

The Influence of Religion on Sustainable Attitudes and Product Choice

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of religious affiliation and degree of religiosity on sustainable attitudes and product choice. With over 70% of the world adhering to one of the seven main world religions and spending on sustainability in the billions of dollars, an understanding of the relationship between religion and sustainability is crucial. This research investigates differences among religious affiliations and varying levels of religiosity through a survey measuring religious preferences, desirability of advertisements for sustainable products, and attitudes toward sustainability. Results from this exploratory research show few significant differences, other than highly religious consumers are less materialistic. Avenues for further research are provided.

Introduction

Recent news highlights the influence of religious affiliation on a variety of consumption related experiences including development of restaurant menus (Moon, 2011), consumers' discretionary income (Leonhardt, 2011), apparel preferences (Bailey, 2011), and general business opportunities (Zoll, 2010).

Religious affiliation is well known for contributing to a consumer's core values (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004). One of the pioneering psychology of religion scholars identifies the relationship between God and nature as one of the key differences among religions (James, 1902/2004). Prior research also shows distinct differences among religious affiliations in doctrinal prescriptions regarding environmental and sustainable attitudes and behaviors (Sarre, 1995). The differentiating element of sustainability related prescriptions is directly relevant to consumer behavior as spending on sustainable consumption is expected to increase from \$28 billion in 2010 to \$60 billion by 2014 (Chestney, 2010). With over 70% of people in the world adhering to one of the seven prominent world religions, understanding the theoretical relationship between religious affiliation as an individual difference variable and consumption behaviors, and more specifically sustainable consumption behaviors, is important (Hunt & Penwell, 2008).

Methods

This study utilizes a student sample ($N=101$) that were 49% female, 61% Caucasian, had an average age of 21, and an average of 15 years of schooling. Participants completed a Qualtrics survey. Each participant was randomly assigned to either a prime or no prime condition. In the prime condition, each participant either unscrambled religious words (god, heaven, bible) or wrote about his or her religious beliefs for one minute. Participants viewed a series of five sustainability-related advertisements and were asked to indicate attitudes toward and purchase intentions of the products in the ads. Following the ads, participants were asked to describe personal sustainable behaviors, current and childhood religious affiliation, and degree of adherence to religious beliefs.

References

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Ad #1



Ad #2

Results

Key findings:

- No significant difference in religiosity between religious prime and no prime conditions, $t(96)=.474$, $p=.636$.
- No significant difference in attitude toward advertisements or purchase intentions for sustainable product advertisements (ads #1-5).
- Highly religious consumers are less materialistic than less religious consumers, $t(95) = -2.453$, $p=.016$.

Qualitative responses to relationship between religion and sustainability:

From religious respondents

- "It's important in being good stewards of creation, but not to the point of worshipping the earth or forgetting that God made the world for people to use and enjoy (not waste though)."
- "It is important that we respect and honor the blessings and gifts that God has given us and we do that by treating them well."

From non-religious respondents

- "Sustainability effects how long we can stay and enjoy ourselves on this planet."
- "Sustainability will make the Earth last longer, so if the point of life is to live longer and have more generations of offspring that it is very important."

Discussion

Results from this study show that views of sustainable advertisements do not differ among religiosity levels or religious affiliations, though this result could be due more to inadequate variability in the student sample. The most prominent finding from this study shows that highly religious consumers are less likely to be materialistic suggesting an attitude of sustainability related to acquisition of fewer belongings. Qualitative responses suggest that both religious and non-religious consumers have a desire to be sustainable but for different reasons – religious consumers want to care for God's creation (assuming a Western religious perspective), and non-religious consumers want to preserve the planet for generations to come.

Prior research conducted by this researcher using a nationally representative sample has shown that non-religious respondents are positively correlated with holding sustainable consumption attitudes (SCAs) and participating in sustainable consumption behaviors (SCBs), while denominations supporting an inerrant view of the scripture, such as Baptists and Presbyterians, are negatively correlated with SCAs and SCBs. Contrary to expectations in this prior research, higher religiosity is correlated with higher participation in SCAs and SCBs. Possibly, consumers of higher religiosity feel a commitment to care for God's creation as has been supported in previous studies (Noomene, 2011). Additionally, other variables besides religion were found to increase participation in SCAs and SCBs such as being female, being more liberal, and having higher education.

In summary, this research is still in the exploratory stage. The first stage of this research (the SCA and SCB study described in the previous paragraph) was conducted using secondary data. The second stage of this research (the student sample described here) was an attempt to collect primary data, though the results show that a different demographic sample may provide more beneficial results. The next stage of this research seeks primary data collection but among a more representative group of the consumer population.



Ad #3



Ad #4



Ad #5

Why This Research Matters

- Over 70% of the world is religious.
- \$60 billion of spending on sustainability in US by 2014.
- An understanding of WHY consumers will or will not participate in sustainable behaviors and purchase sustainable products provides insight into how to preserve the planet for generations to come.



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