

Brand loyalty an expression of self-worth, just like religion

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If you care about brands, external apparel matters more than underwear, according to a Duke researcher.

(PhysOrg.com) -- The brand name logo on a laptop or a shirt pocket may do the same thing for some people that a pendant of a crucifix or Star of David does for others.

For people who aren't deeply religious, visible markers of commercial brands are a form of self-expression and a token of self-worth, just like symbolic expressions of one's faith, according to new research by a Duke University marketing professor and colleagues in New York and Tel Aviv.

In fact, the more religious a person is, the less those sort of brand expressions seem to matter, according to a series of experiments run by the team. Their paper, "Brands: The Opiate of Non-Religious Masses?," appears currently online in the journal *Marketing Science*.

"People with a high involvement in religiosity aren't necessarily as brand-conscious as people who

don't practice religion," said Gavan Fitzsimons, the R. David Thomas Professor of Marketing and Psychology at The Fuqua School of Business. This is true at least for visible expressions of brand, like socks and sunglasses.

The team first conducted a field study in which they looked at several geographic areas for the number of Apple stores per million people, the number of brand stores such as Macy's and Gap, and a comparison statistic they called the "brand-discount store ratio." Then they compared these rough measures of brand reliance against the number of congregations per thousand and self-reported attendance in church or synagogue, controlling for income, education and urbanization differences. In every analysis, they found a negative relationship between brand reliance and religiosity.

To zero in on the question, they performed four laboratory experiments in which feelings of religiosity were manipulated before subjects went through imaginary shopping experiences.

In a group of 45 college students, one group was primed by being asked to write a short essay on "what your religion means to you personally," while the other group wrote about how they spend their days. Then each group was sent on an imaginary shopping trip in which they chose between products shown two at a time, national brand versus store brand.

Some of the products were forms of self-expression, such as sunglasses, watches and socks. Other products were functional items like bread, batteries and ibuprofen.

The group that had been primed to think about religion was less likely to choose branded products of self expression. This was particularly true for publicly viewable products that could be used to express identity.

A second, Internet-based experiment measured the self-reported religiosity of 356 participants, and then ran them through the same shopping experience. Again, those that were highly religious cared less about national brands for the self-expressive products. For the functional products, level of [religiosity](#) didn't make a difference.

Two more experiments demonstrated that [religion](#) reduces brand reliance by apparently satisfying the need to express self-worth.

"We don't think people are choosing these brands, consciously saying, 'I want to signal to everyone how I feel about myself through this brand,' " said Fitzsimons, whose iPhone rings with Johnny Cash singing "Ring of Fire." But sub-consciously, it's likely a different story.

"Brands are a signal of self-worth," Fitzsimons said. "We're signaling to others that we care about ourselves and that we feel good about ourselves and that we matter in this world. It's more than 'I'm hip or cool,' " he said: "I'm a worthwhile person, and I matter, and you should respect me and think that I'm a good person, because I've got the D&G on my glasses. "

So if you were the brand manager for a new kind of apparel, you might study the demographics of your markets in a different way, Fitzsimons said. "If you knew that your target customers were largely more religious, that'd probably suggest the store brand path would be easier. If you knew that your customers were largely not at all religious, that suggests that you might want to focus more toward building a national brand."

More information: "Brands: The Opiate of the Non-Religious Masses?" Ron Shachar, Tülin Erdem, Keisha M. Cutright, Gavan J. Fitzsimons, *Marketing Science*, articles in advance, Sept. 24, 2010. [DOI: 10.1287/mksc.1100.0591](https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1100.0591)

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