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RESEARCH HYPOTHESES FOR THE INFLUENCE OF SPIRITUALITY ON THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR OF OLDER ADULTS

Abstract

The interest in spirituality in consumer behaviour is growing. Previous research suggests that consumers' behaviour is influenced by their level of spiritual development and commitment, and that it can be spiritually motivated. This paper explores the influence of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults, as they reach spiritual maturity or undergo intensive spiritual growth toward the end of their life. The spiritual needs of older adults are described and research hypotheses designed to suggest the influence of spirituality on their consumer behaviour.

Key words: spirituality, religion, senior consumer, spiritual development, spiritual needs.

HYPOTHESES DE RECHERCHE POUR L'INFLUENCE DE LA SPIRITUALITE SUR LE COMPORTEMENT DU CONSOMMATEUR SENIOR :

Résumé

La spiritualité est un sujet d'intérêt grandissant en marketing. Les études existantes suggèrent que le comportement du consommateur est influencé par ses degrés de développement et d'engagement spirituel et qu'il peut être spirituellement motivé. Le présent article explore l'influence de la spiritualité sur le comportement des consommateurs seniors, alors qu'ils ont atteint leur maturité spirituelle ou sont en fort développement spirituel à l'approche de la fin de leur vie. Les besoins spirituels des seniors sont décrits et des hypothèses de recherche formulées qui suggèrent l'influence de la spiritualité sur leur comportement de consommation.

Mots clés: spiritualité, religion, développement spirituel, besoin spirituel, consommateur senior.

1. Introduction and objectives:

Although spirituality has been a central concept in psychology and sociology for the past ten years, little research has explored its influence on consumer behaviour yet. The paucity of available research results lied so far in part from a lack of consensus regarding the definition of spirituality and some confusion between the concepts of spirituality, religion and religiosity (Zinnbauer et Pargament, 2005, McGinn, 1993). Thus responding to a call for conceptual clarification, a framework for the study of the influence of spirituality on consumer behaviour was established, involving a definition of spirituality and related concepts (religion, religiosity and faith), and a description of spiritual development (Ulvoas, 2009). We build here on this existing framework to explore the influence of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults as they reach spiritual maturity or undergo intensive spiritual growth toward the end of their life, thus leading to the display of more salient spiritual characteristics.

From a consumer behaviour prospective, the few results available suggest that consumers' behaviour is influenced by their spiritual values, their levels of spiritual development and commitment (Ball et al., 2001; Hampton et al., 2002), that it can be spiritually motivated (Skousgaard, 2004), and that spiritual value is a dimension of the overall value perceived by consumers (Holbrook, 1999; Aurier, Evrard, N'Goala, 2004). In this paper, we design testable research hypotheses for the influence of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults. Our overall objective is thus to draw from the extant literature a research agenda to examine the influence of spirituality on the behaviour of senior consumers.

2. Conceptual framework:

2.1. Definitions of spirituality, spiritual development and related concepts:

2.1.1. Definition of spirituality and related concepts:

A multi-disciplinary literature review in the fields of psychology, sociology and theology provided us with an inventory of over thirty definitions of spirituality. Despite this wealth, spirituality quickly appeared as a concept on the definition of which there was no consensus and which was often narrowed down to religion, which is unsatisfactory at a time when a large number of people consider themselves spiritual but not necessarily religious. Thus responding to a call for conceptual clarification, we identified the characteristics of spirituality and designed our own definition of the concept, as follows: "Spirituality is the construction of the meaning of one's life. It appeals to one's ability for transcendence and its objects are the inner self, alterity and the sacred"[1]. Spirituality involves a spiritual identity, which can be religious or non religious, and a level of spiritual commitment.

Religion, as "a unified system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred" (Delener, 1990), is the most common form of spirituality. It has two dimensions: religious identity (the tradition within which the members of a specific religious group practice their religion, for example Christianity) and religiosity.

Religiosity is "the strength with which an individual adheres to the central principles of his religion to place them at the heart of his life" (Jackson, 1999). Highly religious individuals will exhibit commitment to their religious beliefs in many aspects of their life including consumption (Mokhlis, 2006), while the less religious ones will give them a more peripheral position.

2.1.2. Spiritual development:

Spiritual development is a life-long process. Although it follows a path travelled by many before and the stages of which have been identified (Fowler, 1981), it is also associated with personal variations in numerous fields.

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[1] Alterity should be understood in a broad sense and includes other human beings, nature and the universe. It is the interconnection of these objects that enables the holistic perspective on life and provides its meaning. Transcendence corresponds to "an individual's capability to step out of his/her immediate perception of time and space and to see life from a wider, more detached angle" (Piedmont, 2001). The sacred is "a perception of either a divine being or a sense of ultimate reality or truth" (Larson et al., 1998): God, gods, a divine being, the supreme energy, the wholeness of life.

The construction of one's personal identity is central to this process, which leans on two central concerns: the satisfaction of one's ego (prioritary in earlier stages) and the concern for others (central in later stages). The idea that spirituality grows in the last part of life is not new and Confucius (479 B.C.) used to say: « *at fifty, I understand heaven's decree* » (life expectancy was less than 70 at the time). The chronological and sequential theory of spiritual development (Fowler, 1981) also identifies the last part of life as favourable to increased spiritual development and the achievement of spiritual maturity, thus leading to the display of more salient spiritual characteristics. In the last period of life indeed, older adults enjoy cognitive maturity and the ability for gerotranscendence. They are going to finalize their spiritual development in a context of gains and losses traditionally associated with old age and the consciousness of their own mortality. Spiritual maturity will be the climax of spiritual development and the highest levels of spiritual development will often be observable after fifty (Fowler, 1981).

2.2. The spirituality of older adults:

2.3.1. *Seniors' spirituality is the result of maturity:*

Maturity and spiritual development are linked, thus leading to the display of advanced stages of spiritual development at an older age. Cannon (1994) suggests that spiritual maturity is associated with psychological maturity. Previous studies in psychosocial and cognitive development show indee that older adults enjoy a greater capacity to integrate cognitive and emotional perspectives (Labouvie-Vief, De Voe et Bulka., 1989). Fowler (1981) also claims that advanced stages of spiritual development are associated with a greater personal autonomy and sensitivity to context and relativism. At an age when the older adult is usually free of former professional constraints and where he has completed his parental duties and the education of his children, he is more available to look inside himself and at the world which surrounds him, so as to lead the quest for his more spiritual dimension (Jung, 1943, 1964). Some constraints associated with old age, such as the decrease in mobility, give him the opportunity to experience meditation and contemplative silence, which both facilitate spiritual development (Atchley, 1997). At an age where he has had the opportunity to experience ambiguity and the relativity of human life, the older adult tends to go beyond the linear models of thought strictly based on logics which he used so far to deal with reality (Alexander et al.,1990 ; Sinnott, 1994). He sees the world under a new light and accepts paradox while taking into account feelings and context, as much as rationale.

This enables him to give a turn to his thinking to successfully lead his spiritual quest. The result is the wisdom associated with ego integrity and the ineluctable aspect of the life cycle, based itself on a new synthesis and reintegration of the self (Erikson, 1963). Fowler (1981) describes a positive relation between age and advanced spiritual development characterized by a sense of unity and personal transcendence. This perspective supports the theory of a link between age and a change in knowledge management, which leads to spiritual development (Labouvie-Vief, 1990). Although numerous authors make a link between spiritual development and ageing, others associate spiritual maturity with the experience of the end of life, whatever the age. The older adult is at a stage in his life where he repeatedly witnesses the disappearance of his age peers, thus creating an increasing consciousness of his own mortality and making him more sensitive to the questioning related to the end of life and the meaning of death.

2.3.2. *The theory of gerotranscendence:*

The spirituality of older adults stems as much from their cognitive maturity as from their ability for gerotranscendence. Indeed, it is often observed that older adults disengage from the values of competition amongst individuals which might have been characteristic of the middle of their life. Gerontologists have long explained this attitude by the theory of disengagement (Cumming, 1963 ; Cumming et Henry, 1961 ; Cumming et Newell, 1960), according to which the older adult looses interest in and takes a distance with the society he lives in and which often rejects him as a senior, to turn to his inner self (Bruyneel et al., 2008). It is opposed by Erikson and Erikson (1997), who claim that this attitude of retrenchment is on the contrary the sign of an increasingly spiritual perspective. The senior adult, after turning to the world which surrounds him and then to himself in the last part of his life, would then turn to the sacred. Tornstam (1994, 1999) advocates a distinct and age-related path towards spirituality: gerotranscendence, which he describes as a "*shift from a rational and materialist perspective to an increasingly cosmic and transcendent one*". Gerotranscendence is the ultimate stage towards maturity and wisdom. It relies on the older adult's predisposition for the integration of life's cosmic or transcendent dimension, generativity, the link between life and death and the mystery of life. Gerotranscendence occurs at three levels: the cosmic one, that of the self and that of individual relationships (Tornstam, 1999).

2.3.3. *Spiritual growth is a mechanism to cope with the difficulties associated with old age:*

Ageing comes with changes in physical well-being, mental sharpness, the frequency and the type of social interactions. These changes are most of the time experienced as losses: in health, memory and social role. Such losses challenge one's continuity of himself and life, and create a need to maintain or rebuild one's integrity. This will in turn accelerate spiritual growth and lead the individual to wonder more deeply about the meaning of such losses. It is also possible that the older adult experiences negative reactions from his environment related to his ageing, leading to phenomenons of ageism (which is a negative consideration of a person related to his ageing). Such negative reactions are experienced as aggressions, which create a need for the senior adult to defend himself against them. Spiritual development is thus a mechanism which enables older adults to cope with the losses associated with old age and to defend themselves against age related aggressions (Atchley, 1997; Mattes, 2005; McFadden, 1996). Old age also corresponds to a stage in life where individual think more and more often about death. Indeed, the increasing number of their age peers who disappear before them creates an increasing consciousness of their own mortality in older people. This can generate strong anxiety (Urien, 2008), which spiritual growth can help reduce, as it involves finding the meaning of one's life and death and a reflection on after life (Ita, 1995). Research in gerontology has thus proven the benefit of taking the spiritual dimension of beings while treating pathologies associated with ageing.

2.3.4. *The spiritual needs of older adults:*

At an age which comes with its share of losses and where spiritual growth, facilitated by gerotranscendence, is a mechanism which helps the older adult adapt and defend himself, the first category of spiritual needs has to do with the needs for integrity and personal dignity and the transcendence of losses and handicaps. The next category of spiritual needs appears in the context of the approaching end of their life. The reduction of death anxiety is a specific spiritual need, which involves resolving to and preparing oneself for dying. This becomes possible through the acceptance of life as a path to which death is a logical and ultimate ending. Establishing an overall positive outcome of one's life greatly contributes to this. To reach that stage, the older adult needs to reread his life so as to link and put into perspective the different events that make it.

In the global context of this mental work, the continuity of man and the care for future generations play an important part through generativity. Relationships to others shall receive special attention, be characterized by a concern for humanism, reparing what can be and reconciliation. Thirdly, the final category of spiritual needs is the quest for a (more or less intense) relationship with the sacred. Spiritual needs of older adults thus involve: restoring personal dignity and transcending the losses and handicaps of old age; reducing death anxiety, accepting to die and preparing for dying; finding the global meaning of one's life, believing in the continuity of life and caring about future generations; establishing positive relationships with others, reducing guilt and reconciling; and establishing an intimate relationship with the sacred (McKinley, 2001; Fry, 2000).

Tableau 1 . The spiritual needs of older adults

Integrity and personal dignity, transcendence of losses and handicaps	The decrease in mental and physical capabilities and the loss of some social roles make the older adult vulnerable in his own unity, which he feels the need to restore. It becomes necessary to transcend those losses while giving them some meaning (Moberg, 2002 ; McKinley, 2001 et Kohler, 1999).
Reducing death anxiety, resolving to die and preparing oneself for dying.	The time of the future, that which remains to live, is limited and the older adult sees more and more clearly the approach of his own death (Pillot, 1988). This situation often generates a lot of anxiety. Death acceptance and preparing oneself for this deadline play a major role at the end of one's life.
Finding the global meaning of one's life, rereading one's life events, linking them, believing in the continuity of man and caring for young generations.	« Giving a meaning to one's life helps to live one's death, giving a meaning to one's death helps living more fully » (Pillot, 1988). Thus, one accepts more easily the approach of death if one perceives the outcome of his life as overall positive and his life as meaningful. Rereading, assembling one life's events and situating them in a larger ensemble, which includes future generations, will play a major role (Vimort, 1987, 1990).
Finding intimacy in the relationships with others, reducing guilt and reconciling.	Guilt arising from the difficulties met in one's life can be strongly perceived as punishment by the more religious people. Some events and relations with others generate suffering and misunderstanding. Reducing guilt, healing wounds and reconciling becomes increasingly important with the approach of death (Matray, 1989).
Establishing a relationship with the sacred and finding intimacy.	The identification of the supreme centre of values: the sacred, is at the heart of this last category of needs. Once the nature of the sacred has been identified, the older adult will try to establish an intimate relationship with, through a relationship of trust which will bring comfort and serenity.

2.3.5. *Spiritual maturity leads to spiritual well-being :*

Spiritual maturity and spiritual well-being are the fruits of spiritual development. The first is associated with finding the meaning and the aim of one's life. It leads to the second according to its two dimensions: *the spiritual dimension* (well-being related to the sacred) and *the existential dimension* (well-being related to the meaning of life and life satisfaction without a specific reference to God, religion or the sacred) (Paloutzian et Ellison, 1982 ; Ellison, 1983).

Spiritual maturity is indeed associated with a certain number of benefits:
- the first one is the ability to appreciate and benefit from the gains associated with ageing, as the spiritually mature adult is able to open himself more deeply to his inner self and the beauty of the environment he lives in, the latter becoming a source of intense joy. Ageing cannot be perceived negatively at that stage, since it leads to inner peace and a greater intensity in the relationships with alterity, in both its human and natural dimensions (Bergeron, 1999).
- the second benefit comes from the fact that spiritual maturity enables the older adult to better accept the changes associated with ageing and to find some meaning to illness when it occurs. This contributes to reducing the stress associated with sickness and ageing as the senior adult who enjoys inner peace is able to better accept the limits of the environment he lives in and will not try to influence its balance. In other words, self determined peace establishes a stable human environment that is well suited to the older adult.
- spiritual maturity gives the senior the meaning of life, especially its last years. To the difficult questions of "Why am I old and sick ? why do I have to suffer the losses of my mental capabilities ?", each senior will find his own answers. Spirituality provides a framework for the analysis of the meaning of the last years of life, which involves accepting one's life as a whole, and without which might arise the feeling that one's one and only life has been spoiled The last years can take a positive meaning, of time used to enjoy what one has accomplished earlier and to reconcile with the events and the people which require it.
- spiritual maturity helps to reduce death anxiety. That is all the more true for the oldest adult, for whom this deadline is near. He has found the meaning of his life and death is a logical element of the life puzzle.

He has thought about life after death and has identified the various solutions available to leave a trace behind him. He can resolve to die and prepare for dying.

3.   Method:

An extensive multi-disciplinary review of literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, gerontology, psychiatry, health and marketing was undertaken. Content analysis revealed five categories of influences of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults: spiritual values and one's level of spiritual commitment, one's level of spiritual development, spiritual development as a context, spiritual consumption value and spiritual motivations for consumption (Ulvoas, 2009).

Given the importance of these growing demographics in most developed economies and the size of certain age-related sectors, testable propositions were then developed to enable future study.

4.   Findings:

Research propositions derive from these five categories of influence of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults.

4.1. Influence of the spiritual values and the level of spiritual commitment:

Values influence the formation of attitude, and erect consumption limits and taboos; the stronger the level of spiritual commitment, the stronger this influence (Homer and Kahle, 1988; Mokhlis, 2006). They also shape consumption ethics while prescribing the rejection of non compatible consumption behaviours and the adoption of those in line with spiritual values or religious prescriptions (Shaw and al., 2005; Mokhlis, 2006). Seniors are expected to be spiritually more mature and thus to score higher on the self-transcendence values of universalism (social justice, tolerance and equality for all) and benevolence (generosity and seeking the welfare of others, including nature) as described by Schwartz (2006).

In this context, research propositions directly derived from this would be:

P1a: Seniors have a favourable attitude toward the consumption of products and services which they perceive to be respectful of or to promote the values of social justice, peace, equality for all and the welfare of others including nature. The stronger their spiritual commitment, the stronger their attitude.

P1b: Seniors have an unfavourable attitude toward the consumption of products and services which they perceive are not respectful of or do not promote the values of social justice, peace, equality for all and the welfare of others including nature. The stronger their spiritual commitment, the stronger their attitude.

4.2. Influence of the level of spiritual development:

Spiritual development modifies consumers' identity, which leads to a shift in the orientation of their consumption, from ego satisfaction in early stages of spiritual development to an increasing sensitivity to the impact of their consumption on others in later stages (Ball et al., 2001; Hampton et al., 2002). Fowler (1981) has observed that seniors are usually characterized by higher levels of spiritual development. Hence, a research proposition could be stated as follows:

P2: Seniors consumers are more sensitive to the impact of their consumption on others. They will try to use consumption to create a positive impact on their environment.

4.3. Influence of the spiritual development context:

Spiritual development has been suggested to be a coping mechanism against the challenges of old age and seniors who have not yet reached their spiritual maturity are expected to undergo intensive spiritual growth. In this context where spiritual growth becomes a priority, we can predict that seniors will use consumption experiences to fuel their spiritual development. Therefore, they could either use consumption to explore the objects of their spirituality more deeply or to find meaning. Research propositions could be stated as follows:

P3a: Spiritually developing seniors will be more likely to choose consumption experiences involving a high level of meaning content.

P3b: Spiritually developing seniors who seek connection to their inner self will be more likely to choose internally-focused consumption experiences.

P3c: Spiritually developing seniors who seek connection to their human alterity will be more likely to choose outer-directed consumption experiences.

P3d: Spiritually developing seniors who seek connection to their natural alterity will be more likely to choose nature-directed consumption experiences.

P3e: Spiritually developing seniors who seek connection with the sacred will be more likely to choose consumption experiences involving a transcendental emotion potential.

4.4.   Influence of the spiritual value of the market offering:

As a market offering can be entrusted with a spiritual value which contributes to the overall consumption value as perceived by the consumer (Holbrook, 1999; Aurier, Evrard and N'Goala, 2004), we can expect the usually more spiritual senior consumers to be sensitive to the perceived spiritual value of a market offer. As thus:

P4: Senior consumers will be more likely to perceive a market offering including a significant spiritual value as superior to a market offering which includes none.

4.5.   Spiritually motivated consumption:

Spiritual needs generate spiritual motives for consumption (Skousgaard, 2006), which can be intrinsic and aimed at satisfying the spiritual values of the consumer, and extrinsic and aimed at enhancing the comfort level and social prestige of their beholder. Both motivations can coexist (Weaver and Agle, 2002). We formulate our two final propositions as:

P5a: Intrinsically spiritually motivated consumption of seniors is geared at satisfying spiritual needs.

P5b: Extrinsically motivated consumption of seniors is geared at increasing their comfort level and enhancing the way their environment perceives them.

5.   Conclusion, further research and managerial implications:

In a world where developed societies are characterized by a fast increasing senior population, understanding the needs of older adults has become a priority for marketers, as large consumption potentials are associated with this heterogeneous segment. In this context, parting from the traditional socio-demographic approach of seniors to include elements of human development has been suggested as a necessary path to better understand the needs of older adults (Guiot, 2006). Spirituality is one such element, which becomes all the more legitimate in the light of spiritual development theories which identify spirituality as a priority for seniors.

In this paper, we build on the conceptual framework elaborated earlier (Ulvoas, 2009) to design a series of testable research hypotheses for the influence of spirituality on the consumer behaviour of older adults. Out of the five avenues which we draw for the study of the influence of spirituality on senior consumption, a very interesting one is that of the influence of values aimed at creating a fairer and better world. This opens new perspectives for the understanding of motivations to purchase fair trade and environmentally friendly products for example, or the donor behaviour of older adults. Another important one is the potential for marketing to contribute, through the design of thoughtful and relevant consumption experiences, to the spiritual development of older adults. Last but not least is the role that the marketplace can play to allow senior consumers to express their spiritual values and create meaning through consumption.

At this stage, our work remains strictly conceptual and the main weakness of this paper lies in the absence of validation of the research propositions on a sample of senior consumers. Various markets have been identified as favourable for these tests, amongst which arts and culture, and tourism. The next step of our work will be to test our research propositions in relation to the tourist behaviour of older adults.

As a conclusion, we believe that marketing, whether we look at it from a traditional commercial standpoint or from a societal prospective, has a mission to fulfil to help satisfy the spiritual needs of older adults and thus contribute to their overall well-being.

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