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## **Consumer Spirituality and Marketing**

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Over the last ten years, the topic of spirituality has inspired scores of studies in management and related disciplines. Marketing scholars, it seems, have shied away from discussing spirituality for far too long. This paper draws attention to the rising salience of consumers' spiritual needs. A working definition of spirituality and preliminary guidelines for researchers are provided to kick-start research and dialogue in this important area. It is argued that spiritual utility urgently needs to be incorporated along with other utilities when considering product benefits.

### **[to cite]:**

Sudhir Kale (2006) , "Consumer Spirituality and Marketing", in AP - Asia-Pacific Advances in Consumer Research Volume 7, eds. Margaret Craig Lees, Teresa Davis, and Gary Gregory, Sydney, Australia : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 108-110.

### **[url]:**

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## CONSUMER SPIRITUALITY AND MARKETING

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last ten years, the topic of spirituality has inspired scores of studies in management and related disciplines. Marketing scholars, it seems, have shied away from discussing spirituality for far too long. This paper draws attention to the rising salience of consumers' spiritual needs. A working definition of spirituality and preliminary guidelines for researchers are provided to kick-start research and dialogue in this important area. It is argued that spiritual utility urgently needs to be incorporated along with other utilities when considering product benefits.

### CONSUMER SPIRITUALITY AND MARKETING

The concept of spirituality dates back almost two thousand years to St. Paul, but it is only in the last two decades or so that it has been systematically researched in the social sciences. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines human spirit as "the vital principle, the animating force traditionally believed to be within, and the essential nature of every human being." While over two hundred articles have appeared on the topic of spirituality and management between 1999 and 2005, hardly any papers address how spirituality could be harnessed in the marketing context. The small amount of literature that does exist on spirituality and marketing tends to be largely been practitioner-oriented and seems confined to the marketing of churches or cults (Lyon 2000). This article contends that businesses are fast realizing the role of soul and spirit in human consumption and have begun to effectively capitalise on the spiritual needs of consumers even in marketing materialistic products such as sports cars and soft drinks. Marketing scholars, on the other hand, have been slow in exploring the phenomenon of spirituality and in assessing its impact on the marketplace.

Spirituality revolves around the key constructs of meaning and interconnectedness and should therefore form a natural field of inquiry for macro-marketing scholars as well as those interested in post-modern phenomena and marketing (Kale 2004). Spirituality has the potential to explain some of the dynamics between the self and consumption. However, research on spirituality within marketing cannot progress unless there is agreement on the constituents and correlates of spirituality.

### WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Scholars in management, psychology, religion, philosophy, nursing, and counseling have argued for over two decades on the definition of the term spirituality. Confusion between the concepts of spirituality and religion is what mainly fuels this debate (Dialmy 2001; Zinnbauer, Pargament and Scott 1999). In one of the first empirical studies on spirituality and management, Mitroff and Denton (1999a) uncovered some theoretically prescient observations: the respondents in this study differentiated strongly between spirituality and religion. While they viewed religion as a highly inappropriate topic of discourse

in the workplace, spirituality was seen as a highly appropriate subject for discussion. Similar observations were echoed in the work of Roof (1993). In this study, a large number of interviewees felt that religion had an institutional connotation that manifested into the practice of rituals, adhering to dogmas, attending services, and the like. Spirituality, on the other hand, dealt with life's deeper motivations and an emotional connection to God (or creation).

The word *spirituality* comes from the Latin root *spiritus*, meaning breath—the breath of life. Benner (1989) esoterically characterises spirituality as a human response to God's gracious call to a relationship with Him. Beck (1986) and Goldsmith (1992) characterise spirituality as an inner state of being; the heart or force within a person. Schneiders (1989, 684) defines spirituality as "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives," while Myers (1990, 11) describes it as "a continuing search for meaning and purpose in life; an appreciation for the depth of life, the expanse of the universe, and natural forces which operate; a personal belief system."

Based on an exhaustive review of interdisciplinary literature, spirituality has been defined in this article as *an individual's endeavors to explore -- and deeply and meaningfully -- connect one's inner self to the known world and beyond*. This definition somewhat parallels Clark's (1958) concept of religion, which he characterised as "the inner experience of the individual when he senses a Beyond." We shall now briefly explore the key components of this definition. An elaborate description of these components appears in Kale (2004).

*Inner Self.* Key to most discourses on spirituality is the idea of an inner life or inner self. Zukav (1990) characterises the inner self as the invisible realm in which the origins of our deeper understanding are located. Bartunek and Moch (1994) suggest that the notion of inner self involves a sense of one's being or consciousness, and how that being relates to other beings. The inner self could also be visualised as the core from which our most valuable thoughts and feelings originate. It is only when we are in touch with this core that we act with authenticity (Kale 2004).

*Meaning.* The search for meaning in life permeates both spiritual as well as existential discourses. For example, Victor Frankl (1959) has discussed the noölogical dimension of mankind, the innate motivation to find an overarching meaning or purpose in life. Cremins (2000) characterises "search for meaning in life" as the most significant aspect of spirituality. Carroll (1997) views spirituality as a relationship that fosters meaning, purpose, and mission in life.

*Interconnectedness.* The term connectedness or its correlates have been used in almost all descriptions of spirituality (Benjamin and Looby 1998; Mitroff and Denton 1999a; Van Ness 1996). Sass (2000) suggests that

spirituality, throughout the literature, has been depicted as an emphasis on connection and integration. Such connection has been portrayed as the recognition of the ultimate unity of all beings, a sense that there exists an energy that transcends all material categories and concepts. Mitroff and Denton (1999b) acknowledge the significance of interconnection in conceptualizing spirituality as the basic desire to find ultimate meaning in life and to live an *integrated* life (emphasis added).

*The Beyond.* Inherent in most discussions on spirituality is the notion of a supreme power, a superior being, or a transcendental force that provides a sense of purpose for everything and everyone. It is in connection with this “Beyond” that a spiritual experience occurs. A spiritual experience is often accompanied with a sense of awe, wonder, amazement, and joy. Vedic philosophy maintains that experience of the Beyond is the end of duality; a deep realization of the unity of all things and beings.

Spirituality is an exploration of the inner self and a discovery of the interrelationships of that self with the broader reality. Self exploration and integration thus form the two main drivers of spirituality. Goods and services designed and promoted to facilitate this exploration and integration would therefore offer *spiritual utility* to consumers.

#### **SPIRITUALITY AND THE MARKETPLACE**

Spirituality has become big business. Oprah Winfrey, the popular talk-show host, helps millions of viewers “remember their spirit” on a daily basis. A *USA Weekend* poll conducted in July 1998 revealed that 47% of Americans viewed spirituality as the most important element of their happiness. Ray and Anderson (2001) found that over 50 million Americans—and the same number of EU residents—now subscribe to new values and ways of relating when it comes to work, success, consumption, and spirituality. They call this segment “cultural creatives,” a group spread across the largest cities and the smallest towns, spanning all income and socioeconomic strata. Cultural Creatives care deeply about ecology and saving the planet, about relationships, peace, social justice, and about authenticity, self actualization, spirituality and self-expression. They tend to be both inner-directed and socially concerned; they are activists, volunteers and contributors to good causes more than other Americans (Ray and Anderson, 2001).

The aging of consumers in Western societies, coupled with their level of affluence, now permits them *and* the business community the luxury of seeking more meaning in their lives (Brandt 1996). Evidence of meaning-seeking is ubiquitous. A group calling itself the Conscious Business Alliance (CBA) has been set up in the U.S. for the soul purpose of providing spiritual nourishment through business activities. It is an international membership alliance of individuals, businesses, and organisations who share a vision and a commitment to develop a new paradigm for the meaning and nature of work. CBA explores the many ways in which the business community can both enrich and be enriched by the human soul and spirit. In regard to the increasing evidence of spirituality in the Western world, Mariana Caplan (1999, 117) writes:

Over the past 40 years, the West has been met with a

massive influx of spiritual information, currently crowding the pages of popular newspapers, television programmes, and the glossiest mainstream magazines. Meditation classes are offered at the United Nations, Hillary Clinton uses visualisations and relaxation techniques, yoga is taught in many of the world’s largest corporations, and the spiritual lives of celebrities such as Richard Gere, John Travolta and Tom Cruise are the frequent subject of public questioning and curiosity. Not only has mainstream spirituality gained popularity, it has also become big business. The New Age is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and some of the most popular contemporary spiritual teachers and gurus are among the wealthiest men and women in the USA.

A Gallup poll conducted in 1999 asked the question, “Do you feel the need in your life to experience spiritual growth?” 78% of Americans said yes, up from 20% in 1994. Clearly, the market is riper than ever before for offerings that would quench the spiritual thirst of consumers. Marketing scholars need to catch up with these market developments and incorporate spirituality as an important explanatory facet of consumer behavior.

#### **RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This article provides a working definition of spirituality which can be used as a starting point for studying the phenomenon within the marketing context. Scholars are encouraged to provide alternative definitions and to carry out a debate on the merits and drawbacks of the various definitions. Critical to this discourse should be a commitment to avoid the spirituality/religion controversy when it comes to definitions.

It would be interesting to explore the correlates of spirituality with other variables such as personality, nationality, culture, and age. Several interesting issues could be researched. For example, does the incidence of spirituality increase or decrease with economic development? What are the global macro-trends in spirituality and how would these trends impact consumer behavior and marketing practices? What is the relationship between spirituality and consumer identity? Is spirituality increasingly used as a means of identity preservation and as a reaction to deterritorialization?

To fully comprehend the spirituality phenomenon and to explain its dynamics in the marketplace would require considerable research, both qualitative and quantitative. Segmentation models may be designed by incorporating spiritual variables comprising of both beliefs and practices. Market diversification activities of spiritual and religious organisations such as the Vatican, the Hare Krishnas, and the Mormons as well as those of New Age pundits such as Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer could be systematically studied to better understand market dynamics.

As mentioned earlier, it is puzzling that not many marketing scholars are interested in the topic of spirituality. Doctoral dissertations on spirituality are almost unheard of in the halls of marketing academia. There is hardly any scholarly research addressing the role of spirituality in the consumer choice process. These oversights are probably attributable to the slavish insistence on separating spirituality from other elements of life, a phenomenon brought to the fore by Mitroff and Denton (1999a). Given the paucity of research on the topic of spirituality, bountiful opportunities exist for those who wish to make their mark

in this exciting area.

A recommended starting point would be to comprehensively conceptualise the concept of spirituality and delimit its boundaries. Scholars will then need to devise acceptable scales that measure spirituality. While attempts have been made in the management and social psychology literature to develop such scales, (cf. Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Hays, Meador, Branch, and George, 2001; Sass, 2000, Hodge, 2001), the instruments appear lacking in analytical rigor and comprehensiveness. As of today, spirituality is still a slippery construct, and only a systematic program of inquiry will provide meaningful and actionable insights.

### CONCLUSION

It seems that the world is smitten by the spirituality bug and marketing academics are oblivious of this development. Consequently, marketing scholars are largely ignorant about what has brought about the resurgence of spirituality and how this development plays out in the marketplace. Spirituality is increasingly impacting the beliefs and behaviors of consumers the world over. Spiritual motivations are not simply restricted to the choice of a particular sect, guru, or religion. Secular corporate firms are increasingly using spiritual appeals to identify and bond with consumers. The community of marketing scholars needs to urgently comprehend and research the role of spirituality in modern consumption. Management scholars have already taken cognizance of the significance of spirituality, as evidenced by the number of articles on workplace spirituality figuring routinely in contemporary management journals. Journal editors in the field of marketing could help accelerate theory development on spirituality and marketing by inviting and publishing papers exploring spirituality. Doing so will bring us closer to closing the gap between theory and practice.

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