When Moral Mindsets Increase Unethical Consumption: the Influence of Religion and Moral Emotions on Luxury Consumption

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Through two studies, our research explores the relationship between religiosity and luxury consumption. Study 1 shows that religiosity influences negative moral emotions, which negatively influences purchase intentions and perceived morality of luxury brands. Study 2 shows that a moral mindset decreases negative emotions and increases purchase intentions for religious consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
While research has extensively explored religiosity’s influence on materialism (e.g., Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; LaBarbera and Gurhan 1997; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2005, 2009), there has yet to be an examination of how religiosity influences luxury consumption. Religious scripture often refers to living life simply, being content with what one has, giving up control to a higher power, and suppressing desires for buying goods and performing actions just for show (i.e., conspicuous consumption) (Hunt and Penwell 2008; Schmidt et al. 2014). These values are in direct opposition to those held by consumers in pursuit of heightened self-esteem through the consumption of luxury brands.

Thus, our research fulfills four purposes: (1) identifying the relationship among religiosity (both dimensions of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity) and luxury consumption, (2) understanding how moral emotions drive attitudes toward luxury consumption and associated morality perceptions (i.e., examining moral emotions as a mediator to the relationship between religiosity and luxury consumption), (3) testing the moderating influence of moral versus marketplace mindsets on luxury consumption attitudes, and (4) determining specific reasons for luxury consumption, as moderated by religiosity level.

Morality and Luxury Consumption
Luxury goods, are those which “confer prestige on their owners, apart from any functional utility” (Grossman and Shapiro 1988: 82). These goods are more likely to be purchased for their symbolic value than non-luxury products because of their ability to signal status and prestige (Dubois, Laurent, and Czellar 2001; Geiger-Oneto et al. 2013; Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009). In addition to symbolic value (i.e., conspicuousness value), Vigneron and Johnson (1999) identify four other sources of value that luxury goods provide their owners as compared to non-luxury goods: unique value, social value, emotional value, and quality.

In addition to providing these five sources of value, luxury products can also be a symbol for moral qualities (Baron 1999), which influence one’s moral self-image (Stellar and Willer 2014). Baron (1999) describes that consumers voice their morals with their wallets, such that they purchase or do not purchase goods (or an entire brand portfolio) given fit or dissimilarity with their morals. Thus, if luxury consumption is viewed as a moral (immoral) behavior, consumers “vote” with their wallets to purchase (or not purchase) the luxury good.

Religiosity & Luxury Consumption
Over 70% of consumers worldwide adhere to some sort of religious belief (Hunt and Penwell 2008). Additionally, explicit references to materialism as well as pride-based consumption and status consumption are made in religious scripture (Schmidt et al. 2014), which suggests that a consumer’s religious background provides insight into motives for and response to luxury consumption. Specifically, Western religious scripture advocates against materialism and pridelful consumption, with pride even being one of Catholicism’s seven deadly sins. Religion serves as one of the most enduring sources of core values for consumers, which influences consumption motives, even at a subconscious level (Mathras et al. 2016; Minton and Kahle 2014).

Moral Emotions as a Mediator
Haidt (2003) describes moral emotions as “those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (p. 853). Moral emotions can reflect positive affect (e.g., awe, gratitude, compassion, love) or negative affect (e.g., guilt, shame, regret, remorse) (Haidt 2003). While positive affect can be experienced from improved self-esteem as consumers purchase items they feel reflect their personal identity well, it is possible that consumption of luxury goods could lead to negative affect as a result of post-purchase regret.

Such negative affect is emphasized across religious affiliations, with sin-associated consequences in Western religions and detachment from the self/cycles of rebirth in Eastern religions (Hunt and Penwell 2008; Schmidt et al. 2014). Given these relationships, and the prior theorizing on the relationship between religiosity and luxury consumption, it is expected that negative moral emotions, but not positive moral emotions, mediate the relationship between religiosity and evaluations of luxury products. Thus:

Hypothesis 1: Negative moral emotions mediate the relationship between religiosity and evaluative measures of luxury products.

Conspicuousness Value as a Mediator
Purchasing high-priced luxury goods, particularly for the purpose of advertising one’s status is likely to be considered indulgent consumption behavior. Previous research reveals that feelings of guilt and regret are common emotional consequences of indulgent consumption for some consumers (Keaveney, Huber, and Herrmann 2007; Ramanathan and Williams 2007). For example, religious consumers may view the purchase of luxury goods as being wasteful unless they are able to provide a sound justification for purchasing such goods (Schwarz and Xi 2011). Additionally, both Eastern and Western religious scripture discourages materialism and prideful consumption, with pride being one of Catholicism’s seven deadly sins. (Hunt and Penwell 2008).

To reduce these negative emotions, religious consumers may justify the purchase of luxury goods by focusing on product quality, social benefits, or that they deserve a high-priced luxury good (emotional value). Therefore, while other motivations for purchasing luxury exist, the conspicuous value of luxury products to display one’s wealth, status and power is more likely to be linked to negative moral emotions than other reasons.

Hypothesis 2: Conspicuousness mediates the relationship between religiosity and negative moral emotions for luxury products.

Moral versus Marketplace Mindsets
A moral mindset represents thinking that is ethical, virtuous, and worthy, while a marketplace mindset focuses on economic attainment, a prosperous free-market, and commercial advancement. Research assessing moral mindsets, especially in comparison to marketplace mindsets, is very limited (Ben-Nun and Levitan 2011) and mostly examines direct effects of priming moral mindsets on general...
moral judgments (c.f., VanBavel et al. 2012; Wheatley and Haidt 2005).

Interestingly, emphasizing moral goals can reduce cognitive dissonance by reducing concern about overspending (i.e., attainment of moral goals) (Förster 2009), which is directly reflective of luxury consumption. Research also suggests such assessment of the future (e.g., with goals) serves as what they term a “moral regulatory function” where consumers use a projection tactic to imagine their future self in judging and deciding on current morally questionable behaviors (Klein, Lowrey, and Otnes 2015). Therefore, priming religious consumers that have specific, easily attainable moral goals should result in increased luxury consumption because of heightened awareness of one’s positive self-actualize. In contrast, consumers that are less religious do not follow explicit moral guidelines and may instead indicate decreased luxury consumption desires after exposure to moral mindset primes given negative affect about one’s self.

Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Moral (marketplace) mindsets increase luxury evaluations for highly (less) religious consumers.

Study 1: Mediation Through Motives and Moral Emotions

This study identifies the role of negative moral emotions (H1) in the relationship between religiosity and luxury consumption. In addition, the role of conspicuousness as a reason for luxury consumption is explored (H2).

Method

Students (n=167,Mage = 21.0, 49% female) at a Mountain West university completed a survey which asked about their purchase intentions and moral affect for a luxury perfume, reasons for purchasing a luxury perfume, attitudes towards luxury branded products in general, and, lastly, religiosity.

Results

Mediation through Moral Emotions. First, simple mediation through moral emotions was tested. The relationship between the I/E religiosity interaction term and purchase intentions was mediated by negative moral emotions (CI: -.01, .13) but not positive moral emotions (CI: -.01, .07). Similarly, the relationship between the I/E religiosity interaction term and perceived morality of purchasing luxury perfume was mediated by negative moral emotions (CI: -.01, .04) but not positive moral emotions (CI: -.01, .04). Consumers that were high in both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity had the most negative moral emotions, while it was the consumers that were low in intrinsic and high in extrinsic religiosity (i.e., behaving religiously just for show) that experienced the least negative moral emotions.

Serial Mediation through Reasons and Negative Emotions. A series of regression models were used to determine if the I/E religiosity interaction term significantly influenced any of the five reasons for purchasing luxury products (perceived social value, conspicuousness, uniqueness, emotional value, quality). The I/E religiosity interaction term only significantly influenced reasoning to purchase luxury perfume because of its perceived conspicuousness (β = -.70, p < .01). Given that conspicuousness was the only reason significantly influenced by the I/E religiosity interaction term, only this reason is explored further with serial mediation analyses using Hayes’ PROCESS macro (Model 6). Results show that the only significant serial mediation model is through conspicuousness reasoning as well as negative moral emotions. See Figure 1a for a complete a list of coefficients for all three dependent variables (purchase intentions, perceived morality and attitude towards luxury goods).

Study 2

This study seeks to replicate the findings of Study 1 in addition to examining moderation effects with mindset type – moral or marketplace (H3a). It is expected that religiosity is positively correlated with luxury consumption when consumers are primed with a moral mindset, but the opposite pattern of effects occurs when consumers are primed with a marketplace mindset.

Method

Respondents (n=142, Mage = 48.2, 54% female) were recruited online panel. Respondents were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (mindset: moral, marketplace) between-subjects design. After exposure to condition, participants proceeded to indicate their purchase intentions and moral affect for two product categories: luxury perfume and luxury sunglasses. In addition, respondents were asked to evaluate reasons for purchasing a luxury good, attitudes towards luxury branded products in general, and, lastly, religiosity.

Independent Variables. To manipulate mindset, respondents completed a word unscrambling task that contained 10 scrambled words associated with either a morality or marketplace mindset. All other measures were identical to those used in study 1.

Results

Mediation through Moral Emotions. A series of hierarchical regression models were used to examine direct effects of religiosity and mindset as well as the interaction of these variables on the dependent variables. Analyses were run for luxury perfume first and then replicated with luxury sunglasses. The interaction of intrinsic religiosity and experimental condition (moral vs. market mindset) significantly influenced consumers’ intent to purchase a luxury perfume (β = -.19, p < .01), perceived morality of purchasing luxury perfume (β = -.18, p < .05), and attitude towards luxury products (β = -.17, p < .05). In addition, the interaction of extrinsic religiosity and experimental condition significantly influenced consumers’ intent to purchase a luxury perfume (β = -.23, p < .01), perceived morality of purchasing luxury perfume (β = -.19, p < .05), and attitude towards luxury products (β = -.22, p < .05). Because both types of religious orientation (intrinsic and extrinsic) were found to influence the dependent variables in a similar manner, a composite religiosity variable was created which combined both orientations. This new composite religiosity variable was used in all subsequent analyses.

Next, a mediation analysis was utilized which determined that the relationship between the religiosity x mindset interaction term on intent to purchase a luxury perfume was significantly mediated by negative moral emotions (CI: -.30, -.06) but not positive moral emotions (CI: -.07, .14). Consumers that are high in religiosity and primed with a moral mindset have the least negative moral emotions as a result of purchasing luxury perfume, while it is the consumers that are less religious and primed with a moral mindset (i.e., behaving religiously just for show) that experienced the most negative moral emotions.

Similarly, the relationship between the religiosity x mindset (moral vs. marketplace) interaction term and perceived morality of purchasing luxury perfume was also only mediated by negative moral emotions (CI: -.15, -.01). The influence of the religiosity x mindset interaction term on general attitudes toward luxury consumption was also only significantly mediated by negative moral emotions (CI: -.18, -.02). Identical results were found using luxury sunglasses as the product category.
Serial Mediation through Conspicuousness and Negative Emotions. Results indicate that conspicuousness as well as negative moral emotions mediate the relationship between the religiosity x mindset interaction term and luxury perfume purchase intentions, perceived morality and attitude towards luxury goods. See Figure 1b for complete list of coefficients for all three dependent variables (purchase intentions, morality and attitude towards luxury goods).

Discussion

Similar to Study 1, negative moral emotions (but not positive) as well as luxury motives continue to mediate the relationship between religiosity and luxury consumption evaluations. Also, in support of H3, mindset type (moral vs. marketplace) interacts with religiosity to influence negative moral emotions and luxury product evaluations. As expected, highly religious consumers that are primed with a moral (marketplace) mindset report lower (higher) negative affect and, accordingly, have higher (lower) evaluations of luxury products. The opposite pattern of effects occurs for less religious consumers.

General Discussion

This research provides a novel perspective on luxury consumption in showing that moral emotions are a driving factor in evaluations of luxury products, and consumers’ religiosity influences these emotions. First, the relationship among religiosity and luxury consumption evaluations was explored to find that consumers high in both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity had the poorest evaluations. The highest luxury product evaluations came from consumers low in intrinsic but high in extrinsic religiosity (i.e., partaking in religiosity mostly just for show). Second, mediation through moral emotions revealed that negative (but not positive) moral emotions influenced luxury consumption evaluations (inclusive of perceptions of luxury consumption being a moral issue). Third, the moderating influence of moral/marketplace mindset was explored, to show that, interestingly, moral mindsets produced fewer negative moral emotions and more positive evaluations of luxury products for consumers high in religiosity.

Of particular interest for theory is the counterintuitive finding that a moral mindset actually improves evaluation of what some would consider an immoral behavior (luxury consumption). Previous research has found that beliefs regarding consumption that originate from religious scripture should result in religious consumers having more negative moral emotions toward luxury consumption (Westaby 2005). However, the opposite was found in our studies – priming a moral mindset leads to fewer negative moral emotions and more positive evaluations of luxury products. In terms of theory, our findings suggest the presence of a moral halo effect, such that priming a moral mindset makes religious consumers feel better about themselves and this halo then transfers to evaluation of other attitude objects that previously were perceived as immoral, including luxury products (as the results of Study 1 show).

Additionally, another interesting finding from this research is the mediating role of negative moral emotions but no mediation with positive moral emotions. Haidt (2003) described that moral emotions encompass both positive and negative elements. While, we expected that negative moral emotions would play a more prominent role in luxury product evaluations given the emphasis in sin and detachment in religious scripture (Hunt and Penwell 2008; Schmidt et al. 2014), our findings are still fascinating given that priming a particular mindset produces more positive evaluations of luxury consumption for some consumers. Suggesting that a much larger portion of consumer reasoning for consumption is driven by avoidance of these negative moral emotions (i.e. regret and guilt).

REFERENCES


