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Spirituality effects on consumption behaviour in the fashion market industry and its importance for the development of successful marketing strategies: A comparative study of female consumers in the UK and Iran

Introduction

This study aims to investigate the effects of spiritual beliefs of consumers on their consumption behaviour in the fashion industry. The lack of research in this field, as well as the growing interest of consumers around the world on spirituality has led to increased interest amongst scholars in a topic and makes this study very significant and timely for the fashion market industry. This investigation aims to compare spiritual consumers from the UK and Iran in order to identify the impact that religious, and socio-cultural beliefs may have on the spiritual consumer's buying patterns. The study will therefore identify appropriate marketing strategies, to enable the development of marketing value prepositions appropriate for this segment

The concept of spirituality dates back to almost two thousand years to St. Paul, but it has only been implemented in social sciences studies in the last two decades (Kale, 2006). In the 20th century, William James and other psychological researchers linked spirituality to an individual's personality and the subsequent actions of that person (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Although it has been accepted that buying behaviours of any individual can reflect on their spiritual beliefs; there has been no theory developed to explain this connection (Belk et al.1989; O'Guinn and Belk 1989, Subrahmanyan & Gould, 2013). Unlike religion, spirituality is recognised as a personalised matter, which has resulted in a hasty definition of the word; hence, scholars find it difficult to research this area (Gotsis & Kortezi 2008; Bishnoi et.al, 2012; The royal college of psychiatrists 2013, Zinnbauer 2005). Due to the growth of spirituality amongst people around the world, it is crucial for companies to understand the characteristics and needs of their consumers to enable them to achieve and sustain their competitiveness in current global markets.

Development of spirituality

Scholars claim, since the Second World War, Christianity has lost credibility amongst its believers due to its failure of providing satisfactory explanations and emotional support, which has led to a decline in church attendance in many developed countries (Campbell, 2007; Thomson, 2013, Berger, 1969; Bruce, 2013; Wilson, 1996; Weber, 1958). The major changes that took place in the 1960s in sexual behaviours, the role of women, and immigration, alongside the development of new religious movements have all played a part in challenging Christian (religious) based values (Thomson, 2013).

As a result, a movement towards wisdom, enlightenment and intuition and a search for the "real self" became popular and this turn to self as a representation of spiritual belief (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Thomson, 2013). Such spiritual beliefs free individuals to experiment with traditions and philosophies that resonate with them and offers the opportunity of believing without belonging (Reinfeldish, 2005; Thomson, 2013). Although a decline in

church attendance has been witnessed this does not represent a loss of faith, as people are replacing new institutional belief systems with existing ones (Elliott, 1997; Campbell, 2007; Thomson, 2013). The decline of church attendance has been replaced by consuming goods and services which could be unfulfilling; thus, the new age of spirituality is a combination of one's beliefs and the market (Jackson, 2002).

Consumer behaviour and spirituality

With a recent indicator that over 80% of the people around the world associate with religion, it can be said that religious beliefs are an important part of most individual's life (Pew, 2012). Also, human's beliefs may affect their judgment, attitudes and choices. Currently, there is the lack of consensus on the definition of spirituality; hence, the lack of research linking spirituality to consumer behaviour. Although there are some similarities between spiritual and religious beliefs, the two remain distinct. While religion is more focused on a particular faith system, spirituality involves values, ideals and virtues to which one is committed (Vitell et.al, 2016). In this research, therefore, we conceptualise spirituality to provide a working definition based on literature and refine it after the findings. This definition will later be refined based on the findings from the interviews and surveys.

In this study, Fowler's stages of faith development model will be used in order to determine levels of spirituality a consumer holds and to determine the effect that this may have on consumerism. This theory helps understand the impact that different level of spirituality may have on consumerism. Fowler's stages of faith development model, (Fowler, 1991; ball et al 2001), suggests that as an individual is developing through these stages, he/she will be less concerned about the benefit to the self when purchasing an item, the focus will mostly be redirected towards the well-being of others, this obviously is affected by individual's commitment to spiritual development (Giacalone and Jurkiewics, 2014, p.60). Fowler's stages of faith development includes the following stages. Firstly, Synthetic Conventional, at this stage the person develops a growing awareness of other religions and belief systems. Individual Reflective follows this, which is the formation of an identity that connects to the eternal. The third stage is Conjunctive Faith, which is the development of a stronger relationship with direct reality. The final stage of Fowler's faith development theory is Universalising Faith, this is when concern of a person shifts from self to others (Fowler, 1991).

Earlier studies tended to focus on broad issues surrounding consumers; recent research focuses more on the relationship between consumer identity and their choices (Moschis and Ong, 2011). In order to understand the decision-making process of individuals, the Hunt-Vitell theory of ethics will be used in this research. This theory proposes a number of antecedents that form the decision-making process of an individual, these can be classified into The Professional Environment, The Industry Environment, The Organisational Environment, The Cultural Environment and, The Personal Characteristics.
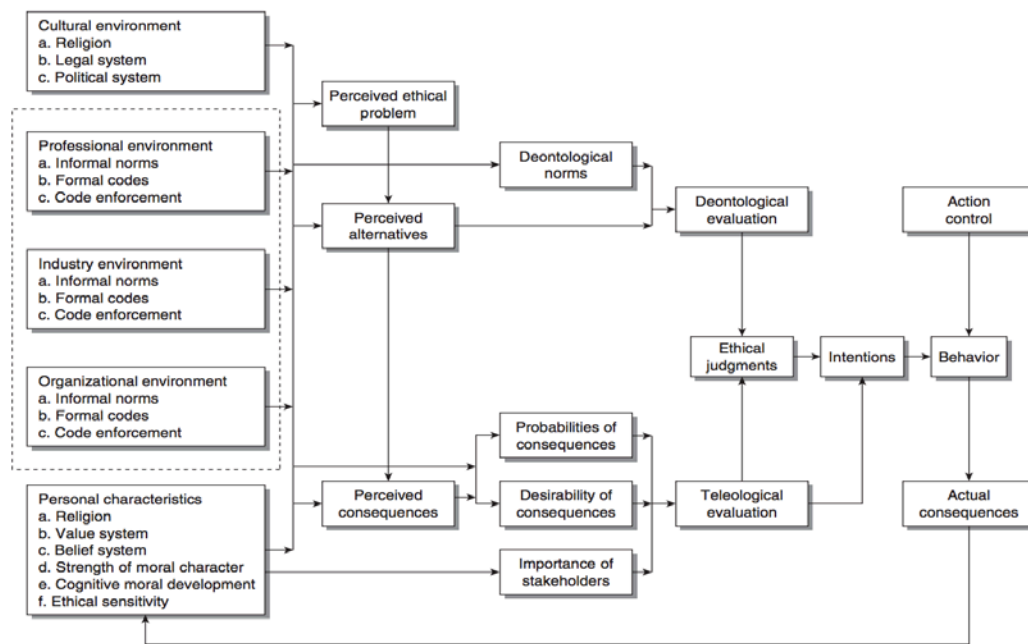
Figure 1 Hunt-Vitell theory of ethics source: Hunt and Vitell, 1986-1993

This investigation will focus on personal characteristics and cultural environment, as these are the only two factors that would apply to an individual's consumer ethics.

Marketing through spirituality

Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004), define workplace spirituality as a universal experience where one is trying to find meaningfulness and interconnectedness by making an alignment between their values and actions. It can be assumed that a spiritual consumer will try to seek this interconnectedness, desire and purpose by aligning their purchasing behaviour with their values and beliefs.

Transfer of Meaning Model

The transfer of meaning model suggests that the messages are integrated into the marketing communication by the marketers through texts, symbols and images these are then extracted by their customers in accordance with their socio-cultural beliefs (McCracken, 2005). Marketers use symbols and images that are favourable to the promotion of their products and services amongst the customers and since these symbols and interpretations vary across cultures, individuals from two different regions may have a different interpretation of the same image. At the same time, it is important for marketers to understand the symbols that may give a negative perception to their products due to evolved meanings of the symbols in the society.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood model predicts that the attitudes of the consumers are a result of two thinking modes, the central route that are stronger than those developed through the peripheral route (Petty, 2013). Kruglanski and Van Lange (2012) in their

research found that individuals that enjoy thinking through things are more likely to think deeply on an issue aside from those who do not have such high need for cognition. Since spirituality encourages individuals to think deeply on the issue, this model has relevance for marketers and their communications based on the spirituality of their consumers. Since the thinking processes may also vary across cultures, what is central in one society may be peripheral in the other and vice versa. Thus, identification of the thinking route taken by the consumers towards marketing products can enable marketers to design their product communications and promotions accordingly.

Methods

A mixed method approach will be used for this research since it allows the use of past research as well as new findings through primary and secondary data collection. Quantitative research will be carried out using a closed ended survey questionnaire; the questionnaire measurement scales will be designed from a selection of previous studies and will be based upon validated scales. The development of the questionnaire proceeded through planning, design and pilot testing. The pilot study was undertaken using 30-50 participants in each country to fill in the questionnaire and the measures were examined for reliability indicators (Cronbach's alpha), also participants will be asked for feedback upon the clarity and nature of the questions.

For qualitative aspectof the research, semi structured interviews will be used to evaluate the reaction of the respondents towards their opinions on promotional strategies of various brands via advertisements, which will be shown to respondent for their possible influence on the spiritual beliefs. The advertisements will be used in order to give the participants a clearer idea concerning spirituality in the fashion industry, they will be used as an example of what a spiritual consumer might be looking for when purchasing an item, the participants will then be asked to outline if they have opinions of the adverts shown being aligned with their spiritual shopping behaviours. The respondents will then be asked to participate in further, in depth interviews, based on exploring their reaction to the advertisements in a detailed manner to identify the possible links with their spiritual beliefs. In addition to interviews and surveys, which are beneficial methods for the collection of primary data, published articles will be used to gather secondary data on the subject. Due to the lack of a widely accepted framework on this particular subject, studies of ethical consumer behaviour in fashion industry will be used to develop a theoretical framework.

Using a convenience sampling method of consumers who reside in the UK and those who reside in Iran, who are female and fall within generation X and Y categories were sought to provide the quantitative data responses; the sample size is determined by Yamane's formula. The data will then be factor analysed using SPSS 23 followed by AMOS 23. Use of an attribute criterion-sampling method will enable the selection of participants for the semi-structured interviews. Collected data from the interviews will be analysed using NVivo 11, emerging themes and patterns will be established through axial coding and triangulation, which will support development of relevant conclusions to identify appropriate marketing strategies.

The current progress of the research

At this stage, the research is more focused on the literature review and collection of data. The pilot data has already been collected, feedback has been gathered, and amendments to the questionnaire have been made. The questionnaire was distributed after pilot amendments to the questionnaire were been made. The data collection occurred over two months and initial analysis yielded early results for the BAM conference. The early findings are to be presented at BAM. Also, theoretical frameworks of the study will be further developed and appropriate marketing strategies will have been framed beyond the conference.

With the data collection being completed, data was exposed to analysis in SPSS 23. Data screening and cleaning stages occurred and outliers were removed.

For an internal consistency test, Cronbach's Alpha has been undertaken to ensure that all construct have an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha value before applying any statistical techniques.

A small demographic analysis, helps us to understand that in both countries the majority of participants are female , (72% Iran , 55% UK) and are aged between 22-29 (43% Iran , 67% UK) with an income of less than 25000 GBP per year (Iran 51%, UK 49%).

Out of the 362 participants from Iran (some data had to be deleted due to missing values and outliers), 61% either agreed to be spiritual or strongly agreed, and 13% did not view themselves spiritual, the rest were not sure about their answer. Also, about 45% viewed themselves religious and 23% did not. 89% of Iranian participants viewed themselves as Muslims.

In the United Kingdom however, these results were quite different than those in Iran. Out of the 395 participants, almost 44% of the participants considered themselves somewhat spiritual and about 25% did not. Moreover, 32% thought themselves to have some religious beliefs and 39% did not view themselves to be religious. From religious people 32% were Christians, 27% were Muslims and 20% were Atheists.

The early stages of analysis clearly shows that people in Iran are more Spiritual/Religious, also diversity within religious beliefs is a lot lower than that of England. With Britain being more diverse and people choosing their religion rather than being assigned a religion at birth people are freer to explore their beliefs. Also Iran having strict rules about converting from Islam makes it more difficult for people to choose their religious beliefs.

This research is still at early stages of analysis. The first step is data screening. According to Hair et al. (2010), data screening and cleaning are very critical, especially when the intention is to use multivariate analysis. For the purposes of data cleaning, initially two types of analysis were applied. These are missing data and outliers.

Missing data often occurs when a respondent fails to answer one or more questions in a survey (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2011). Missing data occurs for a variety of reasons but the most common reasons in social science research are long questionnaires and/or participants who accidently miss out questions. Hair et al. (2010) highlight that the problem of missing

data affects the statistical analysis of the original dataset in two ways; firstly, by reducing the power of the statistical techniques in indicating any relationships in the dataset; and secondly by generating bias in the process of parameter estimations.

From UK responses, there were 37 responses marked as incomplete, this number was 14 for Iran. In line with the recommendations from Hair et al. (2010), questionnaires that had missing data were no longer considered for further analysis, which constituted 8% UK and 3.5% Iran. Malhotra et al. (2013) describe this procedure for removing missing data as case-wise deletion. Therefore, above 370 completed questionnaires for each country, was considered to be usable for further analysis, which is an acceptable number of responses for this study.

An internal consistency test was performed, to ensure that all constructs had acceptable Cronbach's alpha scores before applying any further statistical techniques. This analysis indicated that, Cronbach's alpha for all individual constructs are above 0.7 (Nunnaly, 1978; Sekaran, 2003; Field, 2009; Hair et al., 2010).

A Normality test was applied to ensure the data is normally distributed. In statistics, normality refers to the data distribution which is a fundamental assumption in measuring the variation of variables. When analysing the data, it is not always required but is found better if the variables are normally distributed (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007).

For now this study is assessed on normality through visual inspection of the data distribution. Frequency distribution (histogram), scatter-plot and P-P plot (probability-probability plot) will be applied later. The frequency distribution that plots the observed values against their frequency, provides both a visual judgement about whether the distribution is bell shaped and insights about gaps in the data and outliers outlying values (Peat and Barton, 2008). Carrying out visual inspection of data normality shows an acceptable level of normality.

Also an early Factor analysis, has shown 12 Factors for this study, which looks promising and will be then used to make the anticipated model.

Quantitative data analysis will proceed to Structural Equations modeling to explore confirmation of structural models and this will be complemented with qualitative evaluations

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