Brands: the Opiate of the Non-Religious Masses?

Ron Shachar, Tel Aviv University, Israel and Duke University, USA
Tulin Erdem, New York University, USA
Gavan J. Fitzsimons, Duke University, USA
Keisha Cutright, Duke University, USA

Researchers have suggested that people often form religious-like relationships with brands. The popular press has even proclaimed brands as the “new religion”. This research aims to understand whether or not there is a significant relationship between consumers’ religiosity and their reliance on brand name products. First, we analyze the relationship between religiosity and brand reliance in the U.S. at a macro level, using state level data. Next, we examine the relationship between individual levels of religiosity and brand reliance. Our results suggest that non-religious consumers rely on brands more than religious consumers, particularly when income is high.

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Brands have become a ubiquitous presence in today’s world, affecting the everyday lives of consumers in many ways. Beyond providing general product benefits, brands maintain unique personalities (Aaker 1997) that consumers often capitalize on to express who they are to themselves and others in their lives (Aaker 1999). The personalities of brands also seem to enable their ascent to cult-like, or even religious, status in the lives of their consumers, supporting the notion that the sacred realm of religion and the secular world of consumption are often intertwined (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). The popular press has even proclaimed brands as the “new religion” (Financial Times 2001).

While the potential relationship between religion and brands has generally been acknowledged, systematic research on the relationship between religiosity and the importance of brands in consumers’ lives is noticeably lacking (but, see Rindfleisch, Burroughs & Wong’s working paper for a recent exception). Thus, this research focuses on the relationship between religiosity and one indicator of the importance of brands in consumers’ lives that we refer to as “brand reliance”. We define brand reliance as the degree to which consumers prefer branded goods over goods without a well-known national brand (e.g., generics). Our objective is to establish that a relationship exists whereby individuals with different levels of religious commitment (religiosity) differ systematically in their brand reliance.

In our first study, we examine the relationship between religiosity and brand reliance at a macro level, using state level data. We find that higher religiosity, as measured by the number of congregations and self-reported church attendance, is associated with lower levels of brand reliance (as measured by two separate indexes reflecting the relative presence of brand focused vs. non-brand focused retailers). Further, we find that this result is strongest in high income states.

In our second study, we complete a micro-level analysis. We measure brand reliance by asking participants to make a series of choices among branded and generic products. We then relate the responses to individuals’ reported church attendance. Consistent with the macro-level analysis results, we find that higher religiosity is associated with lower brand reliance, but only among high income individuals.

Given these two highly consistent studies, we aim to conduct additional research to allow us to better understand the factors underlying this relationship between religiosity and brand reliance. We speculate that religion and brands satisfy a common need, and it is this underlying need that links religiosity and brand reliance. For example, our findings may reflect differential strategies for maintaining a sense of belonging between religious and nonreligious individuals. For the religious, this need may be fulfilled through attendance at religious services. For the nonreligious, this need may be fulfilled by belonging to brand communities.

We also aim to better understand why we observe the link between brand reliance and religiosity largely for high income consumers. A number of plausible explanations are possible for this finding, but perhaps the most intuitive and parsimonious is that high income consumers have larger consideration sets. In other words, their income allows for the consideration of a much broader range of products than that of low income consumers. This leaves room for factors such as religiosity to influence their choices. Alternatively, low-income and high-income individuals may have qualitatively different consumption goals. Low-income individuals may use consumption as largely a means of survival. Conversely, high-income individuals may use consumption to serve higher-order goals (e.g. need for belonging, risk compensation) that can also be achieved through religion.

In addition to exploring the psychological explanations for the observed effects, future research might also explore the implications to firms. For example, retailers who are interested in promoting their store brands (versus the national brands) might consider using physical cues that remind shoppers of their religious beliefs in the store (e.g. dramatic cathedral ceilings at the entrance, religious-like music). Similarly, they might consider advertising their store brands through media that attract a greater percentage of religious consumers, or using spokespersons that are associated with strongly held religious beliefs. Conversely, retailers that focus on national brands or place lower strategic importance on their store brand lines should probably avoid such cues and outlets.

In terms of what implications our results may have for consumers, one could argue that our findings should not promote any changes in their behaviors if the status quo leads to the greatest consumer satisfaction. Thus, future research should determine whether or not the nonreligious are more satisfied after buying a brand, while the religious are more satisfied after buying a store brand.

In sum, this research has identified what we believe to be a very interesting empirical phenomenon, supported by two distinct methodological approaches. We believe this evidence will be of great interest to the consumer research community, and hope that it will spur research as to why there is a relationship between religiosity and brand reliance, as well as how an understanding of this relationship might best be applied.
References
Rindfleisch, Aric, James Burroughs, & Nancy Wong (working paper), “Religiosity and Brand Commitment”.

In Death and in Love: Sacred Trade-offs in the Death Care and Wedding Industries
A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA
Derick Davis, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Funerals and weddings represent two of the largest purchases consumers make. In the United States, the average funeral costs $6,500 (and can reach $10,000 with burial costs) and the average wedding costs more than $27,000 (AARP 2000; FTC.gov; Rheault 2007).

Funeral and wedding purchases pose unique challenges; consumers typically have little purchasing experience and make decisions under time pressure, while subject to the scrutiny of friends, family, and acquaintances. Furthermore, the respective industries have been subject to criticism for unscrupulous sales and marketing practices (e.g., Mitford 1998; Boden 2003; Mead 2007).

We examine a particular challenge facing consumers purchasing funerals or weddings. Consumers purchasing products and services in these domains are reluctant to engage in price-based trade-offs, which we contend puts them at risk of overspending. A growing literature examines how consumers are unwilling to engage in trade-offs between the secular (e.g., money) and the sacred (e.g., love and commitment; Baron and Spranca 1997; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Fiske and Tetlock 1997; McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel 2003).

Such taboo trade-offs produce a variety of negative outcomes, including moral distress, moral contamination, decision avoidance, and decision refusal (Tetlock, et al. 2000; McGraw and Tetlock 2005; see also Luce, Bettman, and Payne 1997). We examine how price-based trade-off avoidance leads to non-compensatory decision strategies and spendthrift decisions.

A funeral purchase implicitly requires a price be placed on a deceased loved one’s memorial. A wedding purchase similarly requires a price be placed on a ceremony that represents a couple’s love and commitment. We argue such purchases are seen as secular-sacred transactions and lead to price-based trade-off avoidance. Consumers do not want to undervalue sacredly held values by trading off price versus other attributes, such as product quality or quantity. Thus, consumers engage in non-compensatory choice strategies and chose premium options rather than balancing price against other attributes.

We present three studies that demonstrate consumers’ greater willingness to pay for death care and wedding products compared to other routine purchase situations. We also show the effect is due, in part, to consumers’ reluctance to engage in price-quality trade-offs.

Study 1 demonstrates that consumers are willing to pay more for products that are associated with funerals and weddings than no specific association, even when those products are judged to be of the same quality. Participants stated their willingness to pay (WTP) for four products (e.g., candles, thank you cards) that were randomly assigned for use in either a funeral, a wedding, or for “any reason” (control). Participants’ WTP for products used as part of a funeral ($M=31.42) or memorial service ($M=35.21) were significantly higher than for the control ($M=$18.23). Despite higher WTP values for funeral- and wedding-related products, judged quality of these products did not differ from control.

Study 2 used a matching versus choice procedure (Slovic 1991; see also Luce, Payne, and Bettman 1999) to examine consumer’s unwillingness to make price-based trade-offs in funeral purchase decisions. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control or memorial dinner condition and were presented with two product options for use at the dinner. Respondents were asked to state the missing price (taboo trade-off) or quantity (routine trade-off) that would make them indifferent between low and high quality options. They were then asked to choose between the two matched options.

When faced with a price vs. quantity trade-off, participants in the funeral condition chose the high-quality/price option more often than control (68% vs. 51%) and chose more of the same product when faced with a price vs. quantity trade-off (75% vs. 38%). But consistent with our hypothesis that non-price-based trade-offs are not taboo, quantity-quality trade-off choices did not differ between conditions (68% vs. 65% for the funeral and control condition, respectively).

Study 3 examined the effect of different techniques to reduce spendthrift preferences for high-price high-quality goods with sacred associations. Participants were instructed to perform a price matching task between lower-quality/lower-priced thank you cards and a higher-quality option with no price listed (as in Study 2). The cards were to be sent to attendees of a wedding or funeral. Participants in the control condition were subsequently asked to make a choice between either option. The debiasing conditions were designed to encourage price-quality trade-offs by presenting either sacred or economic reasons to make price-based trade-offs. First, the difficult nature of price-based trade-offs in sacred domains was described, and the subsequent inclination of consumers to choose premium options was stated. Respondents in the economic debias condition were told that rational consumers recognize trade-offs are necessary in all situations including sacred events. Respondents in the sacred debias condition were told that no amount of money captures the importance of the situation, and therefore the meaning of the event should not be expressed through spending. In both conditions, participants were then encouraged, in light of this information, to treat the choice between the matched options as they would any run-of-the-mill purchasing decision.

Participants in the control condition chose the high-price, high-quality option 86% of the time, which is consistent with findings from Study 2. Those who read the economic debiasing statement chose the high-price, high-quality option 60% of the time, whereas participants...