster an image of professionalism (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Giacalone & Riordan, 1990).

Professionalism

Professionalism, though well understood colloquially, has been a nebulous and multidimensional construct academically (Bartol, 1979; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Professionalism has previously been conceptualized including both individual-level and organizational-level variables. Individual-level variables, including dimensions of attractiveness (D'Angelo & Van Der Heide, 2016; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015) and credibility (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012), can help conceptualize the target's intrinsic characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors. Organizational-level variables like organizational prestige (Fogarty, 1992) can likewise help establish the extrinsic qualities to be overlaid on the individual, such as position or workplace, which may also indicate the individual's status and character. Thus, professionalism may be most appropriately operationalized using the multiple dimensions associated with this mercurial construct, concurrently considering both the individual- and organizational-levels of attributions many individuals seek to foster.

In professional contexts, individuals seek give and give off cues believed to warrant their intended levels of professionalism through an increasing mix of face-to-face and mediated communication. E-mail, a medium enabling both giving and giving off cues about one's professional self, serves as a dominant means of communicating in professional contexts (Derks & Bakker, 2010); it also offers new opportunities to revisit and explore anew the processes by which individuals seek to establish and maintain a professional identity and the outcomes of those self-presentation efforts. One unique communicative affordance of e-mail is the inclusion of a signature block, which can help further given cues to receivers about a sender's self.

Signature blocks

Carvalho and Cohen (2004) defined signature blocks as, "the set of lines, usually in the end of a message, that contain information about the sender, such as personal name, affiliation, postal address, web address, email address, telephone number, etc." (p. 2). Signature blocks typically contain between four and seven pieces of information (Rains & Young, 2006), which are automatically included at the end of a sender's e-mail by the e-mail client. Utilized by approximately two-thirds of executives and business professionals (Caron, Hwang, Brummans, & Caronia, 2013), signature blocks are a visible and definitive means of self-presentation and identity management in online communication (Rains et al., 2009).

Research has indicated that the contents of one's signature block can significantly influence a recipient's impression of the sender. Rains and Young (2006) found organizational members'

demographics and organizational position affected the composition of e-mail signature blocks, positing an impression management function fulfilled by the signature blocks. More directly, Carr and Stefaniak (2012) found that cues to the medium used to send a message affect perceptions of a sender's credibility, so that individuals sending a message from a mobile device (i.e., smartphone) are perceived as more credible than individuals sending messages from a desktop computer. Thus, signature blocks are a means of giving and giving off identity cues.

One potential datum point in a signature block is the expression of one's religious beliefs. A common experience is receiving an email with an automatically included religious quotation, verse, scripture, or Taoism, as approximately 10% of signature blocks include religious content (Rains et al., 2009). Though a small percentage, 10% of all e-mails represents millions of senders' signature blocks including religious content. How might these small cues given off regarding an individual's religion affect others' perceptions of the sender, particularly in a professional context for interaction where the sender's religion may not be a relevant cue?

Religious disclosures in professional communication

The disclosure and effects thereof of one's religion in a professional context is an important issue; though empirical work into the effects of religious disclosures has received somewhat mixed results. Most literature—particularly within the fields of communication and psychology—reveals generally positive attributions stemming from individual's disclosure of a religious affiliation (e.g., Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Gregory et al., 2008; Stewart, 1994). An alternate body of work—particularly in the fields of sociology and religious studies—demonstrates negative attributions generated by giving or giving off cues to one's religiosity (e.g., Bobkowski, 2008; Hyers & Hyers, 2008; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007).[2] These two oppositional positions, detailed in the following subsections, lead to a set of mutually exclusive hypotheses regarding the effects of religious disclosures via signature blocks on perceptions of the sender's professionalism. These hypotheses are guided by the halo effect and social identity theory, respectively.

Halo effect of religion

The *halo effect* refers to the positive stereotypes and attributions a perceiver additionally overlays upon a relational partner based on an initial favorable cue (Bailey & Garrou, 1983). Subsequently, Bailey and Doriot (1985) posited the *religious halo* effect, whereby disclosure of a religious belief can confer appreciable social benefit onto the disclosure. Across various works, the halo effect has been conceptualized and operationalized to include the positive social benefits stemming from the disclosure of any religion, so that giving or giving off signals to one's religious belief results in more favorable attributions, regardless of what theology is espoused.

Positive attributions of professionalism from the halo effect. The social benefits of religious disclosure have manifested as more positive attributions of individuals who disclose their religiosity than individuals who do not disclose religious beliefs. These benefits have manifested as more favorable evaluations of a target's intelligence, credibility, morality, personal adjustment, and likability (Bailey & Garrou, 1983; Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Bobkowski & Kalyanaraman, 2010; Stewart, 1994), attributed to the mere disclosure of one's religious belief. These positive externalities of religious disclosures remain even after controlling for the veracity of the speaker's espoused beliefs (Stewart, 1994) for both explicit (Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Bailey & Young, 1986; Stewart, 1994) and implicit (Chia & Jih, 1994; Galen, Smith, Knapp, & Wyngarden, 2011) disclosures of one's religion. From this perspective, communicators benefit from a halo effect when either giving or giving off cues to a religious affiliation, regardless of the specific affiliation.

Particularly relevant to the present study, research has indicated a target is perceived more favorably following a religious disclosure with respect to several dimensions of professionalism.

For example, speakers appear to be more credible when espousing a religious belief than when not (Stewart, 1994). Bailey and Doriot (1985) found that college students viewed working individuals as more interpersonally attractive and trustworthy when disclosing a religious belief than when now. Similarly, Bailey and Young (1986) found that female targets were perceived as more trustworthy and perceived as a better-working partner (i.e., task attractive) when told the target was actively religious. Finally, Bobkowski and Kalyanaraman (2010) found halo effects can occur from online information, revealing participants evaluated a target as more favorably—including more socially attractive—when the subject made extensive (as compared to nominal or no) religious disclosures in online profiles. Thus, consistent with the religious halo effect, it is hypothesized the mere disclosure of one's religious beliefs enhances the impressions formed of a message sender's professionalism:

H1: A sender disclosing religious beliefs via a signature block is perceived as more professional by a receiver than a sender not disclosing a religious belief.

Limitations in halo effect research.   Though the halo effect has been relatively well documented over the past few decades, there remain some findings counter to the halo effect demonstrating negative attributions result from religious disclosures. For example, Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) noted that disclosures of religion—specifically of being Christian—can foster attributions to the target individual as being homophobic, judgmental, socially cloistered, and overly political. In interviews with college-aged Facebook users, Bobkowski (2008) found that several did not explicitly share their religious affiliation due to social desirability concerns and a perceived anti-Christian sentiment online, specifically among college students. Hyers and Hyers (2008) similarly found college students may experience discrimination upon disclosing their religious affiliation, including derogation of themselves and their faith, as well as negative perceptions, including lower levels of intelligence, tolerance, and critical thinking.

One reason for these discrepant findings may be methodological artifacts in the dominant lines of empirical work into the halo effect. Previous research into the halo effect has predominantly operationalized religiosity as church attendance and/or belief in Judeo-Christian beliefs among Judeo-Christian samples and populations. For example, both Bailey and Garrou (1983) and Bailey and Doriot (1985) exposed college students in Tennessee to a photograph and biographic information of a churchgoing or non-churchgoing target individual. Similarly, Stewart (1994) utilized a sample of undergraduates in Texas to explore effects of statements regarding church attendance and activity in church functions on perceptions of a speaker's credibility. Though informative, these results are limited by conducting research utilizing samples from large, public, Southern institutions, and specifically the potential biases introduced by utilizing those populations without accounting for dominant religious attitudes and identification. Research into college students' religious beliefs reveals 66% of college students in the United States self-identify religiously with some denomination of Christianity, with an additional 3% identifying with Judaism (Pew Research Center, 2014). By utilizing Judeo-Christian stimuli or profiles in a population in which 69% of individuals self-identify as Judeo-Christian, previous research may have tested only the halo effect stemming from the disclosure of commensurate religious beliefs, as predominantly Christian samples evaluated either Christian or nonreligious targets and omitted the more precise effects of a sender's disclosure of specific religious affiliations.

There is some empirical support to this methodological artifact and influence on results. In an experiment using a representative sample of U.S. adults, Swan et al. (2014) found that a perceiver's own religiosity can affect the relationship between religious self-disclosures and attributions, so that only religious participants evaluate a religious target (without the target's specific religious beliefs identified) favorably. In contrast, respondents self-reporting low religiosity exerted more positive attributions on targets identified as being non-religious. These results are consistent with similar findings that an individual's religiosity influences attributions of religious targets (Bobkowski & Kalyanaraman, 2010;

Galen et al., 2011). Application of an alternate approach, beyond the binary disclosure or nondisclosure of a religion, may help resolve these discrepancies in research around the halo effect and religious disclosures on attributions, specifically of professionalism.

Religion as a social identity

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978, 1979) affords an alternate approach to understand the effects of religious disclosures in professional contexts. Fundamentally a theory of intergroup behavior, SIT proposes that positive self-esteem and enhancement occur through displays of ingroup behavior and social identification, while discriminating against outgroups. *Social identification* refers to the degree to which an individual perceives herself or himself as a member of a group or social category, and subsequently conforming to the attitudinal and behavioral stereotypes of that group (Tajfel, 1981). Through this categorization, social identities—the part of an individual's self-concept derived from the knowledge of one's group membership (Tajfel, 1978)—help individuals to identify both their own and others' place in society in relation to each other. Individuals affiliate with others perceived to share the salient social identity and overlay positive attributions such as attractiveness (Carr, Vitak, & McLaughlin, 2013) and credibility (Clark & Maass, 1988) onto those ingroup members; while disaffiliating with others perceived to belong to different social categories and attribute more negative characteristics to those outgroup members. Even small and arbitrary cues such as clothing can guide social identification processes and result in pronounced perceptual and affiliative practices (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Tajfel, 1979), provided the social identities denoted by the cues are made salient.

Religious social identification. Religion serves as a meaningful social identity to many individuals (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ysseldyk et al., 2010) deeply entrenched in their sense of self and interactions. There are numerous ways to give and give off cues to a religious social identity in face-to-face interactions, such as explicit disclosures of one's religious beliefs or more passively via unicommunication (e.g., wearing a religious artifact such as a crucifix or Star of David, or certain clothing styles such as a yarmulke or hijab) or hairstyles. Though these nonverbal cues may be constrained via computer-mediated communication (CMC), mediated interactions can still facilitate the transmission of cues to both give and give off religious identities, bringing offline social identities to bear online. For example, Walther (2009) noted that religion can serve as a salient social identity guiding online interactions and conflict, specifically resulting in tensions among orthodox Jews, reformed Jews, and Muslims in virtual discussions. Individuals appear to be increasingly giving off cues to their religious social identities online, as social media allow (and sometimes encourage) individuals to self-identify their religious affiliation in a profile field or via photographs or group affiliations (Carr, Varney, & Blesse, 2016), and signature blocks are used to give off cues to religion via scriptural quotations (Rains et al., 2009). These cues given off should guide social identification commensurate with SIT, so that a receiver perceived to share religious beliefs with a message sender should experience greater social identification with the sender than a receiver who perceives the sender to have a disparate religious belief than his/her own:

H2a: A receiver who shares the religious beliefs disclosed by a sender via a signature block experiences greater social identification with the sender's social group than a receiver who does not share the sender's religious belief.

Effects of religious social identification on professionalism. As an extension of the prior hypothesis, social identification with a sender based on the sender's religious beliefs should subsequently affect perceptions of a sender, including perceptions of the sender's professionalism. One's religiosity guides interactions with and impressions of others (Galen, Williams, & Ver Wey, 2014; Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). According to SIT, one outcome of social

identification is the increased positivity of attributions of ingroup members (i.e., those sharing a salient social identity) while decreasing the attributions of outgroup members (i.e., members of disparate social categories).

Several studies have demonstrated that religious affiliations can influence attributions and perceptions depending on the congruence of individuals' social categories. In an experiment with 169 Lebanese university students self-identifying as either Muslim or Christian, Diab (1979) found participants' evaluations of a subject's interpersonal attractiveness were influenced by an interaction between religious and attitudinal congruence. Findings revealed similarity of attitude on an important political issue could ameliorate the effects of religious differences between a participant and target individual; but that religion still served as a strong predictor of inter-personal attributions and subsequent neighborhood choice. In a survey of 526 Indian Muslims and Hindus, Croucher, Austin, Fang, and Holody (2011) similarly found individuals were perceived as more physically, socially, and task attractive when they indicated similar religious beliefs as respondents than when they indicated a disparate religious affiliation. Conversely, incongruences in social categories between a sender and receivers have been demonstrated to negatively impact perceptions of a speaker's credibility (Kenton, 1989). These studies demonstrate the effects of religious social identities on interpersonal attributions so that a receiver sharing a religious social identity with a sender overlays more positive attributes onto the sender. Therefore, consistent with SIT, individuals who are perceived to share a social identity with the target should perceive the sender more favorably, overlaying positive attributions of dimensions of professionalism, including attractiveness, credibility, and trustworthy. Thus, an additional hypothesis is posited to account for the attributional effects stemming from the social identification hypothesized in H2a:

H2b: An individual's social identification with another's religious social category is positively related to the individual's perceptions of the target's professionalism.

Method

Participants and procedure

A convenience sample of $N = 268$ students was recruited from across multiple courses at a mid-sized Midwestern university in the United States, and participants were given class credit for their participation. The majority of participants were female ($n = 194$, 72.4%), and participants were an average of 20.69 ($SD = 2.63$) years of age. Participants were varied in their class standing, so that 15 were 1st-year students, 81 were sophomores, 88 were juniors, 69 were seniors, 8 were graduate students, and 7 were continuing education students. As there were no statistical differences in study variables based on participants' gender, ages, or class standing, demographics were collapsed in the analysis.

To test hypotheses, an online experiment was conducted, generally following the procedures of prior research into the attributional effects of signature blocks (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). In the present study, after reading an initial informed consent form, participants were randomly directed to one of the three experimental conditions described below. In all conditions, participants viewed a screenshot of an email purportedly sent to the student body of the participants' university from an interested individual, Chris Mayburn, who was affiliated with a geographically distant academic institution and seeking information about the school's academic program and reputation to help govern a professional decision regarding the evaluation and accreditation of the participant's institution. After reading the email stimulus, participants completed several study measures and provided demographic information. After completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with course credit in accordance with the policy of` the class from which they were recruited.

Experimental stimuli

In all conditions, participants were exposed to an e-mail from a sender evaluating the participants' institution for accreditation, a scenario used by previous research on professional communication using college student samples (e.g., Carr & Stefaniak, 2012), with the message addressing a topic salient and relevant to the participants. The content of the email was held constant across conditions, with slight changes in the signature block to experimentally manipulate the sender's implied religious affiliation. In all conditions, the email read:

> My name is Chris Mayburn and I work at [A DISTANT, REPUTABLE UNIVERSITY]. I am writing today to request some information about [PARTICIPANT'S UNIVERSITY], and specifically the academic rigor of its programs and job-readiness of its students. I was recently assigned as an accreditation evaluator for [PARTICIPANT'S UNIVERSITY], and am looking to learn more about the school from the perspective of its students. Any views or experiences you would like to share would be appreciated.

Three experimental conditions were created, so that signature blocks included either a Christian, Islamic, or secular quotation. Though the quotations used had to vary to maintain external validity, to attempt to control for the influence of quotation itself all quotations were selected as they commonly pertained to knowledge and learning. The quotation in the *Christian* condition ($n = 133$) read, "'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.' ~ James 1:5." The quotation in the *Islamic* condition ($n = 79$) read, "'Hold to forgiveness; command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant.' ~ Quran 7:199." Finally, a *secular* quotation ($n = 56$) quotation, "'The more I read, the more I acquire, the more certain I am that I know nothing.' ~ Voltaire," was used as a control condition to provide measures accounting for perceptions of professionalism derived from the mere presence of a signature block but without religious signals given off (see Figure 1).

Measures

Religion

Each participant's *religion* was assessed using a single, categorical item. Each participant was asked to self-identify her or his religious affiliation using mutually exclusive categories from the United States Census Bureau (2012): Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian, Hindu, Satanist, and Atheist. Consistent with previous research utilizing college student samples in the United States (Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Stewart, 1994), the majority of participants ($n = 220$, 82.1%) in this Midwestern United
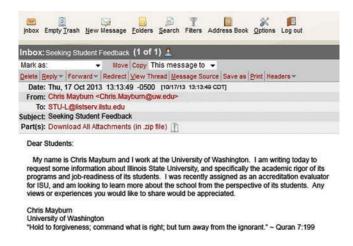

Figure 1. Sample stimulus depicting the Islamic condition.

States sample self-identified as Christian. Additional religious affiliations included Atheist (n = 31, 11.6%), Jewish (n = 6, 2.2%), Buddhist (n = 5, 1.9%), Unitarian (n = 3, 1.1%), Hindu (n = 1, .4%), Muslim (n = 1, .4%) and Satanic (n = 1, .4%).

These mutually exclusive categories were used to identify similar or different religious views between the sender and receiver, assessed as a bivariate measure. Participants self-identifying as holding the same religious beliefs as presented in the stimuli material were coded religiously congruent (dummy-coded as 1), and those self-identifying as a religion different from that espoused in the stimuli material were coded as religiously incongruent (coded as 0). This coding for *religious congruence* between the participant and the stimuli sender resulted in n = 113 (42.2%) participants matching and n = 155 (57.8%) participants not matching the religion of their randomly assigned condition.

Social identification

Social identification was assessed using Wang, Walther, and Hancock's (2009) 5-item scale, which has been used and validated in subsequent work (Carr et al., 2013). Participants responded to items including, "I feel involved in Chris Mayburn's social group," and "I can see myself as a member of Chris Mayburn's social group," using a 7-point Likert-type scale, so that greater values indicated an individual more strongly identified with the sender's social category. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, α = .72.

Professionalism

Professionalism is a somewhat ethereal and multivariate construct (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), comprised of both individual-level and organizational-level variables. To capture this complex, multidimensional construct, several operationalizations from prior research into professionalism at both the individual- and organizational-level were used to operationalize the dependent variable of interest for this research. First, *social attraction* and *task attraction* were each assessed using the respective 6-item dimensions of McCroskey and McCain's (1974) hoary interpersonal attraction scale. Social attraction sample items included, "I think Chris Mayburn could be a friend of mine." And, "I would like to have a friendly chat with Chris Mayburn" and task attraction sample items included "You could count on Chris Mayburn getting the job done," and "If I wanted to get things done I could probably depend on Chris Mayburn." Respondents responded to items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with higher values indicating greater attraction of that type. Both the social attraction, α = .76, and task attraction, α = .82, scales were reliable.

Next, *credibility* was assessed using Metzger, Flanagin, and Zwaurn's (2003) 8-item scale, probing the extent to which the participant perceived the message sender to be: credible, have high reputation, be successful, be trustworthy, offer information of superior quality, be prestigious, have a sincere interest in important affairs, and the extent to which the respondent would be willing to work for them, with higher scores indicated greater credibility. The scale demonstrated high reliability, α = .91.

Additionally, trustworthiness and competence were measured using the respective dimensions of McCroskey and Teven's (1999) credibility scale, with each dimension comprised of six 7-point semantic differential items. The *trustworthiness* scale included anchor points "Unethical|Ethical," "Untrustworthy|Trustworthy," so that higher scores indicated greater trustworthiness and demonstrated high reliability, α = .83. The *competence* scale included anchor points, "Untrained|Trained," and "Incompetent|Competent," so that higher scores indicated greater perceived competence, and demonstrated good reliability, α = .88.

Finally, *organizational prestige* was assessed to account for perceptions of professionalism at the organizational-level. Organizational prestige was measured using Mael and Ashforth's (1992) 8-item scale using 5-point Likert-type items, including, "People in my community think highly of [sender's institution]," and "[Sender's institution] is considered one of the best [institutions]." The scale

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Congruence of beliefs (0 = incongruent; 1 = congruent)	.42		–						
2. Social Identification	3.64	.85	.13*	–					
3. Social Attraction	3.24	.53	.15*	.47‡	–				
4. Task Attraction	3.24	.43	.06	.42‡	.60‡	–			
5. Credibility	3.31	.71	−.02	.47‡	.53‡	.61‡	–		
6. Trustworthiness	4.86	1.17	.06	.42‡	.41‡	.40‡	.61‡	–	
7. Competence	4.80	1.06	.04	.43‡	.36‡	.50‡	.67‡	.75‡	–
8. Organizational Prestige	3.16	.32	.05	.32‡	.32‡	.44‡	.48‡	.32‡	.43‡

$^*p < .05$, $^†p < .01$, $^‡p < .001$.

demonstrated low but acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .66$.[3] Together, these six constructs and measures were used to conceptualize and operationalize professionalism. Table 1 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations among these variables.

Results

The first hypothesis predicts that the mere disclosure of religion (regardless of which religion) will positively influence attributions of the sender. Given the multiple attributions under consideration, to test this hypothesis a multivariate regression was conducted, using whether or not a religious disclosure was made in an email to predict subsequent attributions. The regression was not significant, Wilk's $\lambda = .99$, $F(6, 261) = .55$, $p = .77$, $\eta^2 = .01$.[4] The regression revealed no ability to predict a receiver's perception of (a) *social attractiveness*, $p = .47$, $\eta^2 = .002$, (b) *task attractiveness*, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .004$, (c) *credibility*, $p = .88$, $\eta^2 < .001$, (d) *trustworthiness*, $p = .46$, $\eta^2 = .002$, (e) *competence*, $p = .51$, $\eta^2 = .002$, or (f) *organizational* prestige, $p = .62$, $\eta^2 = .001$, based on whether or not the sender utilized a religious disclosure in a signature block (see Table 1). Thus, H1 was rejected.

The second hypothesis predicts the congruence of a receiver's and a sender's religion positively influences a receiver's social identification with the sender's social group, which in turn positively influences attributions of a sender's professionalism. To initially test H2a, a regression was used to test the hypotheses, with congruence of religious beliefs used (as a categorical variable) to predict social identification. The regression was significant, $F(1, 266) = 4.23$, $p = .041$, $R^2 = .016$, so that a receiver sharing the religious beliefs espoused by the sender via a signature block was more likely to socially identify with the sender's social group, $b^* = .125$. Thus, H2a was supported.

Hypothesis 2b predicts that social identification with a sender's social category positively influences attributions of the sender. As in H1, the hypothesis was tested using a multivariate regression, using social identification to predict subsequent attributions. The regression was significant, Wilk's $\lambda = .34$, $F(6, 239) = 2.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. The regression revealed a receiver's perception of (a) *social attractiveness*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$, (b) *task attractiveness*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$, (c) *credibility*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$, (d) *trustworthiness*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$, (e) *competence*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, and (f) *organizational prestige*, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$, all significantly increased as the receiver's perceived social identification with the sender's social group increased (see Table 2), supporting H2b.

However, as these results do not clearly indicate whether social identification merely mediates the effect of disclosing a religious belief similar to the perceiver's, an additional *post hoc* mediation analysis was conducted. Six mediation models were analyzed using Hayes' (Hayes, 2013) PROCESS macro (model 4), and inferences for indirect effects were based on 1,000 bootstrapped resamples. The congruence of religious beliefs was specified as the independent variable, social identification as the mediating variable, and then each of the six dimensions of professionalism as the dependent variables. None of the six mediation models were supported at the Bonferroni corrected p-value of

Table 2. Multivariate regression models predicting dimensions of professionalism.

Predictor Variable	Dependent Variable	Model 1 (*H1*)		Model 2 (*H2b*)	
		$F(1, 268)$	η^2	$F(6, 239)$	η^2
Presence of Religious Disclosure (0 = No; 1 = Yes)					
	Social Attractiveness	.52	.002		
	Task Attractiveness	1.03	.004		
	Credibility	.02	<.001		
	Trustworthiness	.56	.002		
	Competence	.44	.002		
	Organizational Prestige	.24	.001		
Social Identification					
	Social Attractiveness			4.89[‡]	.32
	Task Attractiveness			3.72[‡]	.26
	Credibility			4.38[‡]	.29
	Trustworthiness			3.60[‡]	.25
	Competence			3.84[‡]	.27
	Organizational Prestige			3.43[‡]	.24
F-value		.55[ns]		2.07[‡]	
Wilk's λ		.99		.34	
η^2		.01		.26	

*$p < .05$, [†]$p < .01$, [‡]$p < .001$.

.008 (calculated at .05/6), $F(1, 266) = 4.23$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = .02$; but all six models demonstrated significant direct effects of religious congruence on social identification ($b^* = .21$, $se = .10$, $p = .04$), and significant direct effects of social identification on perceptions of (a) *social attractiveness,* $b^* = .29$, $se = .03$, $p < .001$ (b) *task attractiveness,* $b^* = .21$, $se = .12$, $p < .001$, (c) *credibility,* $b^* = .40$, $se = .05$, $p < .001$, (d) *trustworthiness,* $b^* = .58$, $se = .08$, $p < .001$, (e) *competence,* $b^* = .54$, $se = .07$, $p < .001$, and (f) *organizational prestige,* $b^* = .12$, $se = .02$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Moreover, examination of the direct, indirect, and total effects (see Table 3), as suggested by Muller and Judd (2005), did not support the direct or indirect effect of mere congruence of religion between a sender
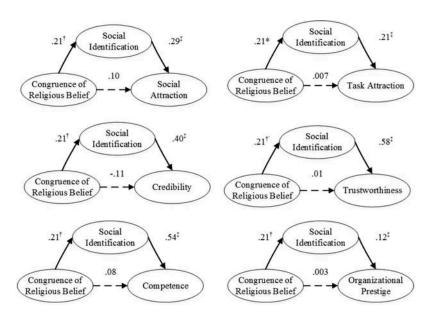

Figure 2. Mediation effects of social identification on the relationship between congruence of sender's/receiver's religious beliefs and six dimensions of professionalism. *$p < .05$, [†]$p < .01$, [‡]$p < .001$.

Table 3. Summary of causal effects, (standard errors), and [confidence intervals].

Outcome	Determinant	Causal Effects		
		Direct	Indirect	Total
Social Attractiveness	Congruence of Religious Belief	.10 (.06)	.06 (.03)	.16 (.06)
		[−.015, .214]	[.005, .137]	[−.015, .214]
Task Attractiveness		.01 (.05)	.05 (.02)	.05 (.05)
		[−.089, .104]	[.003, .098]	[−.089, .104]
Credibility		−.11 (.08)	.09 (.04)	−.02 (.09)
		[−.261, .044]	[.011, .181]	[−.231, .044]
Trustworthiness		.01 (.13)	.12 (.06)	.13 (.14)
		[−.251, .272]	[.016, .263]	[−.251, .272]
Competence		−.03 (.12)	.11 (.05)	.08 (.13)
		[−.269, .206]	[.016, .248]	[−.269, .206]
Organizational Prestige		.00 (.04)	.03 (.01)	.03 (.04)
		[−.071, .077]	[.003, .059]	[−.071, .077]

and receiver on attributions of the sender's professionalism. Taken together, these analyses did not support a mediating effect of social identification as an explanatory process.

What the results do indicate is a two-step process wherein the congruence of the perceiver's/target's religious beliefs affected social identification with the target, which then affected the perceived professionalism of the target. Social identification alone had a significant and direct effect on all six dimensions of professionalism. Participants' social identification, though, was predicted by the congruence of a participant's religious beliefs and the religion identified within the stimulus material's signature block. Taken together, these analyses support H2b, and the prediction that social identification—rather than mere religious disclosure—drives perceptions of professionalism.

Discussion

This research empirically tested the attributional effects of religious disclosures on perceptions of a sender's professionalism through two competing sets of hypotheses: one guided by the halo effect and the other guided by social identity theory. Results of an original experiment supported a social identity approach to the effects of religious disclosures, so that perceptions of a sender's professionalism (operationalized via multiple interpersonal- and organizational-level dimensions as social and task attractiveness, credibility, trustworthiness, competence, and organizational prestige) were positively related to a receiver's social identification with the sender's espoused religion. When the religion expressed by a sender was consistent with the receiver's own religious beliefs, the receiver perceived stronger social identification with the sender, and perceptions of the sender's professionalism increased. Alternately, when the religion expressed by a sender diverged from the receiver's own religious beliefs, the receiver perceived weaker social identification with the sender, and perceptions of the sender's professionalism decreased. Thus, to answer the guiding research question, the effect of a religious disclosure on perceptions of the sender's professionalism are primarily guided by the receiver's own religious beliefs and the congruence of those beliefs with those of the sender's. These findings (a) reframe prior results into the attributions stemming from religious disclosures in professional contexts, (b) support social identity theory and religiosity's role as a salient social category upon when interactants form impressions of others, and (c) provide initial results regarding the effect of religious disclosures via email signature blocks on perceptions of professionals.

Reconsidering religious disclosures

Approaching religious disclosures and subsequent perceptions using the halo effect suggested direct social benefits are derived from giving or giving off cues to one's religiosity, including in professional interactions (e.g., Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Bailey & Young, 1986). However, this direct effect was not supported in the present data, as senders were not perceived as more professional when disclosing a

religious affiliation (i.e., Christian or Islam) than when not disclosing a religious affiliation (i.e., Secular control) via a signature block quotation concluding an email. None of the six individual- and organizational-level dimensions operationalizing *professionalism* were affected by a religious, as compared to a nonreligious, quotation in the signature block. This lack of support for the halo effect is likely a result of the multiple religions used in this study, redressing a limitation in previous studies of operationalizing *religiosity* as a subject's disclosure of only a Christian affiliation and conducting research among predominantly Christian populations. In this way, the present research reflects a broader approach to the study of disclosing a "religion" by utilizing multiple religions within the stimuli to partially reflect the cross-section of extant in the globalized, diverse business environment. Though prior work from U.S. scholars predominantly equated religion with Christianity (e.g., Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Bailey & Garrou, 1983; Stewart, 1994), the present results suggest this equivocation may conflate terms, and indicate previous findings ascribing positive attributions to professionals disclosing their religious affiliations may need to be reconsidered, particularly using a social identity approach.

Utilizing social identity theory better predicted the effects of self-disclosing one's religion on perceptions of professionalism, modeling the effect in a two-step process. Initially, receivers exposed to an email wherein the sender articulates a religious affiliation consistent with their own perceived greater levels of social identification with the sender than those exposed to a dissonant religion. Next, a receiver's social identification with the sender was positively related to all six individual- and organizational-level dimensions operationalizing *professionalism*. Ultimately, social identification predicted 17% of the variance in the multidimensional perception of a sender's professionalism: a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988), and a strong predictor of professionalism. Together, this process of social identification with a sender's espoused religiosity predicting professionalism was supported, and it demonstrated a better fit to the processes of effects of professionals' religious disclosures than the halo effect.

In addition to helping revisit and redress prior work into religious disclosures, the present study helps understand the perceptual and attributional effects that may result from cues given via signature blocks. As these cues are deliberately crafted by users, even the relatively small cues they represent can have measurable, significant effects on how receivers perceive the sender. Through use of religion and the significant social identity religion often serves (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ysseldyk et al., 2010), this study also suggests that other salient social identities reflected in signature blocks (e.g., sports teams, organizational memberships, extracurricular affiliations) may have similar effects on attributions of a sender. Importantly, these attributions are not driven by the simple disclosure of one's affiliation but rather are heavily influenced by the receiver and what social identities are salient and active to be used to guide social identification processes to that receiver. To that end, the same cue given via a signature block by a sender may have disparate effects for various receivers given the receivers' own social categories and identities.

Professional disclosures of religion

A small but substantive percentage of professionals give off cues to their religious affiliation via the signature blocks automatically generated at the end of every e-mail they send and certainly may do so via other means. Particularly in early stages of relational development, wherein senders seek to strategically present a professional image and receivers seek to use available cues to reduce their uncertainty about their interaction partner (Carr, 2016), even small cues such as a signature block can guide initial impressions and subsequent interactions (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). Though substantive work has been done to explore the effect of cues given regarding a sender's religiosity via explicit verbal statements in professional contexts (Bailey & Doriot, 1985; Stewart, 1994), little has been done to explore the effect of similar cues given off, particularly in mediated communication. In addition to supporting a social identity approach to professionals' religious disclosures, the present study also demonstrates that even small, subtle cues to a professional's religious beliefs—such as a

line of a signature block—are noted by receivers and subtly yet significantly integrated into the receiver's perceptions of a sender.

Thus, a practical implication of the present research is that senders may benefit from not utilizing religious quotations in e-mails given the religious diversity of the general working public. Admittedly, social benefit may be had in the attributions of receivers with similar religious social identities, so that a professional interacting with known audiences (or at least known demographics) may find benefit by espousing their religious beliefs in a professional interaction. A Christian propane salesperson in Texas, typically interacting with other Christians, may use a religious disclosure to his advantage, given the positive attributions that may follow—not from the mere disclosure of a religion, but rather from the disclosure of a religious belief commensurate with the propane salesperson's homophilous client base. However, the positivity of perceptions would be attenuated for receivers who identify with a faith different from that espoused by the sender, so that professionals interacting with more hererophilous others who share disparate religious beliefs would perceive the sender as less professional upon disclosure of a religious belief. In these cases, where an audience or receiver is unknown and may share a disparate religious belief, the sender may lose some professional face by disclosing her or his religion. Therefore, while professionals may have a little to gain from utilizing religious quotations in signature blocks, it appears they have more to lose and thus would be wise to follow Gibson's (2013) advice and abstain from such disclosures in religiously heterophilous work environments.

Future directions

This study serves as an initial application of SIT to explain and predict the attributional effects of professionals' religious disclosures, and its findings offer several opportunities for future research to further expand. First, the experimental design relied on variance in participants' religious affiliations to operationalize consonant or dissonant religiosity. This manipulation was appropriate to test the competing hypotheses but did not account for the possible loadings of specific religions and religious social identities themselves. Thus, future work may seek to broaden the sample and stimuli to account for more varied religious beliefs, either expanding to the eight religions identified in the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) or even more nuanced explorations of attributions among various sects and denominations (e.g., Catholic vs. Protestant Christians). An additional opportunity for subsequent work is to explore the effects of religious disclosures for religious professionals, such as clergy or employees of religiously affiliated organizations. The present work assumed a professional in a secular organization—both in its conceptualization and its operationalization (using an employee of a public state university)—where religiosity would not be a *de facto* relevant social category. Future work may seek to see if the social identity effects supported in the present work persist when the professional's religious social identity is already made salient by the nature of the individual's work: Is a rabbi perceived as less professional because of a quotation from the Torah when the quotation's cue is redundant to the sender's title? Perhaps relatedly, the present work did not check for social desirability: Particularly in a dominantly Christian sample, respondents may have felt self-conscious or socially pressured to not disparage or be perceived as being against a religious view—or a specific religion—disparate from their own. Future work may seek to further reduce the perceived taboo of discussing or forming judgments of others based on religion.

Future work may further extend and explore the use of specific phrases and quotations integrated into signature blocks. The topic, valence, and focus of signature block text—both religious and secular—can vary widely and exert additional influence on attributions. Although results (both H1 and *post hoc* analyses) from the present experiment suggest such effects did not occur with the stimuli used in this study as no differences in professionalism were detected between conditions, future work may seek to vary the text to include more proselytizing, pontifical, or damnatory scriptures to affect the perceived religiosity of the target individual and/or to activate specific religious attitudes of perceivers.

Finally, this research used a college student sample. Previous work has demonstrated the external and ecological validity of college students for professional interactions, as they reflect a young adult population being acculturated into various organizations (see Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986; Greenberg, 1987). However, college students may be more attuned to small cues in CMC (like signature blocks) than older users or those not as technologically self-efficacious. Future work may benefit from both broader cross-sectional samples as well as more targeted audiences (e.g., a mosque's membership list) that may make cues to religiosity more or less salient, both to the receiving audience and to the context of the professional interaction.

Conclusion

The 10% of individuals sending an email each day including a religious quotation, scripture, Taoism, or other cue given off to the sender's religiosity accounts for millions of messages—often in zero-history relationships—between individuals in which receivers utilize available computer-mediated cues to form impressions and guide subsequent interactions with the sender, which are influenced by these religious disclosures. These small cues to the sender's religiosity, intended to be an artifact reflecting the sender's personality and social identity, exert a significant influence on receiver's perceptions of the sender's professionalism, so that religious receivers sharing the sender's religious beliefs view the sender more favorably; but nonreligious receivers or those of a different religious affiliation than the sender view the sender as less professional. Given that email is the initial channel of communication for many interactions (and subsequent impression formation) and the increasing religious diversity present in the workplace (Gibson, 2013), unless their social identity is relevant to their jobs (e.g., religious organization), senders may be more successful in management of the selves they give and give off to others by strategically managing their identities by excising religious quotations from email signature blocks, leaving their job title or organization—rather than their religion—as the guiding social identity to guide receivers' attributions.

Notes

1. A guiding assumption in the present work is that the disclosure and receipt of a sender's religiosity is not germane to the interaction or participants. Such an assumption is warranted in the general public, as most organizations do not specifically affiliate with particular religions or religious views; but it does not hold for all organizations. Religious or religiously affiliated organizations or senders/receivers may experience different environmental or interactional norms than are explored in the present work and, as discussed in the Future Directions section of this manuscript, merit independent consideration and exploration of similar disclosures and subsequent attributions.
2. For a more comprehensive review of literature addressing empirical work demonstrating negative attributional outcomes resulting from religious disclosures, see Kinnaman and Lyons (2007). However, it should be noted these findings are generally limited to work in the religious studies literature, and thus may not speak to the effect of religious disclosure in professional contexts on attributions as is the focus of the present work.
3. Though lower than traditional thresholds of acceptable reliabilities (see Bland & Altman, 1997), the reliability coefficient identified in the present study ($\alpha = .66$) should not be a significant concern for the measure or study results. First, *organizational prestige* is one of several dependent measures utilized in this study, and its inclusion merely supports the directionality of effects noted concurrent with other study constructs. Second, various adaptions and modifications of Mael and Ashforth (1992) organizational prestige measure have been used, with studies reporting a wide range in reliability coefficients including $\alpha = .68$ (Jones & Volpe, 2011), $\alpha = .72$ (Griepentrog, Harold, Holtz, Klimoski, & Marsh, 2012), $\alpha = .76$ (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001) $\alpha = .87$ (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Though lower than desired, the reliability coefficient in the present study is thus not radically disparate from prior reported implementations of the measure as an operationalization of the construct.
4. All η^2 values reported are partial eta-squares.

Acknowledgment

Funding

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Caleb T. Carr (PhD, Michigan State University) is an Associate Professor who researches how computer-mediated communication affects communicative processes, including how social media is used for organizational uncertainty reduction and to create and maintain identity online.

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