

Researcher finds companies' religious affiliation can buffer negative reactions

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Kelly Cowart is an assistant professor of marketing at Grand Valley State University. Credit: Grand Valley State University

While companies like Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A are at the forefront

of debate over the religious rights of employers, a new study by a Grand Valley State University researcher shows religious affiliation can safeguard companies against negative reactions to store policies. The findings were published in the *Journal of Services Marketing*.

The research, led by Kelly Cowart, assistant professor of marketing at Grand Valley State University, examines the effect of a firm's religious association on customer perceptions of the firm, especially when a service failure occurs. A service failure is defined as limited hours of operation or a temporary store closing.

Cowart said the current findings indicate that religious affiliations may buffer against some of the negative fallout that ensues in the wake of a service failure, as consumers do not penalize such firms as heavily as those without an affiliation. "More importantly, the findings suggest that a [religious affiliation](#) can garner favor even when the religion is not the dominant religion in society," she said.

Two experimental studies were conducted in which participants assumed the role of a customer visiting a restaurant for the first time. In study one, the customer either ate a meal at the restaurant or could not eat a meal due to the restaurant's closing for an annual holy day. In study two, the restaurant is closed for weekly religious worship rather than an annual holy day.

"Results from both studies revealed that customers are more likely to forgive firms when service failures are associated with religion, regardless of attitudes toward the religious group," said Cowart. "The results were similar no matter what [religion](#) was used in the scenarios: Christianity, Judaism or Islam."

Provided by Grand Valley State University

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