

Chapter 96

Superfluous or Moderation?

The Effect of Religious Value on Conspicuous Consumption Behavior for Luxury Products

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors focus on the aspects of religious belief that may affect consumption behavior. Previous studies have clearly stated that the study of religion's influence on consumer behavior is still under-researched (Lindridge, 2005; Mokhlis, 2009, 2010). The premise lies in the view that culture is a way of life, and thus, the authors explore whether or not that suggests the same for religion, and if it is, how does religion predict the conspicuous behavior of people towards the purchase of luxury goods? In specific, the authors are interested in exploring the level and intensity of religiosity on conspicuous consumption. Therefore, it is significant to study "religiosity" as one of the predictive factors of a consumerism culture that may help explain why people engage in conspicuous consumption. The chapter provides a concluding remark by highlighting the practical aspects on domestic or international marketers who wish to market their luxury products in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for luxury products is growing as individuals' buying power increases and their economic conditions improve (Kuisma, 2008).

There is an increasing demand for prestigious goods, especially imported goods. As a consequence, more new luxury brands are emerging on the market than ever before (Kuisma, 2008). Conspicuous consumption refers to people buying

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prestige products in order to show their status and wealth to the rest of society. Luxury or prestigious purchases can also be services, such as spas, health centers, luxury vacations, and similar items. In the mind of the consumer, luxury means prestige and also high quality. According to Kuisma (2008), previous research in the field of conspicuous consumption looked at the situation wherein rich people spend more of their money on luxury goods than consumers elsewhere. However, the phenomenon is changing; people in developing countries (especially in Asia) who seldom spent their money on luxuries before are now becoming conspicuous consumers, or at least showing certain symptoms of conspicuousness (Kuisma, 2008).

Although religion's impact on consumption-related behavior has been studied in the marketing literature (Mokhlis, 2009), there are many possible reasons why religion has not been examined adequately in consumer behavior literature. Hirschman (1983) suggests one reason for the slow development of literature in this field is that consumer researchers are unaware of the possible links between religion and consumption patterns. Another reason may be that consumer researchers have a prejudice against the topic of religion because it can be a "taboo" subject and too sensitive to investigate. Lastly, Hirschman (1983) claims that religion is so ubiquitous that it may have been simply overlooked by researchers as a variable for investigation in the field of consumer behavior and marketing.

Decades ago, the study on religion and consumer behavior in the marketing field was supported by an analysis conducted by Cutler (1991) that examined the frequency of religion-related papers published in the academic marketing literature from 1956 to 1989. Cutler found only 35 articles that focused on religious beliefs, and most of them (nearly 80%) were published in the 1980s. Essoo and Dibb (2004) claim that the role of religious value systems has not yet been fully acknowledged in consumer research, although researchers have long recognized the significance of religion in

sociology as well as in psychology (Allport, 1950; Pargament & Hahn, 1986). It is clearly noted that to date, consistently only few studies have investigated religion as either a variable in, or a predictor of, consumption patterns. Lindridge (2005) clearly stated that religion's influence on consumer behavior is still under-researched, and supported by Mokhlis (2009, 2010) that only 6 papers out of 35 were specifically identified as falling within the consumer behavior discipline. Hence such gaps in the literature related to the religiosity effects on consumerism and marketing could still be withheld up till now.

Thus, in this study, we will focus on the aspects of religious belief that may affect conspicuous consumption behavior. Culture has many definitions and layers, notably, one of it is religion—as such religious belief is part of culture. Since our premise lies on the view that culture is a way of life, thus we are also interested to explore whether or not that suggest the same for religion—*religion as a way of life*. And if that is the case, how does religion predict the conspicuous behavior of people towards the purchase of luxury goods? In specific, we are interested to explore the level and intensity of religiosity on conspicuous consumption as a specific form of consumer behavior. Therefore, it is significant to study 'religiosity' as one of the predictive factors of a consumerism culture that may help explain why people engage in conspicuous consumption.

In essence, this book chapter is expected to contribute to the body of literature and knowledge of the international marketing and transcultural marketing in the sense that it will be informing the readers about the impact of culture —i.e. religion, and on one type of consumer behavior—conspicuous. Thus, our focus is on the importance of conspicuous consumption where in emerging market such as the Asians, consumers are beginning to engage in buying products that are opulent and luxury in nature. The demand for such products and services are expected to grow as the economic condition of consumers in the

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