Consumer perception of Halal products in a developing country setting: An empirical assessment amongst Sunni versus Shiite Muslim consumers

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to empirically investigate the effects of: religiosity level, ethnocentrism, product judgment, and trust in *Halal* food products on the consumer intention to purchase a Muslim (manufactured in a majority Muslim country) versus a foreign (manufactured in a majority non-Muslim country) product available on the Lebanese market across the two main Muslim sects, namely: Sunnism and Shiism.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employed a quantitative survey that was administered to a proportionate stratified sample of 607 respondents from the two sects.

Findings: Results indicate that Sunni consumers indicate a greater trust in, judgment of, and willingness to buy foreign *Halal* products than do their Shiite counterparts, while Shiite consumers display a greater trust in, judgment of, and willingness to buy Muslim products. Moreover, religiosity, ethnocentrism, brand trust, and product judgment have all been found to significantly influence consumer purchase intention.

Practical Implications: The study results exhibit that religious sect plays a key role in consumer purchase intention, which encourages decision makers and marketers to pursue identity, awareness and communication strategies while targeting Muslim consumers of both sects.

Originality/Value: Muslim consumers' perception of *Halal* products is a sorely under-researched area of study with minimal empirical data supporting such studies. The results of this study offer some insight into consumer behavior differences between members of the two sects.

Keywords: Halal products, ethnocentrism, trust, product judgment, willingness to buy.

Introduction

Religion plays a critical role in shaping individual beliefs and morals thus influencing consumption and purchasing decisions, and assessing products and advertisements (Farah & El Samad, 2014; Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004). Moreover, religion regulates what an individual is allowed to consume (Lindridge, 2005), for instance, Islam and Judaism strictly prohibit alcohol and pork, while both Hinduism and Buddhism forbid the intake of pork and beef (Lada, Tanakinjal, & Amin, 2009).

Muslims are estimated to account for 1.8 billion consumers worldwide, with Islam being the fastest growing religion in the world (Abdul-Talib & Abd-Razak, 2013; Alam & Sayuti, 2011). The *Halal* market has grown exponentially over the last few years and was estimated to be worth US$2.3 trillion in 2010 (The Halal Journal, 2010). This growth is due to the rising number of young educated Muslim consumers who are increasingly vocal about their demand for *Halal*-abiding products, as well as the increasing global presence of Muslim communities (Abdul-Talib & Abd-Razak, 2013).

Halal is an Arabic word that denotes permissible or lawful; it is an all-inclusive concept that encourages Muslim believers to adopt wholesome (*tayyeb*) products in all aspects of their lives and ensure that the products they consume are safe and healthy, both physically and spiritually (Badruldin, et al., 2012). The antonym of *Halal* is *Haram*, which signifies something that is forbidden or unlawful (Rajagopal, Ramanan, Visvanathan, & Satapathy, 2011; Wilson & Liu, 2010). A main doctrine of Islam is for followers to consume only *Halal* products and abstain from the usage of all that is deemed *Haram.*

All food products are considered *Halal* except for those specifically forbidden in the Quran or the Hadiths, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (Wilson & Liu, 2010; Lada, Tanakinjal, & Amin, 2009). *Halal* foods include meat and poultry slaughtered according to the Islamic teachings (*Zabiha*) and which have the name of Allah pronounced upon them during the afore-mentioned process (Bonne & Verbeke Wim, 2008). According to Islamic teachings, animals must be slaughtered with a sharp knife that cuts straight into the jugular veins and carotid arteries to generate maximum blood flow guaranteeing that no blood is left in the meat resulting in a swift, humane death (Ireland & Rajabzadeh, 2011).

Nonetheless, Islamic teachings differ amongst the two main Muslim sects, namely: Sunnism and Shiism. Initially, the Shiite Muslim denomination was formed after a historical conflict between Muslims regarding succession upon the death of Prophet Muhamed (PBUH): the Sunni Muslims believed that Abu Bakr Al Siddiq, a close compatriot of the Prophet and his father-in-law, was his rightful successor, while the Shiite Muslims believed Ali Bin Abi Taleb, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to be so (Farah & El Samad, 2015).

Strictly prohibited foods for both sects include alcohol, pork, blood, meat from a dead animal that has not been slaughtered in the name of Allah and any food item that has been in contact with or contaminated by *Haram* foods or its derivatives (Bonne & Verbeke Wim, 2008). This prohibition includes all carnivorous animals with fangs and claws as well as land-dwelling animals without ears such as insects, frogs, and snakes (Bonne & Verbeke Wim, 2008). Likewise, all intoxicants, such as alcohol, are firmly forbidden by the *Quran* and the *Hadith* (Badruldin, et al., 2012). Given the growing demand for Halal food products, a large number of companies worldwide have seen an opportunity to grow within this increasingly lucrative market (Alam & Sayuti, 2011). For the purpose of this study, a foreign Halal product is one that originates from a majority non-Muslim country whereas a Muslim Halal product is manufactured in a majority Muslim country.

The extensive literature review on this subject reveals that Muslim consumers' perception of *Halal* products is a sorely under-researched area of study: extant literature largely discusses this issue from a conceptual and exploratory perspective with almost non-existent empirical data (Abdul-Talib & Abd-Razak, 2013; Ireland & Rajabzadeh, 2011). Moreover, all manuscripts with empirical data that discuss the *Halal* market and its consumers utilize a convenience sampling method that leaves no room for generalizations (Lada, Tanakinjal, & Amin, 2009). Additionally, the majority of papers deal solely with the issue of *Halal* marketing in relation to meat products (Ahmed, 2008; Bonne & Verbeke Wim, 2008), or with the Halal supply chain itself (Tieman, Van der Vorst, & Ghazali, 2012). Most interestingly, the in-depth review of related literature indicates that no paper to date looked at Halal food evaluation across the different Muslim sects, with all papers focusing on Sunni Muslim consumers (Ireland & Rajabzadeh, 2011). Accordingly, the objective of this study is to empirically investigate, across various Muslim denominations, the effects of: (a) religiosity, (b) ethnocentrism, (c) product judgement, and (d) trust in the considered Halal food products on the consumer intention to purchase a given brand available on the market. The conceptual framework used in this study is shown in Figure 1.

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework Proposed

Impact of religiosity on Halal Brand Trust

Although Islamic teachings are quite straightforward with regards to halal food, their daily adoption is strictly linked to each consumer's level of religiosity, or degree to which he/she is committed to his/her religious beliefs and teachings (Vitell, 2009). Highly religious individuals tend to largely evaluate the world surrounding them based on their religious teachings; thus, they act differently than those who display lower religiosity levels (Worthington, et al., 2003). However, Bonne and Verbeke (2006) show that individuals can portray low religiosity, yet still adhere to their religion's dietary rules. Interestingly, international chains, such as KFC, Burger King, and Taco Bell, have realized a 20% increase in customers after receiving the *Halal* certification for their offerings (Sabri, 2006). Consumer concerns are greatly growing with regards to the *Halal* nature of certain products. Additives and extracts used in many food offerings may include *Haram* components, for example gelatin may contain swine derivatives, while other extracts may contain alcohol (Wilson & Liu, 2010).

To guide Muslim consumers in their food purchase decision-making process, multiple *Halal* certifications were developed worldwide. Ironically, this proliferation has led to great consumer confusion complicated even further by the various opinions held by Muslim clerics regarding what defines a *Halal* compliant product (Abdul-Talib & Abd-Razak, 2013). Indeed, consumers increasingly question the reliability of Halal certifications, especially in the case of products that are imported from non-Muslim countries (Badruldin , et al., 2012). For example, it has been noted that 70-80% of *Halal*-labeled food products in the United Kingdom are possibly not *Halal* with up to 90% of *Halal*-labeled meat sold in the country not meeting the proper slaughter requirements (Rios, Riquelme, & Abdelaziz, 2014).

Another area of concern for Muslim consumers is the *Halal* supply chain itself (Rajagopal, Ramanan, Visvanathan, & Satapathy, 2011). The process of producing and transporting the product, from raw material to purchase point, must ensure no cross-contamination with *Haram* products (Tieman, Van der Vorst, & Ghazali, 2012; Al-Qaradawi , 1997), an issue that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) warned of:

"The Halal is clear and the Haram is clear. Between the two there are doubtful matters concerning which people do not know whether they are Halal or Haram. One who avoids them in order to safeguard his religion and his honor is safe" (Sahih Bukhari).

Moreover, many Western countries tend to stun an animal before it is slaughtered, a procedure that has generated great controversy amongst Muslim clerics. Muslim *sheikhs* in Australia, for instance, deem this process *Halal* and provide certification for such meat while clerics in Malaysia judge it as *Haram* (Wilson & Liu, 2010). While the process is not used in many markets with a large Muslim population, the matter remains of significant relevance in countries relying highly on food imports.

The above-mentioned controversial aspects related to Halal food considerations have, to varying degrees, affected consumer trust in Halal food products. This issue appears to be closely related to the source of the brand, leading the researchers to hypothesize:

H1a: The stronger the level of consumer religiosity, the lower the level of brand trust in foreign Halal products.

H1b: The stronger the level of consumer religiosity, the higher the level of brand trust in Muslim Halal products.

Muslim Denominations and *Halal Consumption*

In terms of food consumption, certain dietary differences exist between the two Muslim sects with Shiite Muslims facing greater restrictions compared to their Sunni counterparts (Cook, 1986). For instance, most Sunni schools permit the consumption of seafood in all its forms:

"Permitted to you is the catch of the sea and the food of it" (The Quran, Chapter 5, Verse 96).

Shiite scholars, on the other hand, only consider seafood with scales, including shrimps, *Halal* as per the traditions of the Imams (Chehabi, 2007). In addition, Sunni Muslims are permitted to eat meat slaughtered by a Christian or a Jew (Binbaz, 1999), otherwise known as the 'People of the Book':

"The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them" (The Quran, Chapter 5, Verse 5).

However, Shiite Muslims are forbidden from eating meat slaughtered by a non-Muslim and only consider meat slaughtered by a Muslim who is facing the *Qibla*, the location of the *Kabaa*, during the slaughter to be *Halal* (Al-Sistani, 2015). Given that foreign Halal products could be produced by non-Muslim manufacturers, the researchers hypothesize:

H2: Shiite Muslim consumers show lower levels of brand trust in foreign Halal products than do their Sunni Muslim counterparts.

Consumer Ethnocentrism and Brand Trust

Consumers typically hold specific opinions of each country shaped partly by a country's political, social, and economic background (Hu, Li, Xie, & Zhou, 2008). Animosity towards a certain state decreases consumer trust of any brand that comes from that nation, which negatively impacts consumer purchase intention (Abosag & Farah, 2014). Additionally, Maheswaran (1994) indicates that consumers tend to use extrinsic product cues, such as country of origin, as purchase determinants instead of using intrinsic product features.

Furthermore, ethnocentric consumers tend to favor the purchase of domestic products (Erdogan & Uzkurt, 2010). Notably, ethnocentrism is defined as "*a view in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated in reference to it*" (Sumner, 1906). It is based upon common group beliefs, ideals and behaviors as well as the attitude that one's ethnic, religious, or cultural group is superior to others (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). Indeed, Shimp and Sharma (1987) highlight that ethnocentric customers are more likely to associate a substandard quality with imported products and hence are less likely to trust and purchase such products than their non-ethnocentric counterparts causing the researchers to propose the following:

H3a: Muslim consumer ethnocentrism leads to a higher level of consumer brand trust in Muslim Halal products.

H3b: Muslim consumer ethnocentrism leads to a lower level of consumer brand trust in foreign Halal products.

Brand Trust and Product Judgment

Consumer trust is the perception that a given brand can be relied on (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1992). Particular countries are trusted more than others by certain consumers; accordingly, products are at times judged mainly on their country of origin (Bolliger & Reviron, 2008). Country-of-origin has been shown to significantly impact product judgment through a focus on product quality, trustworthiness, value, sincerity, and technological progression (Abosag & Farah, 2014). Ethnocentric consumers have a personal preference to purchase products from their own country or from countries with similar cultural backgrounds as this generates a feeling of personal ownership and affiliation with the brand (Darling & Arnold, 1988). In the context of our study, consumer trust works in favor of Muslim *Halal* brands that gain the chance to cast suspicions about the *Halal* nature of foreign brands. The latter are likely to ignite concerns leaving international brands subject to consumer mistrust, hostility and animosity (Mukhtar & Butt, 2012). Based on these arguments, the researchers hypothesize:

H4a: Muslim consumers are likely to show higher trust in Muslim Halal products than in foreign Halal products

H4b: The higher the level of consumer brand trust, the more favorable the consumer product judgment with regards to Muslim Halal products.

H4c: The higher the level of consumer brand trust, the less favorable the consumer product judgment with regards to foreign Halal products.

Relationship between Brand Trust and Willingness to Buy

Brand trust is positively related to brand loyalty since it creates an exchange between the consumer and the brand prompting an ongoing and valuable relationship between both (Sahin, Zehir, & Kitapçı, 2011; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This trust makes the consumer willing to pay a premium price for the product, buy other brands affiliated with it, and spread positive related word of mouth amongst peers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Besides, brand trust acts as a predictive indicator of consumer future behavior by explaining one's purchase intention or lack thereof (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán, & Yagüe-Guillén, 2003). Accordingly, the researchers suggest:

H5a: The higher the level of consumer brand trust, the stronger the Muslim consumer's willingness to buy Muslim Halal products.

H5b: The lower the level of consumer brand trust, the weaker the Muslim consumer's willingness to buy foreign Halal products.

Relationship between Product Judgment and Willingness to Buy

Rios, Riquelme, and Abdelaziz (2014) conducted a survey in Kuwait to examine the trustworthiness of Halal certifications from various Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The results indicate that companies from non-Muslim countries are at a disadvantage when compared to their counterpart Muslim companies since they face lower perceived consumer trustworthiness both in terms of Halal certification and product judgment. Likewise, the findings signify that Kuwaiti consumers have more positive opinions of and prefer to purchase local brands or those from neighboring countries with similar cultures to those from other countries (Rios, Riquelme, & Abdelaziz, 2014). Indeed, a Muslim is deemed religiously responsible in front of God to ensure that the food sold by him is *Halal* which leaves Muslim consumers more likely to hold a favorable judgment of Muslim sellers and are more likely to purchase such products (Tieman, 2011). Consequently, the researchers hypothesize:

H6a: The higher the level of consumer product judgment, the higher the willingness to buy Muslim Halal products

H6b: The lower the level of consumer product judgment, the lower the willingness to buy foreign Halal products

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

Lebanon was chosen as a test-bed for this study given the equal division of its Muslim community, representing 50% of the Lebanese population, between the two main Islamic sects (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015). Similarly to previous studies conducted in Lebanon (Farah & El Samad, 2014; Farah & Newman, 2010), data collection was completed through landline phone interviews and used proportionate stratified random sampling of the Lebanese Muslim ctiizens from across the five Lebanese governorates, or administrative divisions, namely: Beirut, Beqaa, North Lebanon, South Lebanon, and Mount Lebanon, while maintaining a fair representation of gender and age. The governorates are chosen as a tool of stratification due to the fact that Lebanese citizens from alike religious sects are inclined to group within the same geographic areas (Farah & El Samad, 2015). The percentage of each sect per conglomerate was obtained from the Lebanese electoral lists of 2012 as provided by the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. The sampling contact database was provided by a local research company which not only gave access to a list of up-to-date residential phone numbers but also largely assisted in conducting the survey. This design was chosen in order to provide a representative cross-section sample of all the Lebanese Muslim subgroups based on their denominations (Farah & El Samad, 2014).

Twenty preliminary semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted prior to the survey to examine how the above-mentioned factors, namely: religious denominations, religiosity, ethnocentrism, product judgement, and brand trust, impact Muslim consumers' purchase intention of both Muslim and foreign Halal food products. The interviewees were all acquaintances of the researchers, and were chosen based on their diverse sects, religiosity levels, educational backgrounds, and age. All interviewees were asked to provide their opinions of both foreign and Muslim Halal brands. Response confidentiality was strongly stressed in order to avoid social desirability bias, a common issue in interviews that discuss sensitive topics (Farah & El Samad, 2015). All the interviews were recorded and then content analyzed to assure that the scales adopted in the research instrument fit the context of the Lebanese Muslim market.

Measures

The survey instrument originally consisted of six sections related to the main constructs of the study as well as consumers' demographics. The first section includes demographic questions that address respectively: gender, age, religious sect, marital status, education level, occupation, monthly income and governorate. The second part of the questionnaire aims to measure consumer religiosity using the Religious Commitment Inventory 10 (RCI-10), a 10-item scale which intends to evaluate the interpersonal, cognitive, and interpersonal behavioral dimensions of religiosity (Worthington, et al., 2003). This scale is deemed the best measure of religiosity by researchers as it avoids sectarian languages serving as a neutral measure of faithfulness (Worthington, et al., 2003). Moreover, an additional question required respondents to directly assess their religiosity level on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 being not a devout follower at all, and 5 being a very devout follower. The use of such a self-reported religiosity scale has been shown to generate a fair degree of accuracy (Farah & El Samad, 2014).

The third part aims to measure consumer brand trust in both Muslim and foreign Halal products using a 9-item scale utilized by Sahin, Zehir, and Kitapci (2011) and adapted from original scales developed by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), and Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen (2003). According with the study objectives, the afore-mentioned scale is modified into an 18-item scale that measures brand trust in Muslim versus foreign *Halal* products. Respondents are invited to express their brand trust level on a 5-point Likert scale, with the anchors 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

The fourth part of the questionnaire measures respondent ethnocentrism. It consists of a 17-item scale adapted from the Shimp and Sharma (1987) ethnocentrism CETSCALE that employs 5-point Likert statements (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) and has been validated for use in various countries (Saffu & Walker, 2005). The original CETSCALE was developed to measure consumer ethnocentric tendencies in relation to foreign versus American products, however for the purpose of this study it was amended to measure ethnocentric inclinations for foreign versus Muslim Halal products.

The following part is adapted from Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal's (1991) 5-item scale that emphasizes the relationship between price and willingness to buy a certain product (Dodds, 1995; Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991). It is modified to measure consumer willingness to purchase at the price offered for foreign or Muslim *Halal* products by allowing for a response of 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) for each construct.

The final section aims to measure consumer product judgement by employing a 9-item scale adapted from Darling and Arnold (1988) for both foreign and Muslim Halal products. It measures product judgement in terms of competence, suitability, technological development, quality, dependability, design and price (Abosag & Farah, 2014; Darling & Arnold, 1988). Respondents are asked to indicate their agreement with statements regarding each of these constructs on a 5-point Likert scale.

Based on the pilot study, the researchers decided to condense the six initial sections into four main parts: first, a demographic-related section, followed by a table combining the scales related to ethnocentrism, religiosity, and subjective norms, then one merging consumer trust of Muslim Halal food products, as well as their judgement and willingness to buy such products, and finally a table uniting the same items yet for foreign Halal food products. Moreover, scale items were randomly shuffled since their systematic ordering could cause potential bias and response distortions (Knauper & Schwarz, 2004).

Administering the survey in English would have led to a significant distortion of the results since a large proportion of the Lebanese population, especially the older generation, are not fluent English speakers (Farah & Newman, 2010). In order to avoid this sampling error, the researchers decided to translate the survey to Arabic and administer it based on the respondent's language eloquence and preference. The original English survey was translated into Arabic by two native Arabic speakers with a high proficiency in the English language. This was followed by a blind reverse-translation into English by a different translator with no reference to the original English version. The researchers then examined all three versions of the survey to ensure that the congruity of the meanings was maintained. Finally, the Arabic version of the survey was pilot-tested amongst seven acquaintances of the researchers and minor modifications were made based on their feedback.

The questionnaire required around 10 minutes to complete. The total sample size was 607, with a balanced representation of female and male respondents with 312 to 295 respondents respectively. Additionally, the sample was comprised of 305 Sunnis and 302 Shiite Muslims representing 50.2% and 49.8% of the total sample. The respondent distribution by governorate was also fairly proportional to the Lebanese Muslim population distribution, with 15.5% from Beirut, 5.3% from Mount Lebanon, 20.9% from Bekaa, 24.7% from Northern Lebanon, and 33.8% from Southern Lebanon. The sample also had a balanced representation of various age groups, marital statuses, education levels, occupations, and monthly income levels. The demographic profile of the respondents is detailed in Table 1.

Results

The means and standard deviations of the various constructs for both Sunni (*Su*) and Shiite (*Sh*) consumers with regards to both Muslim and foreign hallal products were computed. Results show that Sunni Muslims (*Su*) exhibit a higher level of trust in *(Su: M=3.17, SD=0.50; Sh: M=2.73, SD=0.58)*, judgment of *(Su: M=3.87, SD=0.38; Sh: M=3.31, SD=0.41)*, and willingness to buy foreign products *(Su: M=3.65, SD=0.60; Sh: M=3.24, SD=0.60)* than do their Shiite (*Sh*) counterparts. Shiite consumers, on the other hand, show a greater degree of trust in *(Su: M=3.26, SD=0.65; Sh: M=3.58, SD=0.80)*, judgment of *(Su: M=3.32, SD=0.49; Sh: M=4.01, SD=0.52)*, and willingness to buy Muslim products *(Su: M=3.46, SD=0.71; Sh: M=3.70, SD=0.86)* than do Sunni consumers.

Reliability and validity of constructs

Reliability and validity for each of the constructs has been tested using Cronbach's alpha with the scores for each found in Table 2. The scores lie between 0.74 and 0.98 for Shiite Muslim consumers and between 0.69 and 0.95 for Sunni consumers. A Cronbach's Alpha score above 0.7 is considered an adequate representation of reliability (Field, 2009). The judgment of foreign products construct, however, has a slightly lower Cronbach's Alpha with a reliability score of 0.61 and 0.63 for Sunni and Shiite Muslims respectively. These numbers are deemed acceptable since questionnaires with diverse psychological constructs are expected to have reliability scores lower than 0.7, yet are still considered reliable (Field, 2009). Moreover, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Root Mean Residual (RMR) tests of reliability were computed for each construct. All the constructs are deemed reliable falling at RMSEA and RMR values below 0.08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The GFI, goodness of fit, reliability test was similarly completed for all the constructs, and all constructs satisfy the recommended criteria for

GFI > 0.9 (Byrne, 1994). Additionally, all constructs are deemed significant at the 90% confidence interval.

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM), a statistical modeling technique that allows for the estimation of several separate, yet inter-reliant, regression equations, providing an implied structure for the covariances between a number of observed variables (Ahmed, Anang, Othman, & Sambasivan, 2013). Four sets of SEM were conducted to evaluate the interactions between the variables related to each of Muslim (M) and foreign (F) *Halal* products for both Sunni and Shiite respondents. Based on the SEM findings, the researchers infer the following: A negative relationship is found between respondent religiosity levels and their trust in foreign *Halal* products for both Sunni (*r= -0.60, t= -7.97, p= 0.00*) and Shiite Muslims (*r= -0.01, t= -1.90, p= 0.02*), thus supporting *H1a*.

On the other hand, a positive link has been established between religiosity and trust in Muslim Halal products for Sunni (*r= 0.47, t= 7.94, p= 0.00*) and Shiite (*r= 0.59, t= 5.17, p= 0.00*) respondents thus validating *H1b*. The results also indicate that Shiite Muslims (*M=2.73, SD=0.58)* show lower levels of trust in foreign products than do Sunni Muslims (*M=3.17, SD=0.50)*, which in turn supports *H2*.

H3a establishes a positive relation between consumer ethnocentrism and trust in Muslim products (*Su: r= 0.34, t= 6.13, p= 0.00; Sh: r=0.29, t= 2.63, p= 0.00)* and is supported by the survey findings. Additionally, high consumer ethnocentrism caused a decreased trust in foreign products (*Su: r= -0.51, t= -7.08, p= 0.00; Sh: r=-0.58, t= -3.17, p= 0.018*) hence validating *H3b*.

Moreover, Lebanese Muslim consumers show higher trust in Muslim *Halal* products for both sects (*Su: M=3.26, SD=0.65; Sh: M=3.58, SD=0.80)* than in foreign *Halal* products (*Su: M=3.17, SD=0.50; Sh: M=2.73, SD=0.58)*, which in turn confirms *H4a*. Consumers from both sects (*Su: r= 0.93, t= 10.23, p= 0.00; Sh: r=0.92, t= 11.92, p= 0.00)* display a positive relationship between trust in Muslim products and consumer judgment of the aforementioned products thus supporting *H4b*. However, low consumer trust in foreign products diminished consumer judgment of such products for both Sunni (*r= -0.84, t= -11.43, p= 0.00*) and Shiite respondents (*r= -0.85, t= -7.44, p= 0.00*), allowing the acceptance of *H4c*.

A direct link is also established between trust in Muslim products and willingness to buy such products (*Su: r= 0.37, t= 3.80, p= 0.00; Sh: r=0.64, t= 4.93, p= 0.00)*, while an a low level of trust in foreign products was directly linked to a decrease in consumer willingness to buy such products (*Su: r= -0.43, t= -2.32, p= 0.00; Sh: r=-0.56, t= -6.42, p= 0.00)*, thus validating *H5a* and *H5b* respectively.

Finally, the results indicate a positive relationship between consumer judgment of Muslim products and their willingness to buy the latter (*Su: r=0.44, t=1.25, p=0.05; Sh: r=0.26, t=1.69, p=0.046)*, while a low judgment of foreign products caused a decrease in willingness to buy these products (*Su: r=-0.44, t=-2.32, p=0.023; Sh: r=-0.25, t=-1.81, p=0.036)* supporting *H6a* and *H6b* respectively.

Discussion

The results indicate that Sunni consumers display a greater trust of, judgment in, and willingness to buy foreign *Halal* products than do their Shiite counterparts. Research has indicated that Sunni governments and nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar, have warm and friendly relationships with Western countries, such as the US and the UK (Farah & El Samad, 2015). However, a sense of mutual hostility exists between the West and the only country with Shiite rule, Iran; likewise, the west has an apprehensive relationship with one of the main Shiite groups and governmental players in Lebanon, the Hezbollah party (Farah & El Samad, 2015). Negative reactions to foreign policies and political relationships seems lead to consumer resentment, which in turn lowers one's judgment of products from these 'foreign nations', and thus decreases consumer willingness to buy such products (Nijssen & Douglas, 2004). This holds true even in cases where the foreign product is superior, since quality does not counterweigh consumer animosity (Ahmed, Anang, Othman, & Sambasivan, 2013). However, it must be noted that the Western-Shiite relationships are expected to take a more positive turn after the US and Iran reached a consensual deal regarding the nuclear power of Iran as of April, 2015 (The White House, 2015).

Additionally, Shiite consumers appear to be less trusting of foreign *Halal* products since they have a much stricter definition of what makes a product *Halal* than do Sunni Muslims. As previously noted, Shiite Muslims are only permitted to eat *Halal* meat slaughtered by a Muslim. According to Ayatollah Al-Sayyid Al-Sistani, one of the most prominent Shiite clerics today, the *Halal* label on a food product is of no value on its own, and Muslims must ensure that the producer of the food product is a Muslim or from a country where the Muslim community represents the majority (Al-Sistani, 2015). Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, are permitted to consume meat slaughtered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, hence they are not required to ask further questions about the origin of Halal meat if it is produced in a Christian or Jewish country (Al-Munajjid, 2015) based on the following *Hadith*:

> *"Some people said: O Messenger of Allah, some people bring meat to us, and we do not know whether they mentioned the name of Allah over it or not. The Messenger of Allah (peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Mention the name of Allah over it and eat." (Sahih Al Bukhari)*

Moreover, in confirmation of the above-mentioned information, Shiite clerics strictly forbid the consumption of kosher food (Al-Sistani, 2015), whilst Sunni clerics regard kosher meat as *Halal* and fulfilling of the guidelines of a valid slaughter (Al-Munajjid S. S., 2015).

Moreover, and in further confirmation of our study results, Muslim religiosity plays a central role in the formation of trust and loyalty towards religiously-compliant local products that consumers identify with (Taylor & Halstead, 2014); this can in turn lead to a certain animosity and distrust of foreign products (Tabassi, Esmaeilzadeh, & Sambasivan, 2012). Moreover, research has indicated that positive product judgment increases both brand trust and consumer willingness to buy a certain product (Abosag & Farah, 2014). Likewise, consumers tend to have a more positive perception of local products than they have for foreign products, which in turn increases consumer willingness to purchase domestic products which consequently lowers consumers' willingness to purchase foreign products (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2001). Finally, consumers tend to evaluate more positively and trust products from similar backgrounds thus generating a greater purchase intention in relation to such products while the opposite holds true for product from dissimilar countries (Watson & Wright, 2000).

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents vital implications for marketers as it studies the various links between consumer sect, religiosity, ethnocentrism, brand trust, product judgment and last but not least for marketers, consumers' willingness to buy both Muslim versus foreign *Halal* products. It implies that one's sect can act as a key indicator in how consumers perceive and behave with regards to Muslim and foreign *Halal* products. This provides marketers with an insight of both Sunni and Shiite Muslim consumers' purchase behavior towards *Halal* food products. Moreover, decision makers and marketers can use this information to pursue awareness and communication strategies while targeting Muslim consumers of both sects thus allowing for an increased market segment and an enhanced positioning strategy.

Nonetheless, the limitations of this study must be considered as they point out directions for future research. First, the paper does not account for the impact of different religiosity levels within each sect on the afore-mentioned variables. This is of importance since consumers high on the religiosity scale may react differently to *Halal* product country of origin than do their counterparts on the other end of the spectrum. It would be of great interest for future research to study how religiosity levels within each sect impact consumer product judgment and willingness to buy *Halal* products. Moreover, this study focuses solely on the case of Lebanese Muslim consumers without taking into consideration Sunni and Shiite Muslims from other cultures. A study of similar nature could be replicated on a cross-cultural scale in nations such as Bahrain and Iraq with similar sectarian divisions to verify whether differences in cultural backgrounds create differing attitudes and behaviors.

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Table 1: Sample Demographics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	312	51.4%
	Male	295	48.6%
Age	16-25	137	22.6%
	26-35	167	27.5%
	36-45	118	19.4%
	46-55	102	16.8%
	56-65	59	9.7%
	66 and above	24	4.0%
Religious Sect	Sunni	305	50.2%
	Shiite	302	49.8%
Marital Status	Single	208	34.3%
	Married without children	116	19.1%
	Married with children	213	35.1%
	Separated, divorced, widow	70	11.5%
Level of Education	Less than High School	46	7.6%
	High School	98	16.1%
	A vocational/technical degree	105	17.3%
	Undergraduate/Bachelor's degree	230	37.9%
	Postgraduate degree	128	21.1%
Occupation	Managerial Position	67	11.0%
	Employee	214	35.3%
	Government Servant	43	7.1%
	Self-employed	79	13.0%
	Student	109	18.0%
	Housewife	75	12.4%
	Retired	20	3.3%
Monthly Income	Less than $600	143	23.6%
	$601-$1500	232	38.2%
	$1501-$3000	149	24.5%
	$3001-$5000	67	11.0%
	More than $5000	16	2.6%
Governorate	Beirut	94	15.5%
	Mount Lebanon	32	5.3%
	Bekaa	127	20.9%
	Northern Lebanon	150	24.7%
	Southern Lebanon	204	33.6%

Table 2a: Reliability and Validity Tests (Sunni Muslim sample)

Sunni Muslim Variables	Reliability/CR/AVE	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	df	P-Value
Religiosity	0.95/0.96/0.7	0.993	0.036	0.034	35	6.39%
Ethnocentrism	0.95/0.97/0.66	0.99	0.027	0.043	119	5.25%
Brand Trust	0.89/0.97/0.79	0.98	0.039	0.05	27	5.65%
Judgment of Muslim products	0.69/0.95/0.7	0.99	0.038	0.063	27	6.36%
Willingness to buy Muslim Products	0.88/0.99/0.58	0.96	0.061	0.019	5	5.88%
Trust in foreign products	0.86/0.94/0.63	0.99	0.036	0.041	27	8.54%
Judgment of foreign products	0.61/0.91/0.52	0.99	0.036	0.041	27	8.65%
Willingness to buy foreign products	0.85/0.9/0.65	0.966	0.058	0.017	5	7.14%

Table 3b: Reliability and Validity Tests (Shiite Muslim sample)

Shiite Muslim Variables	Reliability/CR/AVE	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	df	P-Value
Religiosity	0.96/0.97/0.72	0.986	0.033	0.035	35	8.76%
Ethnocentrism	0.98/0.98/0.72	0.977	0.024	0.039	119	9.69%
Brand Trust	0.92/0.94/0.62	0.984	0.031	0.0562	27	14.80%
Judgment of Muslim products	0.74/0.92/0.55	0.993	0.040	0.0466	27	5.04%
Willingness to buy Muslim Products	0.93/0.99/0.57	0.968	0.015	0.011	5	37.81%
Trust in foreign products	0.89/0.9/0.51	0.992	0.039	0.025	27	5.52%
Judgment of foreign products	0.63/0.92/0.55	0.993	0.040	0.0443	27	5.06%
Willingness to buy foreign products	0.89/0.85/0.54	0.967	0.013	0.011	5	38.38%

Table 3: Results of the SEM model

Hypothesis Number	Sect	Relationship	Standardized Coefficient, *r*	*t*-value / *p*-value
1a	Sunni	Religiosity and foreign brand trust	-0.60	-7.97/0.00
	Shiite		-0.01	-1.90/0/02
1b	Sunni	Religiosity and Muslim brand trust	0.47	7.94/0.00
	Shiite		0.59	5.17/0.00
2a	Sunni	Ethnocentrism and trust in Muslim products	0.34	6.13/0.00
	Shiite		0.29	2.63/0.00
2b	Sunni	Ethnocentrism and trust in foreign products	-0.51	-7.08/0.00
	Shiite		-0.58	-3.17/0.018
4b	Sunni	Trust and judgment of Muslim products	0.93	10.23/0.00
	Shiite		0.92	11.92/0.00
4c	Sunni	Trust and judgment of foreign products	-0.84	-11.43/0.00
	Shiite		-0.85	-7.44/0.00
5a	Sunni	Trust in Muslim products and willingness to buy them	0.37	3.80/0.00
	Shiite		0.64	4.93/0.00
5b	Sunni	Trust in foreign products and willingness to buy them	-0.43	-2.32/0.00
	Shiite		-0.56	-6.42/0.00
6a	Sunni	Consumer judgment of Muslim products and willingness to buy them	0.44	1.25/0.05
	Shiite		0.26	1.69/0.046
6b	Sunni	Consumer judgment of foreign products and willingness to buy them	-0.44	-2.32/0.023
	Shiite		-0.25	-1.81/0.036