

THE DIFFERING INFLUENCES OF RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY ON TRAITS RELATING TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Gregory S. Black, School of Business, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, CO 80217, 303-352-7146, gblack4@msudenver.edu

Nicole S. Vowles, School of Business, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, CO 80217, 303-352-4825, nvowles@msudenver.edu

ABSTRACT

The construct of sustainable consumer behavior extends far beyond the typical application of environmental stewardship expressed through purchasing. This research considers two infrequently addressed aspects of sustainable consumer behavior: social equity and financial responsibility. Religiosity and spirituality impact consumer behavior, with some evidence of a link between religiosity and purchase of sustainable products. The separate and distinct impact of religiosity and spirituality on elements of sustainable consumer behavior is addressed in this research. Findings show that while spirituality does have a positive impact on social equity and financial responsibility variables, religiosity does not.

INTRODUCTION

Is sustainable consumer behavior exemplified by consumers simply buying green products and recycling whenever possible? To better understand sustainable consumer behavior, we must take a wider view of the concept of sustainability. To do that, literature on sustainability and sustainable business practices should be considered because the concept of sustainability has received much more research attention there. Though difficult to identify the best definition of sustainability (White 2013), an article published in 2003 captures the necessary elements most completely. In that article, sustainability is defined as a wise balance among economic development, environmental stewardship, and social equity (Sikdar 2003). Applying this definition to consumers leads to a definition of sustainable consumer behavior as a combination of financial responsibility, environmental stewardship, and social equity. The concepts of financial responsibility and social equity are the focus of this research.

Sustainable consumer behavior has recently enjoyed increased research attention. However, much research treats it as merely buying green products (White and Simpson 2013), which addresses environmental stewardship, but ignores financial responsibility and social equity. Current research is beginning to recognize the multiple dimensions of sustainable consumer behavior, acknowledging that it is more than just green consumption practices. It also includes ethical consumer behavior (Eckhardt et al. 2010) and financially-responsible consumer behavior, (Hira 2012). Along with exploring the description of sustainable consumer behavior, antecedents or predictors should also be explored.

Religiosity (Essoo and Dibb 2004) and spirituality (Kale 2006) have been shown to have an impact on consumer behavior. A few studies even suggest a link between religiosity and sustainability (e.g., Narayanan 2013). Other research shows definite links between religiosity or spirituality and business ethics (e.g., Collins 2010) and consumer ethics (Beekun and Westerman 2012). One study suggests that religious education can develop more well-rounded consumers who are capable of handling problems, conflicts and ambiguity (Narayanswamy 2008). Few studies, however, acknowledge the differences between spirituality and religiosity and the varying impacts of the two concepts on consumers. Thus,

exploring the separate and distinct impact of religiosity and spirituality on the two under-researched elements of sustainable consumer behavior will be assessed is the objective of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For more than a decade, marketers have called for additional research regarding the predictors of sustainable consumer behavior because it is often difficult to encourage this type of consumer behavior (White and Simpson 2013). Despite recognition of the need for this research, scholars and practitioners alike often exercise a narrow view of sustainable consumer behavior, most commonly viewing it as pro-environmental behavior, such as buying green products, recycling, reusing products, conserving energy, etc. (e.g., White and Simpson 2013). However, a broader view of sustainable consumer behavior should parallel the description of sustainable business strategies. Thus, behavior to maintain one's health (Berger and Rand 2008), to practice financial frugality (Hira 2012), and to engage in fair trade shopping (Papaoikonomou 2013), should be included in any definition of this important concept. Based on this discussion and the Sikdar's (2003) definition of sustainable business, sustainable consumer behavior is defined as a consumer's balance of financial responsibility, environmental stewardship, and social equity.

The significance of religion has long been considered in sociology, psychology, and organizational studies, but is not yet fully appreciated in consumer research. So far, studies in marketing literature suggest that religion is a key element of consumers' cultures, influencing both their behavior and purchase intentions (Essoo and Dibb 2004). Research also indicates that the positive effects of spirituality/religiosity are not reserved to those believing in Christianity (e.g., Khan and Sheikh 2012). Whether a person is Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist does not appear to be important, as long as the person is generally spiritual and/or religious. In general, Americans define themselves as religious or spiritual, regardless of their actual religion. According to a *New York Times* poll and a *Gallup* poll, 81 percent of Americans believe that some part of themselves goes on after their deaths; 80 percent pray; 30 percent have meditated or practiced yoga; 60 percent say religion is very important in their lives; 54 percent call themselves "religious," and another 30 percent "spiritual, but not religious;" and 67 percent claim to attend religious services at least once per month (as reported in Ball et al. 2001).

While other *Gallup* surveys reveal that 90 percent of Americans express a belief in God (as reported in Walker 2013), there is great variation regarding the concepts of religiosity and spirituality in the literature. Various recent studies show the positive impact of religiosity and/or spirituality on ethical inclination, leadership effectiveness, success (e.g., Phipps 2012), customer-oriented behavior among salespeople (Chawla and Guda 2013), economic development (El Ghouli et al. 2012), success of political agencies and organizations (King 2007), and most importantly to this research, sustainable development (Narayanan 2013). In fact, employees are reported to have a need for, and even yearn for, spirituality in the workplace (e.g., Pawar 2009).

Many studies do not distinguish between religiosity and spirituality, but use the terms interchangeably (e.g., Ali Sarlak, et al. 2012). However, some studies do recognize a distinction between religiosity and spirituality, resulting in differences in how these different concepts influence people's behavior (e.g., Wilson and Hollenson 2013). Religion is often defined as an institutionalized system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices through which people manifest their faith and devotion to an ultimate reality or deity (Kelly 1995). It is expressed in such world religions as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. As an extension, religiosity is defined as a person's degree of adherence to the beliefs, doctrines, and practices of a particular religion (Mattis 1997).

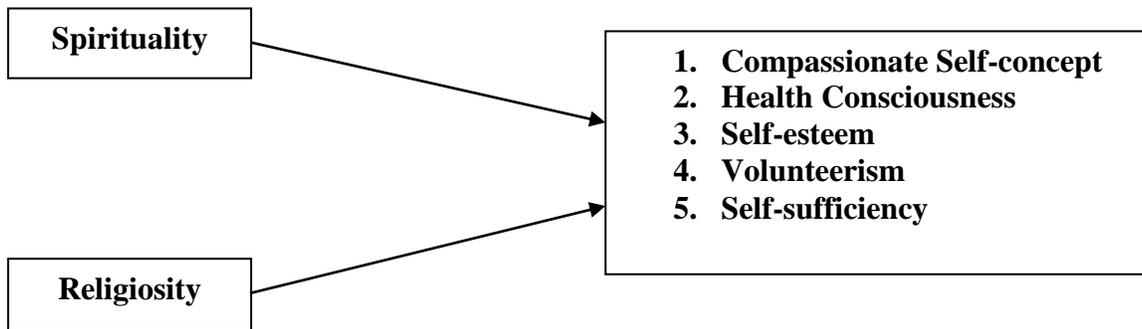


Fig. 1 Proposed research model

On the other hand, spirituality has been defined as a more inclusive concept for describing an individual's personal relationship with a higher power (George et al. 2000). It is concerned with an individual's inner life, which has a positive impact on his or her behavior (Ratnakar and Nair 2012). It is also clear that spirituality is a very difficult concept to grasp and to understand (MacDonald 2011). One's spirituality may or may not encompass membership in a particular religious organization, but is manifested in truly believing in a higher power and acting spiritually rather than just going through the physical motions of being active in an organized religion (Taylor et al. 1996). Collins and Kakabadse's (2006) study even suggests that religiosity, without spirituality, has a negative influence on a person's behavior. On the other hand, if a person possesses spirituality, even if they are not active in an organized religion, he/she behaves more ethically and socially responsible.

HYPOTHESES

Based on this literature review, five specific variables included in sustainable consumer behavior were selected for inclusion in this study. First, compassionate self-concept is defined as how consumers see themselves in terms of having compassion for others and taking an active role in helping others in need (concept developed for this study). Second, the concept of health consciousness was also developed for this study and is defined as being conscious of one's health and taking conscious action to maintain and/or improve good health. Third, self-esteem, also developed for this study, is defined as the extent to which consumers are satisfied with their lives in terms of their consumer behavior (purchasing practices, etc.). Fourth, volunteerism was described in earlier consumer behavior research and is defined as the degree to which consumers believe that donating time to an organization benefits the community and is appreciated (Yavas and Riecken 1985). The fifth sustainable consumer behavior variable, self-sufficiency, was also derived from previous research and is defined as the degree to which consumers view themselves as being responsible and independent (Raskin and Terry 1988).

Figure 1 is the research model representing these variables and the hypotheses that are tested in this study. The hypotheses are as follows.

- H₁: A high level of spirituality leads to more sustainable consumer behavior, as measured by the following five concepts:
- H_{1a}: Compassionate self-concept;
- H_{1b}: Health consciousness;
- H_{1c}: Self-esteem;
- H_{1d}: Volunteerism; and

Table 1 Summary of measure development

Variables	# of Items	Alpha	Eigenvalue
Spirituality	7	.876	4.039
Religiosity	3	.252	1.211
Compassionate Self-concept	3	.857	2.357
Health Consciousness	2	.494	1.342
Self-esteem	6	.794	2.966
Volunteerism	2	.915	1.844
Self-sufficiency	4	.746	2.290

H_{1e}: Self-sufficiency.

H₂: A high level of religiosity has no impact on whether a person will engage in sustainable consumer behavior, as measured by the following five concepts:

H_{2a}: Compassionate self-concept;

H_{2b}: Health consciousness;

H_{2c}: Self-esteem;

H_{2d}: Volunteerism; and

H_e: Self-sufficiency.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from 116 undergraduate students enrolled in marketing and management classes at a major university located in the southwestern United States. This sample included students who were 39.7% male and 60.3% female; were 20-51 years old; were 60.3% Caucasian, 31.0% Hispanic, and 8.6% other; had \$0-\$150,000 in self-reported annual income; had families ranging in sizes from 1-7 people; were marketing majors (36.2%), management majors (24.1%), general business majors (15.5%), finance majors (3.4%), accounting majors (11.2%), and non-business majors (8.6%); and were 50.9% Republican, 19.0% Democrat, 15.5% Independent, and 12.9% other.

The questionnaire was administered on a voluntary basis as possible extra credit to students. They were given several days to complete it. All constructs included in this study were measured by multiple-item measures. In addition, if the measure was derived from scales used in some other study, the exploratory factor and reliability analysis were used to reduce the measures to the most reliable and unidimensional form. Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951) was used for reliability analysis. See Table 1 for a summary of reliability and exploratory factor analyses. Both the spirituality and religiosity measures were derived from an ongoing study conducted at UCLA about college students' beliefs and values (UCLA 2004). In that study, spirituality was measured using a 16 item scale, but was reduced to seven items for this study. Religiosity was measured using a four item scale that was reduced to three items for this study.

The measures used to assess sustainable consumer behavior were developed and analyzed using exploratory factor and reliability analysis. Compassionate self- concept is a new construct for which a measure was developed specifically for this study. Five items were originally included in the measure, but it was reduced to three items through the analysis. Health consciousness was also newly developed for this study and the number of items included was reduced from three to two. The measure used for self-esteem also originated with this study. The original eight items were reduced to six items. The measures for both volunteerism and self-sufficiency originated with other marketing research. Volunteerism was originally measured with three items (Yavas and Riecken 1985) and was reduced to

Table 2: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Dependent Variables	Spirituality		Religiosity	
	T-Value	Significance	T-Value	Significance
Sustainable Consumer Behavior	3.584	<i>p</i> ≤ .01	0.572	<i>p</i> ≥ .10
1. Compassionate Self-concept	5.728	<i>p</i> ≤ .01	1.857	<i>p</i> ≤ .10
2. Health Consciousness	1.108	<i>p</i> ≥ .10	-1.160	<i>p</i> ≥ .10
3. Self-esteem	3.320	<i>p</i> ≤ .01	1.686	<i>p</i> ≤ .10
4. Volunteerism	0.701	<i>p</i> ≥ .10	0.135	<i>p</i> ≥ .10
5. Self-sufficiency	0.951	<i>p</i> ≥ .10	1.938	<i>p</i> ≤ .10

Bolded and italicized entries are significant

two items for this study. Self-sufficiency was originally measure with nine items (Raskin and Terry 1988) and was reduced to four items for this study.

RESULTS

OLS regression was used to examine the hypotheses in this study. The results are summarized in Table 2. It was hypothesized that a high level of spirituality leads to more sustainable consumer behavior (H_1). First, measures for all five constructs were combined to form an overall measure for sustainable consumer behavior. Regression showed spirituality to have the hypothesized impact on sustainable consumer behavior using this summary measure ($t = 3.584$, $p \leq .01$). The sub-hypotheses were then examined to see which dimensions of sustainable consumer behavior were impacted by spirituality. Analysis revealed that both compassionate self-concept ($t = 5.728$, $p \leq .01$) and self-esteem ($t = 3.320$, $p \leq .01$) were influenced by spirituality as predicted. However, spirituality had no impact on health consciousness, volunteerism, and self-sufficiency. Thus, H_1 was partially supported.

The next hypothesis proposed that a high level of religiosity has no impact on whether a person will engage in sustainable consumer behavior (H_2). Using the same summary measure technique described above, the five factors making up sustainable consumer behavior were combined to assess the overall impact from religiosity. The hypothesis was confirmed; however, assessing the impact on each one of the five factors making up sustainable consumer behavior revealed interesting results. Findings suggest that religiosity has a positive impact on a consumer's compassionate self-concept ($t = 1.857$, $p \leq .10$), self-esteem ($t = 1.686$, $p \leq .10$), and self-sufficiency ($t = 1.938$, $t \leq .10$).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the positive outcomes of sustainable consumer behavior, an issue that arises is that consumers tend to resist engaging in activities that take additional time, increased effort, or behavioral change (White and Simpson 2013). Encouraging consumers to engage in sustainable behavior is one of the biggest challenges facing our world today (Peattie 2010). Thus, finding the keys of encouragement to increase consumer participation is increasingly important. This study suggests some antecedents to sustainable behavior and it is through these antecedents, among others, that encouragement may prove effective.

Sustainable consumer behavior, as measure in this study, is increased by higher levels of consumer spirituality. Though it may be difficult to have much impact on something as individual as a person's spirituality, it is conceivable to be able to have a positive impact on individual sustainability factors. The

results suggested that a consumer's compassionate self-concept and self-esteem are especially impacted by spirituality. Strategies to have a positive influence on these variables are much more plausible than trying to impact a more universal characteristic like spirituality, which in turn could increase sustainable behavior.

This study is one of the few that recognizes differences between religiosity and spirituality and the results of this study demonstrate the importance of those differences. As predicted, religiosity, or the outward practicing of and participation in organized religion, has no impact on sustainable consumer behavior. Participation in religions that encourage social norms related to sustainable behavior are likely to have more positive impact on these behaviors. In addition, many consumers are both religious and spiritual; however, this study shows it is the consumer spirituality, not the consumer religiosity, that increases participation in sustainable consumer behaviors.

Research on the impact of spirituality in the workplace has received much more attention than has its impact on consumers. In an organizational setting, it may be possible to achieve a collective spirituality or spiritual resonance (Whitney 2010). However, it is much more difficult to have any serious or permanent impact on individual consumers' levels of spirituality. Consumers who have placed themselves in a potentially spiritual group environment by participating in organized religion may become more spiritual. However, spirituality is not contained within the walls of churches, mosques, synagogues or temples. Higher education may be able to play an important role in increasing students' exposure to ethically-grounded thinking.

Much attention has recently focused on business education. Much of this attention is the result of unethical business practices in big businesses. Business schools are not teaching business majors to be unethical. In fact, business school accrediting agencies require more accountability for business ethics education. Assessment of the impact of a business education on students is an issue that is becoming more of a concern with both business schools and accrediting agencies. Identifying crucial factors outside the actual business education students are receiving may be the key to understanding both business student success while obtaining their education and their sustainable behavior after graduating. Business students appear to be among the most likely university and college students to engage in cheating behavior while in school (Blalock 1996), so the impact of spirituality may be one of the keys to better understanding and influencing our business students' behavior through increasing their spirituality. Albaum and Peterson (2006) found that business students who reported more spiritual tendencies showed more inclination toward sustainable behavior. Thus, business education may have a legitimate role in increasing consumer spirituality (Epstein 2002; Narayanswamy 2008).

From a marketing management point of view, the finding that spirituality does impact elements of sustainable consumer characteristics creates a targeting opportunity. Because these consumers are already predisposed to sustainable behavior, marketers could specifically target this segment for products that address financial responsibility, environmental stewardship, or social equity.

Many consumers profess to want to avoid non-sustainable consumer behavior, such as unethical product offerings, yet few actually act on this inclination (Eckhardt, Belk and Devinney 2010). Thus, it would be an important extension of this research to examine the impact of spirituality and religiosity on non-sustainable consumer behavior.

REFERENCES – Available Upon Request