Religious Influence on Consumer Behavior: Classification and Measurement

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - An overview of published writings on religion and consumption led to the identification of a few dimensions of religious influence on consumer behavior. At the grossest level of partitioning, religious influence on consumer behavior can be broken into positive (approach) and negative (avoidance). At a general level, such positive and negative influences may surround the very notion of the acquisition of material goods. Religion has also been associated with some distinct motivations leading to more specific consumption activities. Perhaps the most obvious and overt influences are those arising from particular dogmas or doctrines. A complex value structure, rooted at least partially in one's religious orientation, may cast a net that takes in multiple consumption activities not specifically addressed by a church's doctrinal teachings. In the pursuit of personal devotion, products from an array of religious orientations, not just one's own, may yield satisfaction. Social influence on consumer behavior, deriving from both informational and normative motivations, may take on the added weight in a religious context.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An overview of published writings on religion and consumption led to the identification of a few dimensions of religious influence on consumer behavior. At the grossest level of partitioning, religious influence on consumer behavior can be broken into positive (approach) and negative (avoidance). At a general level, such positive and negative influences may surround the very notion of the acquisition of material goods. Religion has also been associated with some distinct motivations leading to more specific consumption activities. Perhaps the most obvious and overt influences are those arising from particular dogmas or doctrines. A complex value structure, rooted at least partially in one’s religious orientation, may cast a net that takes in multiple consumption activities not specifically addressed by a church’s doctrinal teachings. In the pursuit of personal devotion, products from an array of religious orientations, not just one’s own, may yield satisfaction. Social influence on consumer behavior, deriving from both informational and normative motivations, may take on the added weight in a religious context.

To gauge more systematically whether these represent meaningful religious influences to specific consumers in a contemporary consumption environment, and to allow for the emergence of other as-yet-unpredicted categories, focus groups and depth interviews were conducted among a total of 71 consumers of varied demographic characteristics, religious affiliations and levels of commitment in a major Southern metropolitan area. Identification and examples of the types of influence observed follows: **Doctrinal** (influence stemming from specific formal doctrines or teachings of a religious organization or the direct recommendation of a pastor or other church official to buy or not to buy); **Personal Devotion** (items purchased or consumption activities engaged in to facilitate, or avoided out of a concern that they may hinder, private worship or meditation); **Value** (influence stemming from values that are at least partially derived from or associated with the consumer’s religious affiliation but not from formally stated rules or doctrines); **Social** (purchase or consumption occurs with or for other members of a consumer’s religious organization or reflects influence stemming from a desire to conform to or dissociate from the consumption behaviors of others in a religious group motivated by interpersonal perceptions, acceptance or relationships). In addition to evidence of the above categories, consistent with the suggestions of earlier writers, a distinct **aesthetic** influence of religion emerged in multiple responses, reflecting a desire to enjoy the aesthetic or cultural properties associated with religious products or artifacts.

Further understanding of the level of such influence in the population, its variability across religious and demographic groups, and its relationship with other constructs requires the development of scale items to tap the various categories. With this in mind, a Likert-scale development procedure constituted the next stage of the research. A total of 350 statements was generated (35 in each of the ten categories derived from the five motivational and two valence conditions). Forty-nine undergraduate business students completed the 350 statements. Data were then factor analyzed via principal-components analysis. A ten-factor solution explained 65.37 percent of the variance across the 350 items. For each of the ten factors, the highest loadings were associated with one of the ten categories, affording preliminary evidence that consumers are able to make meaningful distinctions across the categories. The five items in each category that had the highest loadings but no large cross-loadings were retained for the final scale. Retained items had loadings on the relevant factors ranging from .50 to .92, with no cross-loadings higher than .40. In each category the five items yielded adequate reliability (Cronbach alpha values from .72 to .95). Thus the items retained as measures of the ten categories of religious influence appear, in this sample, to be valid and reliable indicators of the relevant constructs.

In the final stage of the research, the scale was administered to a demographically and religiously heterogeneous sample of 444 consumers. Religious affiliations included 18 distinct Christian denominations, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, “none,” “agnostic,” and some who used more generic terms such as “Christian,” “Protestant” or “nondenominational.” Reliability was adequate (.65 to .86). The greatest level of religious influence arose in the value-positive category (mean 5.26), with the value-negative and personal-devotion-positive results also falling slightly on the “agree” side of the scale (4.63 and 4.59, respectively). The lowest result arose for doctrinal-negative influence (2.93). Other influence categories scored in the 3-4 range. The difference between positive and negative was significant in each motivational category, with the difference favoring positive influence in all categories except aesthetic. Gender differences arose in six categories, with females experiencing more personal-devotion-positive, value positive, value negative and aesthetic-positive influence, and males showing higher levels of personal-devotion-negative and social-negative influence. Marital status led to significant differences in all categories, with the means higher for married than for single respondents except in the personal-devotion-negative category. Age was positively correlated with religious influence in seven of the ten categories. Income was positively correlated with only value-positive influence. Ethnic groups differed significantly in four categories. Religious groups differed significantly across nine of the ten categories (all except value positive). The level of religious activity (number of services attended) was significantly positively correlated with eight of the categories.

Results confirm that religious influence is a multidimensional construct. In both qualitative and empirical results, support is found for the existence of positive and negative influences spanning five distinct motivations: doctrinal, personal devotion, value, social and aesthetic. Scales are developed and validated that provide a basis for the future measurement of these constructs. The levels of influence are shown to vary across demographic and religious groups in ways that warrant further consideration among those within religious or marketing organizations whose efforts are affected by the relationship between religion and consumption.

REFERENCES

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