

# INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR OF CONSUMERS-AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*Past literature consistently revealed that culture plays an important role in the formation of consumer behaviour. Religion, being inseparable part of a culture, would also influence the behaviour of consumers in similar manners which are rarely being investigated in consumer behaviour field need to be explored. The objective of this paper is to explore whether religion influences shopping behaviour. For the purpose, exploratory research is used to explore the link between religion and shopping behaviour by reviewing the literature. Research indicate that shopping behaviour of people differs across different religious group affiliation and degree of faith manifested. It is also found that religious impact on consumption also differs across various product categories and culture. It is investigated that most of the research on religious influence on shopping behaviour was under taken on western setting.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Religious affiliation, Religiosity, Shopping behaviour

## INTRODUCTION

Since cultural background is one of the most important determinants of consumer behaviour, “a marketer with a defective knowledge of culture is doomed”(Engel, Blackwell and Miniard 1995, p. 145). Indeed, research by Bristow and Asquith (1999), Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000), Chudry and Pallister (2002)and de Mooij and Hofstede (2002), to name a few, all revealed that consumers from different cultural backgrounds express certain significant differences of their own, which may warrant differential marketing efforts. From the managerial perspective, a clear understanding of culture and the influence that cultural values have on consumers’ attitudes and behaviour is a prerequisite for designing effective strategies for marketing to consumers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Yet due to diversity in Race, nationality, religious values, geography and customs, it has become increasingly difficult for marketers to use the same marketing mix strategies for all consumer groups (Cui 1997). Cultural diversity requires marketers to understand each group of consumers including their basic demographics, media usage, shopping behaviour, store patronage and consumption patterns and to use sophisticated marketing techniques to reach them. Failure to

customise their offerings to cultural variations would also result in the failure of marketing programmes directed to a specific market segment.

From a marketing point of view, the stability of religion underlying consumer behavior implies the potential of religion as the basis for market targeting and strategies (Delener, 1990a). This is because much information about typical consumers is in a state of flux, that is, the relevancy of certain characteristics to an individual or a group might change depending upon time and situation. Indeed, marketers cannot rely heavily on the implications related to consumers' basic demographics such as discretionary income, education attainment, chronological age and employment status, as these characteristics change over time and from one generation to the next, thus hampering marketers in segmenting the market to its full potential (McDaniel and Burnett, 1990).

Being able to identify how the behavior of consumers is affected by their religiosity factors is critical to the success of marketers, especially for those who operate in multi-religious countries like India. Perhaps the major challenge for them is to understand the differences and similarities that characterize consumers' behavior across different religious. Though marketers can use a standardized approach by focusing on common basic needs for all consumers, they seem to underestimate the profound influence of religious differences among consumers on their choice and shopping behaviors. As such, the advantages of this approach are difficult to gain if consumers with different cultural backgrounds are not largely compelled by standardized marketing efforts because of their religious. Therefore, in order for marketers to develop effective marketing strategies for a specific culture, an intimate understanding yet comprehensive knowledge of how shopping behavior of consumers is constantly affected by their religious values is apparently warranted.

This paper is of conceptual in nature which focuses on how religion influences the shopping behavior of consumer. The prime objective of this research paper is to explore the relationship between religion and consumption behavior. Generally a base of past empirical research on religious influence on consumption behavior is taken to understand the conceptual ground of the research. Exploratory research design is used for the purpose of study.

The paper starts with abstract followed by introduction which gives an idea about the relevance of the study. Next to it, a religion is defined from the context of religious affiliation and religiosity which is followed by literature review. A research methodology is discussed after literature review which is followed by findings and conclusion.

### **Religion defined**

The search for a generally accepted theory or definition faces enormous difficulties in the case of religion (Clarke & Byrne, 1993). Scholars identify at least three historical designations of the term: (1) a supernatural power to which individuals must respond; (2) a feeling present in the individual who conceives such a power; and (3) the ritual acts carried out in respect of that power (Wulff, 1997). Such designations have defied social scientific consensus and thus "it is hard to make any generalization [concerning religion] that is universally valid" (Peterson, 2001, p. 6). As a result, different theories and definitions of religion are often used in the literature. Among others, religion has been defined as:

“A belief in God accompanied by a commitment to follow principles believed to be set forth by God”. (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990, p. 110)

“A socially shared set of beliefs, ideas and actions that relate to a reality that cannot be verified empirically yet is believed to affect the course of natural and human events”. (Terpstra & David, 1991, p. 73)

“An organised system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed (a) to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power or ultimate truth/reality), and (b) to foster an understanding of one’s relation and responsibility to others in living together in a community”. (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2000, p. 18)

“A social arrangement designed to provide a shared, collective way of dealing with the unknown and un-knowable aspects of human life, with the mysteries of life, death and the different dilemmas that arise in the process of making moral decisions”. (Johnson, 2000, p. 259)

“A cultural subsystem that refers to a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to a sacred ultimate reality or deity”. (Arnould, Price & Zikhan, 2004, p. 517-518)

“A system of beliefs about the supernatural and spiritual world, about God, and about how humans, as God’s creatures, are supposed to behave on this earth”. (Sheth & Mittal, 2004, p. 65)

Religion can be viewed in two broad perspectives. Individual association with a particular religion and commitment an individual is having for the religion one is professing.

### **Religious Affiliation**

Religious affiliation or adherence of individual to a particular religious group has been termed an ascribed status. This is because like race and nationality, its effect on individual life often predates birth, determines family size, level of education attained, the amount of wealth accumulated and the type of life decision taken. (Hirschman 1983)

It is suggested that one is born into a religious tradition and through the action of its institutional influences (i.e. Sunday school, church attendance) develops a religious identity or affiliation. Religious affiliations therefore can be depicted as “cognitive systems” of the society. In fact, even within the same ethnic group, religious subculture stands as a sacred value that differentiates people’s attitude and behaviour. Irish ethnicity, for instance, may be exhibited quite differently, depending upon whether one is Irish Catholic or Irish Protestant. Without religious differences, their ethnic differences almost certainly would be less distinct.

It has been measured relative to denominational membership or faith identification of the individual (e.g. Catholic, Protestant, Jews).

Religious affiliation is viewed as sharing a common cognitive system of beliefs, values, expectations and behaviour (Hirschman 1983).

Religious affiliation has typically been measured relative to religious denominational membership or religious identification of the individual.

**Religiosity**

According to Delener (1990b), religiosity (degree to which individuals are committed to a specific religious group) is one of the most cultural force and key influence in buying behaviour. This is because purchase decision is categorised according how much consumers adhere to a particular faith. The extent to which religion affects one's beliefs and behaviour depends on the individual's level of religiosity and the importance one places on the religion itself (Sood and Nasu, 1995).

It has been argued that religion is highly personal in nature and therefore its effects on consumer behaviour depend on individuals' level of religious commitment or the importance placed on religion in their life.

The degree to which a person uses adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs and practices and uses them in daily living. The supposition is that a highly religious person will evaluate the world through religious schemas and thus will integrate his or her religion into much of his or her life. Worthington et al. (2003, p. 85)

Religiosity or religious commitment is "the extent to which an individual's committed to the religion he or she professes and its teachings, such as the individual attitudes and behaviours reflect this commitment" (Johnson, Jang, Larson and Li, 2001: p. 25).

**LITERATURE REVIEW****Religious affiliation and shopping behaviour**

Within the consumer behaviour paradigm, religious affiliation or the adherence of individuals to religious groups has been termed an ascribed status. This is because, like race and nationality, its effect on the individual's life often predates life, determines family size, the level of education attained, the amount of wealth accumulated and the type of life decision taken (Hirschman, 1983). It is suggested that one is born into a religious tradition and through the action of its institutional influences (i.e. Sunday school, church attendance) develops a religious identity or affiliation. Religious affiliations therefore can be depicted as "cognitive systems" of the society. That is, believers of the same religious affiliation are viewed as sharing a common cognitive system of beliefs, values, expectations and behaviours (Hirschman, 1983).

The little empirical evidence that has been accumulated indicates that religious affiliation has the potential to be valuable predictor of consumer behaviour. One of the earliest marketing studies that investigated the influence of religious affiliation on consumer behaviour was by Engel (1976) who noted sharp differences in the psychographic profiles between Lutheran Church and Assembly of God denominations in Brazil. He found that the Lutheran Church members are more secular and show relatively minimal interest in spiritual growth while Christianity has a considerable influence on the lifestyle of the Assembly of God members. Though the implications of Engel's findings are specific to the Brazilian consumer market, the study has empirically demonstrated that religious affiliation and denomination can serve as important variables for consumer segmentation.

In a study on religious affiliation and store location, Thompson and Raine (1976) investigated whether or not customers who shopped at one furniture store differed from the general population of the city with regard to religious affiliation, as well as whether religious

affiliation was a significant determinant of furniture purchases at the store. They found that their results were not impressive and “generally disappointing” (p. 76), as religious affiliation showed no significant relationship to furniture sales. Nevertheless, their findings provided some support ( $p = 0.10$ ) for their hypothesis that the store had a greater amount of sales coming from “a middle range of fundamentalist Protestant religious denominations” (p. 72).

A series of studies on religious affiliation and its effects on consumer behaviour was done by Hirschman in the early 1980's. Her studies mainly focused on the similarities and differences in consumption-related activities among consumers affiliated with Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism religions. Her studies showed that: 1) Jewish consumers tend to be more innovative and less brand and store loyal than non-Jewish consumers (Hirschman, 1981), 2) Catholic consumers are more influenced by price, location, transportation, and mood in making entertainment related choices than are Protestant consumers (Hirschman, 1982), and 3) Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant consumers use different evaluation criteria in making entertainment, residential, transportation, and pet choices (Hirschman, 1983).

Religious affiliation also appears to affect people's media usage and preferences. Hirschman's (1985) analysis of the linkage between religious subcultures and media content preferences among college students found distinct differences between Protestants, Jewish and Catholics in several types of content preferences including television programmes, books and motion picture. Although the sample characteristics do not allow for drawing generalisations on the basis of the findings, the study did support the general hypothesis that religious ethnicity are related to media content preference. In this study, religious differences emerged in a majority of content categories even when the major demographic factors of age, education and occupational status were explicitly controlled.

Evidence suggests that the influence of religious affiliation on consumer behaviour is not restricted to consumer decision-making of purchasing durable goods but also on their choice and evaluation of service providers. In an examination of hospitals, it was found that religious affiliation of a hospital is important in influencing hospital selection and contributes to overall patient satisfaction (Nix & Gibson, 1989). This finding is later supported by Andaleeb (1993) who found that hospitals of a particular religious affiliation were more likely to be recalled, preferred and selected by people of the same religious affiliation.

McDaniel and Burnett's (1991) study of the major media habits of evangelical (born-again) and non-evangelical consumers demonstrated some differences between these two market segments. They found that, as compared to their non-evangelical counterparts, evangelical consumers were generally lower in their newspaper readership, less likely to read business and skin magazines, less likely to listen to heavy rock or popular music and less likely to watch adult comedies or adventure dramas. However, they tend to read religious magazines and use religious broadcast media more often than did non-evangelicals.

Bailey and Sood (1993) examined the effects of religious affiliation on consumer behaviour of six religious groups in Washington DC: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Catholic and Protestant. The underlying aim was to study how the minority religious groups' behaviour (i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam) differed from those in the majority (i.e.

Judaism, Catholic and Protestant). The research examined shopping behaviour for a relatively expensive stereo sound system. The results identified statistically significant differences in the consumer behaviour of different religious groups. They found that Muslim consumers were relatively more impetuous shoppers but less likely to be informed or risky shoppers. Hindus were found to be in rational shopper group while Catholics were less likely to be informed shoppers. Buddhists are the only minority religious members in the sample to report consumer behaviour similar to the societal norms.

Essoo and Dibb (2004) conducted a similar study in Mauritius with a national sample of 600 respondents from three different religions: Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism. The results confirmed that there were still marked differences between Hindus and Muslims for all seven types of shopper: the demanding, practical, trendy, traditional, economic, thoughtful and innovative shopper.

More recently, Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004) conducted a large-scale study that analyse the influence of religion and intensity of religious belief on attitudes towards the advertising of four controversial product groups namely gender/sex related, social/political, healthcare and addictive products. Student samples from four main religious groups -- Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and non-religious believers (mainly Taoism and Confucianism) across six different countries were included in their study. They found that the followers of these four religious denominations have different attitudes towards the four controversial product groups. The followers of Islamic faith were more likely to find advertising of all four product groups most offensive relative to the other three groups.

### **Religiosity and shopping behaviour**

Individuals' level of religious commitment or the importance placed on religion in their life. In an empirical study of religiosity and consumer behavior among 602 mostly Protestant consumers, Wilkes et al. (1986) reached a significant conclusion that religiosity influences several aspects of consumer's lifestyle, which eventually may affect choices and/or choice behaviour. When age, income and sex were controlled, the researchers found that people with a higher degree of religious commitment tend to be satisfied with their lives, have a more traditional sex-role orientation and are more likely to be opinion leaders.

McDaniel and Burnett (1990) investigated the influence of religiosity on the importance of various retail department store attributes held by consumers. The results show that one aspect of religiosity, religious commitment, particularly measured by cognitive religiosity and one aspect of behavioral religiosity are significant in predicting the importance individuals place on certain retail evaluative criteria. Consumers with a high degree of cognitive religious commitment viewed sales personnel friendliness, shopping efficiency, and product quality as being of greater importance in selecting a retail store than did those low in cognitive religious commitment. Religious contribution, a behavioral component of religious commitment, was positively and significantly associated with sales personnel friendliness/assistance and credit availability.

Sood and Nasu (1995) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of the effects of religiosity on general purchasing behavior for a sample of Japanese and American consumers. They suggested that there is no difference in consumer shopping behavior between devout and casually religious Japanese individuals and this could be attributed this to the fact that



religion is not an important element in overall Japanese culture. On the other hand, devout Protestants in the U.S.A. were found to be more economic, buying product on sale, shopping in stores with lower prices, being open to buying foreign-made goods, believing that there was little relation between price and quality, tending to not believe advertising claims while preferring subtle and informative advertisements.

Delener (1989) investigated differences in external search information and media usage patterns of Catholics and Jews, and the associated influence of religiosity. The findings indicated that Jews searched for information more than Catholics and that the difference was greater for non-religious consumers. He also found differences in media usage between the two groups attributed to the religiosity of consumers in each religious group.

In a study of religious influences on consumer innovativeness, Delener (1990a) used two types of measures of innovativeness: willingness to try new brands and a direct measure of innovativeness. The study showed that Jews were more willing than Catholics to try new movies, new books and new magazine. He also found that religious Catholics were more brand innovative than non-religious Catholics. In contrast, non-religious Jews were found to be more brand innovative than religious Jews. His findings are fairly consistent with those described by Hirschman (1981) who found that Jews to be more innovative than non-Jews and to be potentially less store and brand loyal.

A study by Delener (1990b) explored the effects of religiosity on perceived risks and uncertainty in durable good purchase decision. His study was on affluent Catholics and Jewish households in the Northeast of United States for the purchase of new cars and microwave ovens. The findings of the study suggested that Catholics were more likely to be sensitive to any potentially negative consequences of their purchase decisions. This sensitivity was more apparent among consumers with a high degree of religiosity. This attitude relates to the tendency of highly religious individuals to be less secure and low in self-confident as compared to less religious individuals.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

There is a considerable body of extant literature focused on culture and its influence on various aspects of consumer behavior. However, among this body of work, there are limited examples of research that incorporate the role of religion as an element of culture with consumer behavior. Instead, researchers have mainly focused on other subcultural factors such as ethnicity, nationality and values as important predictors of consumer behavior.

Being a part of the culture, religion would influence people values, belief and attitude which in turn would influence behaviour as consumer. So it is imperative to examine and explore the relationship between religion and shopping behaviour.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To assess the past empirical research on role of religion in shopping behaviour
2. To examine whether shopping behaviour differs among different religious groups

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research is purely conceptual base in which exploratory research design is used to study the research problem. Generally past empirical research would have been taken to explore the relationship between individual religious background and shopping behaviour.

## **FINDINGS**

Past research on consumer behaviour were mainly concentrated on influence of culture on various aspects of consumer buying behaviour. But the role of religion in shaping consumer behaviour was always been ignored though it immensely affects ones behaviour by influencing their culture, thinking and lifestyle.

From this exploratory research, it is found that there are two broad aspects of religion; religious affiliation and religiosity which influence shopping behaviour differently. It is concluded that consumer affiliation to different religion results in shopping behaviour. It is also found that degree of faith and belief in a particular religion would also affects shopping behaviour of consumer. It means that religious and non-religious consumers are different in their choices and expectations which results into various shopping behaviour.

Religion influences consumer shopping behaviour by influencing their personality by way of their beliefs, values and attitudes and influencing their lifestyle, information sources and shopping orientation.

It is found that influence religion on shopping behaviour is widely different for different product categories and most of the research on religion and consumer behaviour were conducted in United States where Judeo-Christian culture is predominant.

## **SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Most of the researches which were conducted in the past were in the western setting which impels that future research can be conducted in non-western setting as the degree of influence of religion and religiosity differs from one culture to another. Another implication for the future research is that most of the researches conducted were for the high involvement which indicates that it is required to study whether buying behaviour or shopping behaviour for low involvement product would be influenced by religious background and degree of commitment one hold for the religion he or she professes.

Even this is a kind of exploratory research which could more authentically be carried out by using scale measurement for measuring religiosity and shopping behaviour.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above review makes it clear that different religions have different impacts on some aspects of consumer behaviour. These differences are thought to result from divergent values and beliefs concerning consumption held by different religious ideologies. This effect may be either direct, as when consumption of specific products varies as a function of the tenets held by the religious traditions, or indirectly, as a function of differences in psychological Constructs such as personality and values.



The findings give considerable support for viewing religion as an important construct in the study of consumer behavior. Firstly, religion was found to influence the way in which people make decisions on shopping. In the consumer behavior literature, most studies suggest that shopping is influenced by the following factors: the nature of the product, the degree of perceived risk in the product class, the amount of information search, store image and product assortment. It has also been suggested that consumers are influenced by employment, social, religious, educational and recreational activities. Little research has been carried out to provide empirical evidence that religion impacts the way in which people shop. Consequently, there has been an inadequate explanation of the role of religion in shopping decision making.

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