Wwjd? the Effect of Religious Mindsets on Consumer Responses to Organizational Failures

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This paper explores the implications of religious mindsets on consumer behavior. Specifically, we demonstrate that religious mindsets promote increased forgiveness following an organizational failure. This forgiveness in turn leads to greater satisfaction and behavioral intentions, but is conditional on a recovery effort that is high in socio-emotional sincerity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers encounter religious stimuli on a regular basis, not only through interactions with religious firms, but also via proximity to religious institutions, or exposure to religious music, symbols, or phrases that bear religious connotations such as the bumper sticker “WWJD?” (What Would Jesus Do?). As such, consumers may be influenced by religious mindsets more often than firms are aware, so it is important to determine how such mindsets affect consumer attitudes and behaviors. Mindsets are temporary, situation-activated frames of mind. In this paper, we focus on the effects of a religious mindset. We argue that, following an organizational failure, consumers in a religious mindset will demonstrate greater willingness to forgive the organization.

Forgiveness entails a transgressed victim’s reduction of negative (and usually increase in positive) thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behaviors toward a transgressing offender (Lawler-Row et al. 2007). Forgiveness is highly valued by religions and religious individuals (Barnes and Brown 2010). Forgiveness, however, can be conditional on repentance and other criteria. For example, in Judaism, an offended individual is only obligated to forgive if their transgressor has gone through the process of teshuvah, which includes an expression of remorse, compensation to the victim for the transgression, and a commitment to avoid repeating the offense (Rye et al. 2000).

Identified recovery tactics include apology, explanation, and compensation. Broadly, these take two forms: financial and socio-emotional (Smith and Bolton 1998). From a religious standpoint, we argue that socio-emotional recovery (implying remorse and repentance) may be more likely to prompt forgiveness than would financial recovery.

Together, we therefore hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumers in a religious mindset (vs. not) will respond more favorably to brand failure when accompanied by recovery (vs. not).

**Hypothesis 2:** For consumers in a religious mindset, socio-emotional recovery will be more effective than financial recovery.

**Hypothesis 3:** The positive effects of a religious mindset will be mediated by forgiveness.

Experimental Results

Across five experiments, we demonstrate that religious mindsets (as compared to neutral mindsets) promote greater consumer satisfaction and intentions with an organization following an organizational failure. Studies 1A and 1B employ pre-/post- designs to show that for participants drawn from both Judeo-Christian (1A) and non-Judeo-Christian (1B) populations those who are in a religious mindset (induced via sentence scramble) will demonstrate greater increases in satisfaction post-recovery. Studies 1A and 1B used recoveries that included apologies (socio-emotional) as well as compensation (financial) elements.

Study 2 used a religiously-themed advertisement to induce religious mindsets, while disentangling consumer responses to socio-emotional versus financial elements of firms’ recovery efforts. This study demonstrated an interaction between mindset and socio-emotional content, but not between mindset and financial content, supporting H2. Specifically, participants in religious mindsets responded more negatively to recoveries with low socio-emotional content and more positively to recoveries with high socio-emotional content.

Study 3 followed up on study 2 by only manipulating socio-emotional recoveries, and extending beyond the restaurant context employed in studies 1A, 1B, and 2 to an athletic context. All participants then read a scenario that described a star player making costly mistakes that ultimately lead to a favored team losing an important game. The player later addresses the media in an apologetic or non-apologetic manner. Participants in a religious mindset reported more positive intentions following a strong socio-emotional recovery, as well as more negative intentions following a weak socio-emotional recovery.

Study 4 was designed to explore whether costliness of failure moderated the effects of religious mindsets and also to demonstrate the effects of religious mindsets in response to a real failure. Participants completed a survey that had an element which electronically failed, following which an error screen appeared that was apologetic or not. Costliness was manipulated by having to re-do the task associated with the error. There were no significant interactive effects of cost, but rather a 3-way interaction between mindset, socio-emotional recovery, and perceptions of message sincerity. Those in a religious mindset who perceived the message as insincere more negatively rated the organization.

Studies 1B, 2, 3, and 4 all measured forgiveness and found that these feelings mediated the reported effects.

General Discussion

Across five studies, we demonstrate that a religious (vs. neutral) mindset drives more favorable responses to recovery following brand failure. Importantly, consumers in a religious mindset respond more positively to a recovery with sincere socio-emotional content, and negatively to a recovery with insincere socio-emotional content. In the absence of recovery, a religious mindset does not affect consumer response (such as reduced satisfaction with a brand failure)—pointing to the role of forgiveness prompted by firm recovery efforts.

REFERENCES


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