

Shopping religiously: Brand choice, like religion, can express self-worth

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Marketers hope to connect between the consumer and the products they represent by creating a strong brand identity. Now a Tel Aviv University researcher is giving marketers a heavenly new angle to consider -- religious faith -- on which to build their advertising strategies.

Prof. Ron Shachar of Tel Aviv University's Leon Recanati Graduate School of Business Administration says that a consumer's religiosity has a large impact on his likelihood for choosing particular brands. Consumers who are deeply religious are less likely to display an explicit preference for a particular brand, while more secular populations are more prone to define their self-worth through loyalty to corporate brands instead of religious denominations.

This research, in collaboration with Duke University and New York University scientists, recently appeared in the journal *Marketing Science*.

Crucifix, Star of David or Nike Swoosh?

There is considerable statistical evidence that consumers buy particular brands to express who they are to the outside world, Prof. Shachar says. From clothing choices to cultural events, people communicate their personalities and values through their purchases.

Prof. Shachar and his fellow researchers decided to study the relationship between religiosity and brand reliance.

Focusing on the U.S., the team conducted both field and lab experiments. In the field study, they collected state-level and county-level data on the number of major-brand stores (e.g. Apple, Macy's and Gap) per capita and correlated this with the number of religious congregations per thousand people, as well as with individuals who reported frequent attendance at church or synagogue. Adjusting for economic, educational and urbanization factors, the team found a negative correlation between religiousness and [brand](#) choice.

In the lab experiment, college students were divided into two groups. The first group was asked to write a short essay about what religion means to them personally, while the second group wrote a more casual essay about their day. Both groups then participated in a simulated shopping experience that offered both national and store brands, including items such as sunglasses, fashion accessories, batteries and pain reliever medications. This was coupled with an internet study, in which over 300 participants were asked to write about their religious practices and then went through the same simulated shopping experience.

Where religions block the brand

Researchers discovered that those participants who wrote about their religion prior to the shopping experience were less likely to pick national brands when it came to products linked to appearance or self-expression — specifically, products which reflected status, such as fashion accessories and items of clothing. For people who weren't deeply religious, corporate logos often took the place of religious symbols like a crucifix or Star of David, providing feelings of self-worth and well-being. According to Prof. Shachar, two additional lab experiments done by this research team have demonstrated that like religiosity, consumers use brands to express their sense of self-worth.

Next, he and his fellow researchers hope to clarify how the relationship between advertising and religion affects branding in international markets like Asia and Europe, considering whether a strong religious presence in a particular geographical area might block the expansion of brands. "This seems to be the case," he suggests, "but that is a question we are trying to explore right now."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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