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How does religion matter in the marketplace for minority settings? The case of Muslim consumers in France

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Abstract:

This article proposes to go beyond the view of consumer religiosity as a stable characteristic. Rather, focusing on minority cultural settings, this research presents religiosity as a mobilized resource or a constraint the consumer faces in purchasing environments. The context preceding the situation as well as the marketplace are identified as the causes of the contextualized impact of religiosity in consumer decision making. The objective of this research is to explore this phenomenon in order to identify the factors intervening in the process.

Keywords: *consumer behavior, minority cultural setting, religion, religiosity, Consumer Culture Theory*

Track: *Consumer behavior*

1. Introduction

As the presence of minority religions has been more perceptible in the marketplace for a few years in western countries, research has paid little attention to the interaction marketing-religion in minority cultural settings (Hirschman and al., 2011). For instance, companies such as Carrefour, Casino, Doux, Nestlé, Tesco, and Yum! have recently started to target Muslim consumers in Europe. However, their success can be contested despite the growth of the market (World Halal Forum, 2009), indicating that the problem need to be addressed.

Our main proposition consists in considering the impact of religion in consumption as contextually determined for minority cultural settings. More than in dominant cultural settings, religion conveys a symbolic meaning of belonging and attachment to a social group. Thus, objects of consumption (products and brands) constitute the instrument of expression of religious identification to the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986).

Based on a qualitative study, this paper draws on the scheme of religious involvement in the purchasing environment for Muslim consumers (both natives and migrants) in France. With a large number of Muslims resulting from migration movements in the middle of the last century and the generation renewal (Pew Research Center, 2011), the French context offers a particularly relevant field of investigation. This research is fundamentally inductive and relies on in-depth interviews triangulated with participant observations in purchasing contexts to help articulate emergent themes.

Our results indicate that consumer religious involvement impact on consumption evolves through time and according to situations because of the consumer's subjectivity derived from religious affiliation and the context preceding the purchasing situation. We conclude by proposing emergent themes which lead to the conceptualization of consumer religious involvement in purchasing environments for minority cultural settings.

2. Literature review

A major issue in the scientific study of religion consists in defining of what is being under investigation; that is the relationship between the individual and his/her religion. Religious involvement¹, religiousness, religious orientation, religious commitment, and religiosity are numerous terminologies used in order to refer to the same concept. In marketing research, *religiosity* is commonly used despite certain divergences in its definition. For McDaniel and Burnett (1990) the concept needs to be addressed along two dimensions, making its definition large enough to be relevant for this research. Religiosity refers then to the identification to a religion and to the relative importance of its rules for the individuals.

Marketing research has mostly studied religiosity in a cognitive perspective. On the one hand, Hirschman (1983) points out that religion may be viewed as a common cognitive system of beliefs, values, expectations and behaviors. Its effects can therefore be qualified as indirect, as the author views religion as shaping the individual's personality through the cultural system. On the other hand, religion has a direct impact for the consumer's choice regarding the set of rules delivered by most of the religious doctrines. As a normative framework, they constrain decision making by dictating what is forbidden, prescribed and permissible (Lévi-Strauss, 1958). Despite the relevance of such an approach, a cultural

¹ *Religious involvement* in sociology and psychology of religion refers to the relationship of the individual with religion. However, in marketing *involvement* has a specific meaning: "an internal state variable that indicates the amount of arousal, interest or drive evoked by a particular stimulus or situation" (Mitchell, 1979, p. 174). Hence, in this research, when we refer to *religious involvement* we focus on contextually determined religiosity.

perspective of consumption is needed to better understand how, besides the cognitive aspect of consumer religiosity, attachment to religion affects consumer behavior. As an elementary source of culture (Usunier and Lee, 2009), religion influences consumption choices through symbolic aspects of practices and rituals (Lévi-Strauss, 1958). Expressing religious affiliation is not trivial; it conveys a meaning for the consumer and the surrounding world (Sandikci and Ger, 2010).

Hence, context matters for two reasons. First, the meaning of objects goes beyond their utilitarian function – i.e., the ability to respect religious practice. They convey a cultural identity to the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986). Thus, the context in which the consumer expresses his/her relationship to his/her religious affiliation becomes a critical issue (Hirschman and al. 2011) regarding its symbolic significance (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). From that perspective, the market is a palette of resources by which the consumer builds his/her individual and collective identity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) allowing him/her to respond to the demands of the context. Secondly, for Üstüner and Holt (2007), “contexts matter when they harbor underlying structures that differentially affect consumer acculturation” (p. 43). Considering context from this view emphasizes the importance of identifying the sociocultural structures as contributing to the definition of the place that religion take within a consumer’s identity. Consumption choices, their motivations and the understanding of their consequences go beyond consumer subjectivity. From this perspective, the context can socially explain consumer behavior (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

For Hirschman and al. (2011), marketing-religion interaction has been underestimated in minority cultural settings regarding the numerous cultural influences the consumer faces in a dominant cultural context. The encounters with the dominant and the minority culture, as well as the global consumer culture (Askegaard and al., 2005) produce a diverse and fluid range of individuated identity project (Üstüner and Holt, 2007). Leading to the idea that religious identity is salient within the various identities that collectively constitute the self (Weaver and Agle, 2002), contradictions due to context (e.g. modernity and religion, hedonism and asceticism) contribute to the formation of a hybrid identity (Sandikci and Ger, 2010).

In conclusion, salience of religious identity in consumer behavior appears to depend on the context and the marketplace. From this literature, we propose that for minority cultural settings, religiosity is contextually determined and its impact on consumer decision making depends on sociocultural factors.

3. Methodology

A multi-method approach served our research in an inductive theory building process. We explored the complexity of the phenomena from a triangulated methodology consisting of semi-structured interviews and participant observations in purchasing contexts. Doing so allowed us to understand how consumers identifying with minority cultural settings express their religiosity according to situational contexts by confronting what is said to what is done. We chose to limit data collection to Muslim consumers living in France (meaning both nationals and migrants) for three reasons: *i*) need for a homogenous population (i.e., same prescriptive and proscriptive rules to facilitate the identification of individual determinants to the contextualization of religious practices); *ii*) need for a religion with a relatively strict set of rules with strong implications for consumption; and *iii*) and the significance of the market represented by Muslim consumers in France with 5 millions in 2010, and an expected increase to 7 million by 2030 (Pew Research Center, 2011). Our sample consists of 9 women and 8 men, within the age group of 18-40 years old. We chose to exclude first-generation Muslim immigrants from the analysis in order to minimize conflicts due to generational divergences.

The educational level varied from no diploma to postgraduate implying a wide range of cognitive abilities. Informants were recruited by announcements located in places highly frequented by Muslims (identified as such by the presence of veiled women) and university locations.

French-language interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour 20 minutes, were audio recorded with permission of the informants, and transcribed. We used the analytic software Tropes to emerge common themes from interview data. Eight of the participants agreed to participate to the second phase consisting in participant observations in real context of food shopping and were completed with seven other informants. Phase two was conducted in grocery supermarkets in two large cities of the South of France. Lasting approximately 30 minutes, they were audio recorded to feed the iterative dynamic of analysis of our qualitative data. Triangulation with interviews allowed us to specify the qualification of the emergent themes. Their categorization resulted in the proposed model of minority religious involvement in the purchasing environment (refer Figure 1).

4. Emergent themes

Exploring the contextualisation of consumer religiosity implies first defining the perception that informants have concerning their religious affiliation. From an *etic* perspective, three major aspects emerged. The first, **religious determinism** was primarily derived from the responses of nine informants regarding the first question of the discussion guide (“What makes you think you are Muslim?”). This terminology is derived from a Bourdieuan approach of consumer research consisting in interpreting social behavior as the expression of a pre-existing guide for socialization (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). For these informants, the legitimacy of their religious identity is based on the religious affiliation of their parents and ancestors.

I practice because it is far more cultural for us. We, we do not become Muslim, we are born Muslim. It is more hereditary. [Male, 24, master’s degree, migrant]

I am Muslim because I belong to a Muslim family, because I grew up in such an environment; I was raised with Muslim principles. [Female, 21, some college, national]

Secondly, subjectivity of religious affiliation is then defined by an **intrinsic orientation of religiosity**. From this perspective, for the informants, being Muslim relies on the devotion to sacred things expressed by faith, beliefs, spirituality and a felt duty towards God.

I believe that I have faith in God, I recognize myself more in the Muslim religion than in the others... because before, I followed catechism lessons as I was Catholic. Then I had the opportunity to discover others religions and I didn’t feel that I was getting all the Christian stuff. But when I heard about the Koran, I told myself “that’s it”; it is a very strong feeling. [Female, 21, bachelor’s degree, national]

Emotional attachment to religion appeared as a third elementary source associated with perceived religious affiliation. Only considered in marketing research by Hirschman (1981) in the study of Jew ethnicity, religious affiliation strength relies on the attachment to the community as a social group the consumer identifies with. Based on the interview data, we argue that for minority cultural settings, expressing one’s religion is associated with the claim of his/her cultural particularity towards the dominant culture. The most relevant expression of this idea is the confrontation of rhetoric and behavior. Despite expressing a lack of practice

(mostly with regard to the prescribed five prayers a day), most informants specifically bought halal food. Hence, religious practice through consumption is not only an act of faith (i.e., instrument for religious practice), but a sign of attachment to a specific religion as a social group (Durkheim, 1913).

In addition to subjectivity of religious affiliation, the context preceding the purchase situation appears to affect the salience of religious identity and then the intensity of religiosity. The first of the five contextual factors we identified is the **uncertainty about the market's ability to guarantee the quality of the product offered**. The more the consumer perceives a risk to his/her religious practice, the more likely religious concerns are salient (for example: "As I've been watching TV shows about the way companies try to make money on the back of Muslim consumers, I am more careful, I pay more attention in reading the ingredients." [Female, 23, high school graduate, national]).

While religion is practiced via consumption (e.g., respect of rituals or rules with a daily impact such as food restrictions), this can be interpreted as a deliberated sign of distinction from the majority. The dominant culture is viewed as a harmful force discriminating against the minority, as conveyed in the media for example through a strained political climate with regard to the growth of Islam in France. Hence the **emotional response to the experience as a cultural minority** strengthens the feeling of *communitas* and the rejection of *anti-communitas*. Consumption goods allowing the expression of such a cleavage are therefore favored. This idea can be extended to **other minority cultural settings** (e.g., mostly Jewish population). Despite that Kosher food being accepted by Islamic sacred texts, it is viewed as a symbol of the Israeli politics in the Middle East and thereby rejected on behalf of the attachment to religious identity.

I think in France as soon as you talk about Muslims or you say that you practice... well people think automatically that you're potentially a terrorist. They don't have a good opinion of Islam as media associate Muslims with Islamic bombings... That really pisses me off. [Male, 20, some college, migrant]

I've been following boycott actions against Israeli products. Then when I shop I am careful about the origin of the products I buy. [Female, 23, some college, national]

From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Weaver and Agle, 2002), **social encounters with the majority and the minority of identification** intervene in the salience of religious identity. Religiosity intensity appears to adapt to religious role expectations. Salience of religious identity varies according to the kind of people surrounding the individual who learns to adapt his/her consuming behavior in that sense. Two opposing influences of social environment need to be distinguished according to the absence or presence of consumption choices calling for religious affiliation: private sphere and Muslim surroundings vs. heterogeneous religious and unknown environments.

As a final contextual factor of religiosity intensity, **temporal perspective** seems to strengthen the feeling of religious belonging and impacts consumer decision making. According to significant religious events (e.g. Aid al-Kabir, Ramadan), the informants increase normal religious consumption as they express an awareness of their Muslim identity.

I eat halal food most of the time but mostly during the month of Ramadan because it is very expensive in comparison with normal meat. [Male, 23, no diploma, national]

As we propose that religiosity is contextually determined in consumer decision making, two dimensions define religiosity intensity. First of all, without reference to the environment, behavior is oriented by **inviolable rules in consumption**. Their legitimacy relies on the respect of the sacred and the perceived risk of violations of the religious taboo. Comparing Durkheim’s work (1913) to our qualitative data allows us to propose two kinds of risk: a social risk (e.g., discrimination or rejection from the group) and a divine risk (i.e., coming from God). Guilt also emerged as a factor contributing to the respect of the inviolable religious rules. Nevertheless, if pork meat was repeatedly cited and observed, no common definition emerged. For instance, divergences were noted regarding alcohol and its derivatives (e.g., vinegar and condiments based on vinegar such as mustard or ketchup).

In high school, when a White guy ate pork meat, my Muslim fellows made fun of him. I don’t want that to happen to me even now. So... well I always keep that in mind. [Male, 25, some college, migrant]

From the moment you believe in God, you fear God’s anger, you do what He asked and you avoid you He forbade. [Female, 21, Bachelor’s degree, national]

Along with the inviolable rules, **accepted violations in consumption** appear to structure religiosity intensity. Temptation created by the marketplace and its inaptitude to answer to religious specificities led some informants to establish a hierarchy with respect of prescriptive and proscriptive rules. By seeking alternatives when such adjustments could lead to commit taboo, the constructive consumer choice process integrates nonetheless the concept of disgust toward the product category. (A typical verbatim would be for example: “What’s forbidden... it’s clearly pork meat... it is a disgusting animal. For all gold in earth I wouldn’t eat that, I’d rather die.” [Male, 24, Master’s degree, migrant]).

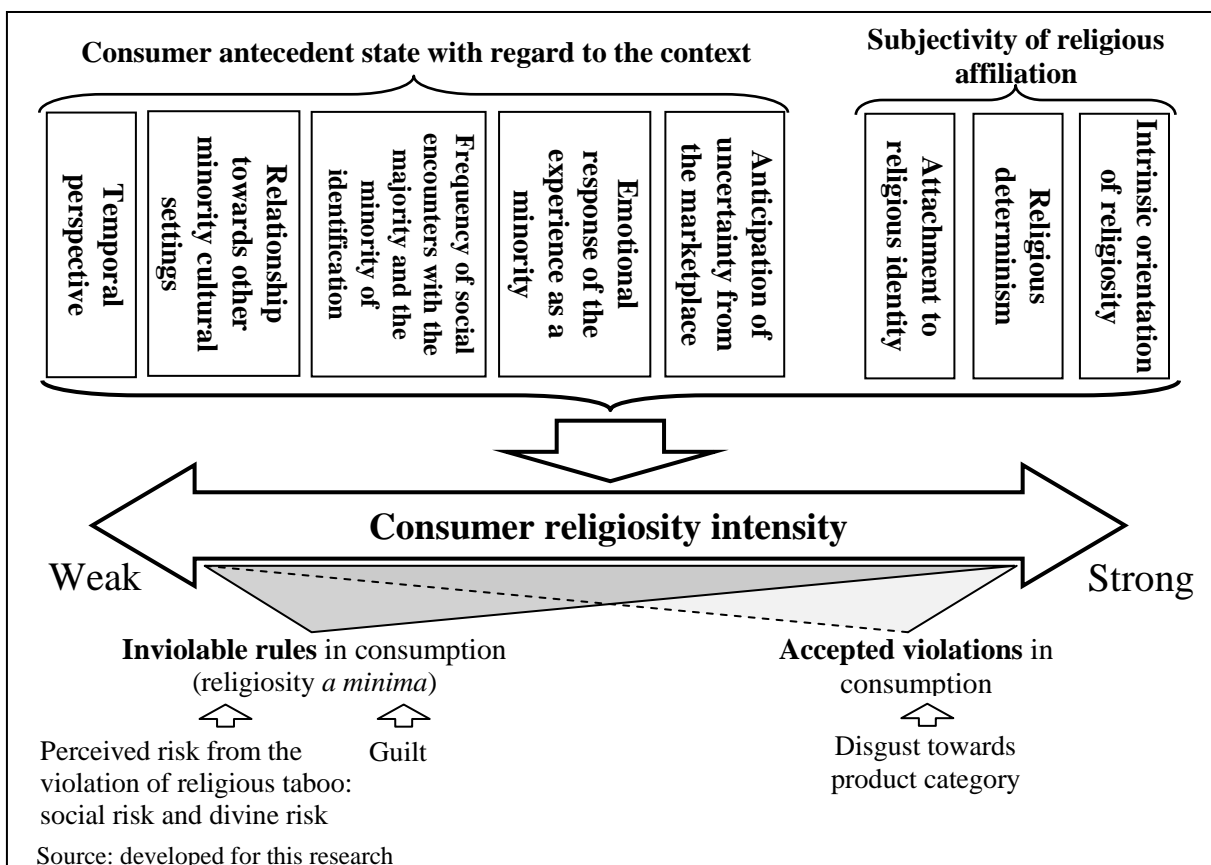


Figure 1: Model of minority religious involvement in the purchasing environment

5. Conclusion

The results of our qualitative study indicate that subjectivity of religious affiliation and sociocultural factors preceding the purchasing situation conjointly affect the consumer religiosity intensity. We propose that for minority cultural settings, religiosity is not a stable characteristic; rather it is determined by the context and the marketplace. Marketers interested in targeting such consumers will find in the model (Figure 1) leverages to build such strategies. For future research, the proposed model should be confronted with other contexts and other religious minority settings. In doing so, some would improve the conceptualization of the role played by the market as well as the identification of sociocultural structures.

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