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Religious beliefs and consumer behaviour: from loyalty to boycotts

Religious beliefs

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Abstract

Purpose – In a constantly changing and increasingly globalised world, religions still play a significant role in influencing social and consumer behavior. The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual model that explores the link between religious beliefs and consumers' boycotts towards particular products. Certain important concepts are linked to boycott, these include: conspicuous consumption of global brands, animosity and country of origin.

Design/methodology/approach – First, a critical literature review on empirical consumer animosity, conspicuous consumption, religion, and consumption studies is undertaken. Second, qualitative techniques are used to collect the primary data. This is undertaken with reference to the case study of boycotting of the international Danish brands in Saudi Arabia, in order to highlight the relative emphasis of each of the factors that may influence consumer purchase behaviour of global brands.

Findings – The findings of this study show that there is a strong relationship and a clear link between religiosity in Arabic/Islamic collectivist cultures and consumer behaviour (mainly boycotting). It also shows that consumers in such societies are collectively influenced by these factors when formulating their purchase decisions, particularly for international brands.

Research limitations/implications – The sample was chosen from Saudi students living/studying in the UK. Hence, caution should be applied when generalising across other cultures. A future, larger-scale survey using questionnaire would be useful to confirm qualitative results drawn from this study. The findings of this paper offer pivotal implications for decision makers and the managers of those multinational companies who are interested in the Middle Eastern market.

Originality/value – As a result of the increasing gap and cultural conflict between the Western and Muslim worlds, many international companies are negatively affected by the changes in the international environment, which is reflected in consumer behaviour. This is particularly highlighted when these events are related to religious issues. Although the consumer boycott phenomenon has existed for more than a century, only recently has it gained more popularity and motivated researchers to acknowledge it from a marketing/managerial perspective. Also, the paper offers guidance for future research in a field of research that is still in its infancy.

Keywords Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Consumer behaviour, Country of origin, Beliefs, Boycott, Religiosity, Collectivist cultures, Conspicuous consumption

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

One of the major hallmarks of the twenty-first century business environment is the phenomenal growth of globalisation. Today's interconnectedness, trade relations and global mutual dependence impose diverse challenges on company's strategists. The world trade has grown exponentially as a result of globalisation. Transportation of

people and goods to all areas of the world has never been as fast and cost-effective as it is today (Pinho and Martins, 2010).

The buying behaviour is not only restricted by social, political and economic opportunities, but also influenced by cultural frameworks of consumers' environments (Willer, 2006). A linked issue is evident in politics and can be found in the form of xenophobia – the fear/hatred of those different from ourselves (e.g. foreigners) especially when religion is at the core of these differences (Reeves, 2003). One obvious example is when Christian fundamentalists have boycotted Jerry Springer the Opera when it was staged in the UK due to the portrayal of Jesus as a homosexual (Thomas, 2010). Friedman (1985, p. 97) defined the consumer boycott in its modern sense: “an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace”.

On present days, there are issues concerning the way certain countries and certain organisations are attempting to ban the wearing of religious symbols (Crumley, 2004). Moreover, many issues are shaping the political climate in the world today; these are at the heart of conflict between different cultures. For example, major events such as the September 11 and the events following lead to the Iraq war. In addition, more recently, as a reaction to the British writer Salman Rushdie having received an award for his work from the British Government lead to a demand to boycott British embassies and goods in the Arab and Muslim world who offended the symbols of Islam; prophet Mohamed and the holy *Quran* (Hoyle, 2007).

Also, consumers in Muslim and Middle Eastern countries have been urged to boycott Danish goods as a result of a religious conflict following the publication of Prophet Mohammed caricatures in a Danish newspaper (Knight *et al.*, 2009). Many Muslims say that the cartoons are extremely and deliberately offensive, expressing a growing European hostility towards Muslims. The portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims in general as terrorists is seen as particularly offensive (Knight *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, this boycott decreased the Danish company's sales in the Middle East to zero in a matter of days. The boycott of Arla's (the famous Danish company) products in the Middle East had cost Arla about 54 million euros. These events show the growing gap between east and west, i.e. between the west and Muslim communities (civilisations conflict); this reveals how vulnerable companies can be influenced by cultural conflicts (Willer, 2006).

However, although researchers have long recognised the importance of religious value systems in sociology (Anderson, 1970) and in psychology (Allport, 1967; Pargament and Hahn, 1986), few authors such as Essoo and Dibb (2004) have fully acknowledged and showed the role in consumer behavior studies. Most studies about boycott and consumers behavior towards foreign product have been conducted in the industrialised countries as the study of Rose *et al.* (2009) and Klein *et al.* (2004). Ettenson and Klein (2005) suggest that relevant research on consumer boycotts has surprisingly been paid much more attention by political science and organizational behavior rather than the field of consumer behavior. Therefore, the religious and cultural issues have been ignored as major drivers to participate in foreign products boycotts.

Moreover, Smith and Li (2010) investigated the effect of integrative motivation on the willingness to participate in boycott activities in China. In Islamic and Middle Eastern countries, very few studies have been conducted yet. More specifically, no attempts have been made to develop a conceptual model which can be fit to Muslim

consumers' behavior towards foreign products. Therefore, the present paper attempts to develop a conceptual model that investigates the different aspects affecting Muslim consumers' perceptions and behavior leading them to boycott a product that they were once a hard loyal to.

2. The study aim and objectives

In the light of the gap identified in the previous section, the current study proposes a conceptual model which explores the link between religious beliefs and consumer boycott. Certain constructs have been found – by examining the literature – to be linked to boycott. These include: conspicuous consumption of global brands, animosity towards foreign products as well as towards countries which is reflected in the concept of country of origin along with our main construct of interest that is expected to moderate the Muslim consumers buying behavior which is religious beliefs. More specifically, the study objectives are to:

- (1) explore the factors influencing consumers boycott towards particular products; and
- (2) identify the literature gap by reviewing the relevant literature; therefore, develop the appropriate conceptual model to bridge the investigated gap.

3. Literature review

This section identifies the different concepts related to boycotting behavior and how these concepts are linked together, which will formulate the basis for the conceptual model that will be proposed later on.

3.1 *Boycotting: (Danish products as a good example)*

In September 30, 2005, Denmark's largest newspaper printed 12 drawings depicting Prophet Muhammad implying that Islam preaches violence and condones terrorism. The blasphemous images caused uproar among Muslims around the globe and triggered a diplomatic crisis within Arab and Islamic countries. The Danish newspaper that had published the cartoons refused to apologize maintaining that it is a way to ensure freedom of speech. The Arabic media insisted that the publication of the cartoons had nothing to do with the freedom of expression. According to them, freedoms of expression do not mean freedom of to insult and while demanding an apology, suggested economic boycott and political action (Maamoun and Aggarwal, 2008).

Almost four months after the cartoons were published; the Middle East observed an unexpected indignation. On Friday January 20, 2006, religious clerics all over Saudi Arabia (during the weekly prayer service) called for the boycott of Danish products as a way to react to the cartoons. Within a few days, an enormous boycott of Danish dairy products started in Saudi Arabia. Danish products, from Lurpak butter to Lego toys, were quickly pulled off the shelves in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Tunisia, Jordan, and other countries around the Middle East as Muslims awaited an apology for the cartoons (Maamoun and Aggarwal, 2008).

3.2 *Global dynamics and culture: globalisation vs localisation*

The literature holds contradicting views regarding culture effect on consumer behavior; this is because culture comprises a certain number of components that include

languages, values, attitudes, customs, norms and religions of a group of society (Collinson and Rugman, 2007). De Mooij and Hofstede (2002) and Willer (2006) stressed that consumer behavior in the world will become more heterogeneous and therefore convergence is a myth of international marketing.

Many authors (Assael, 1998; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002; Huang *et al.*, 2010) have argued that influence of the globalisation leads to convergence of world's cultures. This convergence will lead to homogeneous needs, tastes, and lifestyles. Levitt (1984) was the first main supporter of the extended debate about standardised global marketing planning and he argued the globalisation of markets eliminates many national differences of world culture. In addition, homogenisation of consumer wants and needs would be created by using new technologies (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). Standardisation offers interesting cost savings, due to economies of scale and enables a company to get the greatest advantage from excellent thoughts and ideas and know-how created within the total organisation (Leonidas, 1996). Other advocates of the globalisation approach argue that development of global marketing mix strategies is the main way to succeed in international environments. This view can be justified by the acceleration of internationalisation of world economies and the parallel increase in global competition, improved living standards, economic combination, and trade liberalisation (Levitt, 1984; Leonidas, 1996; Farah and Newman, 2009).

However, many authors (Warner and Joynt, 2002; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002; Willer, 2006; Braunsberger and Buckler, 2009) have indicated that patterns of consumer behavior in the international markets show considerable differences and dissimilarities due to the heterogeneity which is caused by cultural differences. Moreover, there are many consumption differences among different countries due to differences in rationality levels of consumers buying decisions. Therefore, the assumption of rationality cannot be considered in a cultural context and it is characterised by unrealistic, impractical elements. De Mooij and Hofstede (2002) argued that homogenisation of consumer behaviour will not be created by converging technology and vanishing income differences, rather, consumers' behavior will become more different and heterogeneous as a result of cultural differences. As incomes converge across countries, the manifestation of value differences will become stronger. Therefore, it is obvious that the assumption of homogenisation underestimates the degree of cultural creativity that arises out of the interaction of global and local forces and therefore does not reflect reality because, culture and religious beliefs are among the last areas that are affected by global convergence (Willer, 2006).

Proponents of the localisation philosophy argue that standardisation inaccurately supposes cultural neutrality (Raymond *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, because of the inherent complexities and differences involved in working and operating in the international marketplace (Roper, 2005), it is more practical that special needs of each overseas market can be considered by a marketing program design (Douglas and Wind, 1987; Leonidas, 1996). The following factors were found to be influencing the consumer behavior and attitudes in the international context.

3.2.1 Religion and religiosity. The starting point of the proposed model is religion. Religion can be considered as catalysts for customer movement from loyalty to boycott. Religion defines and explains the values for life, which in turn are reflected in the values and attitudes of societies and human beings. Such values and attitudes shape form the behavior of institutions and members of cultures (Fam *et al.*, 2004).

For example, many public holidays are often binding to religion. The holy days for each religion differ significantly, for example, Christians view Easter and Christmas Day as two important dates; while Muslims consider Ramadan the holiest month. Religion does not directly impose obligations but usually moralistically sets certain values, beliefs, and practice requirements (Worthington *et al.*, 2003).

The importance of religious value systems in sociology has been recognised by researchers; however, few studies such as Delener (1990b) and Essoo and Dibb (2004) have fully acknowledged and showed its role in consumer behavior studies. They argued that consumers' behavior and in turn their purchasing decisions are greatly influenced by religion values. To develop the religiosity concept, two general components of religiosity are identified: religious affiliation and religious commitment (Worthington *et al.*, 2003).

In order to determine the influence of religion on consumer behavior, this study will look to religiosity in both sides' religious affiliation and religious commitment.

"Religious affiliation or the adherence of individuals to a particular religious group has been termed as ascribed status" (Essoo and Dibb, 2004, p. 686). Hirschman (1983) indicated that religious denominational affiliations may be viewed as "cognitive systems". "A cognitive system can be defined as a (collection) of beliefs, values, expectations and behaviors that are shared by members of a group or a society". This perspective suggests that members of religious group or society may have common and shared cognitive systems, which may control and impact that group's behavior (Essoo and Dibb, 2004). In addition, different aspects of choice behavior will be influenced by religious affiliations (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2006). Therefore, religious affiliations play an important role in forecasting of consumer behavior patterns (Solomon, 2007).

Religious commitment indicates to the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices, and uses them in daily living (Worthington *et al.*, 2003). Consumers' behavior and their purchasing decision can be categorised according to the degree to which consumers adhere to a particular faith, therefore, religiosity term indicates the degree to which people are committed to a particular religious group, the most significant cultural forces and a major influence in buyer behavior (Delener, 1990b; Essoo and Dibb, 2004; King and Crowther, 2004). These religious commitments and beliefs influence the feelings and attitude of people towards consumption. For example, the consumption of pork is prohibited in both Islam and Judaism but it is allowed in Christianity. In effect, religion influences what consumers belief, what they like, and what they dislike (Rehman and Shabbir, 2010).

Regardless of different degrees of religious commitment; religiosity are linked and correlated to particular consumer lifestyles. Consequently, "religiosity is a viable consumer construct because it is correlated with lifestyle variables such as opinion leadership, risk avoidance, credit purchase and life satisfaction" (Essoo and Dibb, 2004, p. 689). Therefore, it is argued that religiousness or religiosity, is an important value in the individual's cognitive structure, and can influence an individual's behavior toward buying products (Lau, 2010).

The connection and relationship between culture and religion can be shown through self identity and family (Lindridge, 2005). Culture can be identified by three ideational themes: "cognitive – language based, symbolic – objects, and structuralist – organisations, with the latter perhaps being the most relevant issue" (Lindridge, 2005, p. 143). Drawing upon the study of Levi-Strauss, the structuralist approach concentrates

on culture noticeable within social organisations and structures and the way in which they are learned and acted upon by the individual (Lindridge, 2005). As Reber (1985) considered that religion perpetuates societal structures, such as religious institutions, Lindridge (2005) therefore concluded that religion can be identified with the structuralist approach to culture. "A set of cultural norms and values, perpetuated through a structuralist cultural system, identifiable with collectivism and individualism can be extracted from a religion" (Lindridge, 2005, p. 143). Collectivism and individualism can be represented by the degree a culture supports, fosters and facilitates an independent and distinctive self over other group members (Brewer and Chen, 2007; Lindridge, 2005).

It is evident that a consumer adopts products, behaviors, and practices in an attempt to satisfy the way others look at them. With the dramatic increase in consumer choice, self identity has become a matter of personal selection of self-image (Hamilton and Hassan, 2010). Therefore, in cultural context and to build self identity of customers, conspicuous consumption may lead to boycott based on customers' religious beliefs.

3.2.2 Conspicuous consumption and products. Some researchers such as Belk (1988) and Amaldoss and Jain (2005) consider that the decision to purchase a "conspicuous" product depends not only on the material needs, but also on social needs. In addition, many authors, such as Piron (2000) and Wang and Chen (2004) consider that conspicuous consumption refers to consumers' who wish to provide evidence of their ability to purchase luxury goods. O'Casey and Frost (2002) assert that one important motivating force that influences a wide range of consumer behavior is the desire to gain status or social prestige from the acquisition and consumption of goods. Therefore, "marketers often create or (re)position products and brands to embody a particular social identity oriented lifestyle" (Reed Li, 2004, p. 286).

However, these consumers can also define themselves by what they do not buy or do not wish to buy "I would never wear a Rolex watch" or "I boycott Nike" or "I boycott Lurpak; Danish products" (Schroeder, 2000). Therefore, consumers may boycott some products or brands not for practical purposes but to give certain image about themselves.

Furthermore, consumers may consume some products in order to demonstrate their religious adherence (Lindridge, 2005). The research of Amaldoss and Jain (2005) identified the existence of two competing social needs among consumers: a need for uniqueness and a countervailing need for similarity. These needs form the basis of what we refer to as the desire for exclusivity and conformity. However, Bourne (1957 cited in Piron, 2000, p. 309) investigated the influence of reference groups on consumer purchasing decisions for a particular products and suggested that such decisions are a function of two forms of conspicuousness:

- (1) exclusive; and
- (2) seen or identified by others, visibility.

Piron (2000) considered that visibility relates to where a product is generally consumed and suggest that products are used either publicly under the influence and direct observation of reference groups or privately without any influence. Research (Sen *et al.*, 2001) suggests that people's consumption decisions are strongly influenced by their reference groups (i.e. groups that an individual uses as a guide for behavior in a specific situation).

Piron (2000) referred to conspicuousness as the social and public visibility surrounding the consumption of a product. For consumption to be conspicuous, they expect it to be a social event, publicly witnessed by other consumers. Therefore, “publicly used products are more conspicuously consumed/used than products that are consumed/used in the privacy of one’s home” (Piron, 2000, p. 309). Moreover, he considered that a product’s country of origin may have different levels of significance in a consumer’s purchasing or boycotting decision whether a product is used publicly or privately where reference group impacts may be decreased and reduced.

In this context, Sirgy *et al.* (1991) suggested that there is an indirect relationship between country of origin and consumers’ image, creating a desire to be publicly seen with country of origin – rated products congruent with the consumer’s personality. The proposed model shows that religious beliefs (religion, religiosity, culture, and self identify) which can create a conspicuous consumption in parallel with consumer animosity which may lead in result to consumers’ boycott towards particular products.

3.2.3 Consumer animosity in international marketing. Significant attention in international marketing literature has been paid to consumers’ animosity as a determinant of global product purchasing behavior (Rose *et al.*, 2009). Some studies examine the relationships among consumer animosity and other issues such as consumer efficacy, and consumers’ willingness to participate in boycott activity (Smith and Li, 2010). Tensions among countries are presented throughout the world (Bahae and Pisani, 2009). These tensions may come from economic arguments and regional disputes (e.g. India and Pakistan) (Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007).

Consumer animosity refers to strong negative emotions toward purchasing products from a disliked nation or group. The majority of consumer animosity studies have examined the attitudes of the members of one nation towards the products of another nation (Rose *et al.*, 2009).

Consumers’ animosity can be classified into four categories, namely, stable versus situational and personal versus national (Ang *et al.*, 2004; Amine *et al.*, 2005; Huang *et al.*, 2010). Steady; stable animosity comes from hard and complicated relations in the past between two countries and is a value transferred from one generation to the next, while situational animosity is closely related to present political and economic events. National animosity can be held by consumers toward a particular country based on perceptions of how that country has treated and dealt with their home country (as the US war in Iraq) (Amine *et al.*, 2005). Personal animosity results from depressing and negative personal experiences that may have happened during contacts with a foreign country or through relations with its citizens and nationals (Amine *et al.*, 2005).

Furthermore, Klein *et al.* (1998) were the first to link tensions between countries to consumers’ purchasing behavior, i.e. consumers motivation to purchase products stemming from companies linked with a country engaging in disapproved actions or behavior. In this context, Klein *et al.* (1998) presented the idea of consumer animosity which can be defined as “remnants of antipathy related to previous or ongoing military, political or economic events”. Using the Nanjing massacre by the Japanese in 1937 (in which 300,000 Chinese civilians died) as a historical background for the Chinese’s still persevering anger against Japan, they empirically showed that Chinese consumers’ willingness to purchase Japanese goods had been affected negatively by animosity. However, the quality of products coming from the hated nation is recognised and admitted

by consumers harbouring feelings of animosity, but still they tend to reject to purchase those quality products (Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007).

Importantly, animosity and ethnocentrism were shown to be distinct constructs (Bahae and Pisani, 2009; Rose *et al.*, 2009; Maher *et al.*, 2010), having obviously different effects on foreign product preferences. Therefore, ethnocentric consumers tend to avoid purchasing goods from any foreign country and feel that purchasing foreign products is wrong because it hurts the national economy, causes unemployment (John and Brady, 2010), while consumers holding feelings of animosity may find it well tolerable and suitable to purchase products from a variety of foreign countries but decline to buy products coming from one particular foreign country which is the target of animosity feelings (Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007; Guido *et al.*, 2010). Previous studies of foreign products have found that consumer animosity has no impact on judgments of product quality, as a result of country-of-origin effects. That is, consumers could recognise that a product is of quality by its country of origin, but still refuse to buy the product due to feelings of hostility towards the country (Ettenson and Klein, 2005; Rose *et al.*, 2009). Accordingly, the proposed model shows how consumers' animosity in consideration of product country of origin will result in boycott of the country products.

3.2.4 Country of origin. One of the most popular areas of research in international marketing is the country of origin stereotype and its effect on consumer behavior which has gained a research attention in recent years (Fraser and Fraser, 2002; Josiassen and Assaf, 2009). The effects of country of origin upon consumer perceptions, and purchase intentions remain of interest to marketing researchers (Russell and Russell, 2006; Bloemer *et al.*, 2009).

Some studies support the importance of country of origin on consumers' behavior, and even proposed that the country of origin should be the fifth element of the marketing mix, after price, promotion, product and distribution (Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998).

Country of origin is considered a related yet distinct construct from animosity (Amine *et al.*, 2005). Klein *et al.* (1998) was the first study which illustrates how buying decisions are influenced by a direct influence of products' country of-origin without considering products judgments. This challenged the common sense in the country-of-origin literature, according to which "made in" effects on consumers' willingness to purchase foreign products were supposed to impact on purchasing decisions indirectly by product judgments (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007; Russell and Russell, 2010; Tigli *et al.*, 2010; Jiménez and San Marn, 2010). In addition, Klein *et al.* (1998) noted that harbor animosity can be created by consumers toward a specific country while believing that the country produces high quality goods.

In the light of reviewing animosity literature, Amine *et al.* (2005, p. 128) considered that:

Consumers avoid purchasing products from countries that have engaged in hostile military, political, or economic acts against the consumers' home country, and they find these acts both grievous and difficult to forgive.

At present, innumerable conflicts take place around the world and tensions may exist between nations for different reasons such as military conflicts, divergence over foreign policy, tensions in international business, economic disagreements and religious conflicts (Wang, 2005).

Country of origin research is well documented in the international marketing literature; however, few studies in developing countries have been conducted to explore country-of-origin effects (Alden *et al.*, 1999; Sohail and Sahin, 2010). In order to develop effective marketing communication strategies, country of origin can be used to measure the varying perceptions and attitudes of consumers toward products of a clearly identifiable (Orth and Firbasova, 2002).

However, very few studies have been conducted to explore the tensions among countries which stem from a religious conflicts and the impact of this disputes on consumers' behavior towards products of companies from the offending nation (e.g. people in Islamic and Middle Eastern countries have recently expressed anger against Denmark following the publication of prophet Mohammed caricatures in a Danish newspaper).

4. The conceptual model of the study

In an increasingly globalised marketplace, there is evidence that foreign product purchase behavior vary across cultures. Most studies about boycott and consumers behavior towards foreign product purchase have been conducted in the industrialised countries such as Rose *et al.* (2009) and Klein *et al.* (2004). Ettenson and Klein (2005) suggest that relevant research on consumer boycotts has surprisingly been paid much more attention by political science and organizational behavior rather than the field of consumer behavior. Therefore, the religious and cultural issues have been ignored as major drivers to participate in foreign products boycotts.

Moreover, Smith and Li (2010) investigated the effect of integrative motivation on the willingness to participate in boycott activities in China. They used a previous model and adapt it to the context of Chinese circumstances. In Islamic and Middle Eastern countries, very few studies have been conducted yet. More specifically, no obvious attempts have been undertaken to develop a conceptual model which can be fit with Islamic consumers' behavior towards foreign products.

Consequently, in the light of the study issues and gap which are extracted based on literature review, the current study develop a conceptual model which proposes that loyalty toward a product or a country can be vastly moderated by religiosity (religious beliefs) and that this will affect negatively the customers perceptions of the country of origin, this negative feeling can become hostile and result in feelings of animosity which will end up in consumers moving to the extreme case of boycotting after they once have been hard loyals to a certain brand/product. Also, the negative perception of a certain country can affect conspicuous consumption negatively and result in the same thing. Some of the relationships between these different constructs are established in the literature, others will be established based on the qualitative study later on in this research. The conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1.

5. Research methodology

The present study is drawn from secondary sources of the literature and designed to investigate and explore the link between culture, religion, animosity, country of origin and conspicuous consumption of global brands and to highlight the relative emphasis of each of the factors that may influence consumer purchase behavior of global brands.

The relevant literature in the current study such as referred various books, journals in the area of boycott; religiosity, collectivist cultures, and consumer behavior are critically searched.

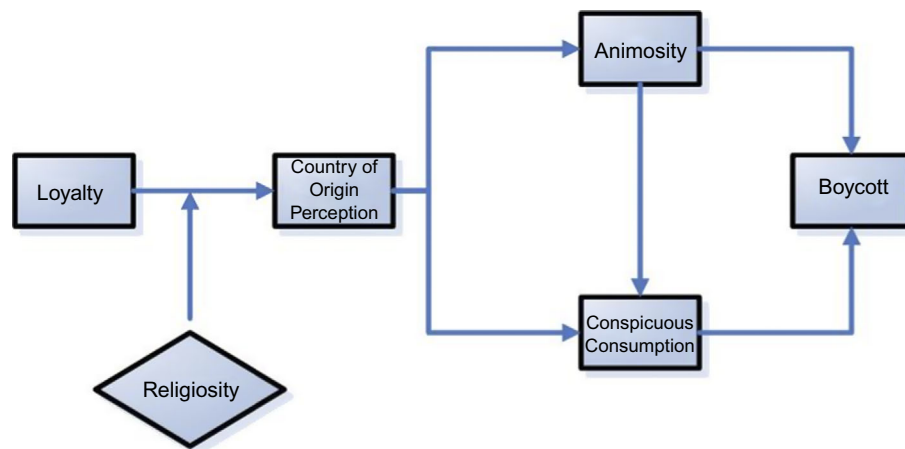


Figure 1.
The conceptual model
of the study

To achieve the study objectives, the authors eventually decided to use qualitative, inductive, interpretive; phenomenological research approach. Also, semi-structured as well as qualitative case study was used to achieve the aim of the research which is explore the factors influencing consumers boycott towards particular products, and to identify the literature gap by reviewing the relevant literature; therefore, develop the appropriate conceptual model to bridge the investigated gap.

In the interpretive philosophy, researchers such as Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008) did not start with any clearly preconceived set of hypotheses and theories to test and did not formulate explicit hypotheses and guides. However, they designed frame sample questions that investigate events which were taking place. Therefore, the researchers do not test any hypothesis in the study. Davis and Parker (1979, p. 24) stated that:

[...] some topics are not amenable to hypotheses statements. For example, conceptual development and comparative analysis are not usually able to be stated as hypothesis [...] and therefore the research methodology can be clarified and defined by restating the topic in terms of a set of objectives for the research.

It is previously known that culture and religion are linked; and religion is one of the culture's elements (Rugman and Collinson, 2006). However, this research has analysed to what extent, in the contemporary world, religiosity which is becoming a key driver of people consumption. Therefore, the current study's aim is to explore this new phenomenon; contemporary event and to increase general understanding of this situation. As a result, the researchers adopted a phenomenological approach philosophy rather than a positivist due to the nature of topic. This refers to that:

[...] phenomenology represents a philosophy approach to studying human experiences based on the idea that human experiences based on the idea that human experience itself is inherently subjective and determined by the context in which people live (Zikmund and Babin, 2007, p. 136).

This approach is appropriate to be selected in this study as the study interest is "socially constructed" phenomenon (Saunders *et al.*, 2006).

In order to match the aim of this research, qualitative semi-structured interviews are held with a sample of 15 Saudi Master's and PhD students at the Cardiff University – UK, aged between 24 and 28. Although the research is exploratory in nature, the researchers also employ an explanatory case study about Arla Danish Company as an example only in order to provide some explanatory details (i.e. it could have used other examples). So, the aim of the research was not only to explain the case of Lurpak; Arla but also it is much bigger, while the Arla case study just provides an example about what is happening.

The interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks in July 2009 in different cafeterias and coffee shops in the Cardiff city, UK. Data were collected by face-to-face interviews with designated persons. Each interview lasted about one hour.

In this research, the researchers made sure that all the selected Saudi students were stayed in their country last year in order to make sure that they were involved, participated or at least observed the boycotting of Danish products. Therefore, the purposive choice of sample was used to establish 15 in-depth interviews in order to explore the in-depth views of the reason of boycotting Danish products by Saudi people, to explore the link between culture, religion, country of origin and conspicuous consumption of global brands and to highlight the relative emphasis of each of the factors that may influence consumer purchase behavior of global brands. The non-probability judgment purposive sampling proved very productive as it helped the researchers to make sure that all the selected participants were Saudi students, Moslems and living in their country last year; in other words, they noticed or involved in the boycotting of Danish products.

In analysing the interviews' data, the researchers followed seven stages which are developed by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008). These stages are, namely, familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing concepts, re-coding, linking, and re-evaluation. Therefore, the data obtained from the in-depth interviews were analysed to extract emergent themes, which are used together and integrated with the findings of case study and the literature to design the overall findings.

6. Findings and discussion

The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed by reducing the textual information into much fewer content categories by determining the presence of certain words or concepts in order to draw conclusions about the messages within the texts. The results confirmed lots of the relationships proposed in the model. These relationships are presented below.

6.1 Religiosity and consumer behavior

The study's results support the findings of earlier studies such as Essoo and Dibb (2004) into the influence of religious affiliation on consumer behavior. Moreover, religion's role in culture and subsequently consumer behavior were identified in Saudi Arabia which is one of the eastern culture in which Islam pervades and extends to every aspect of a society (Fam *et al.*, 2004). This finding is consistent with Essoo and Dibb (2004) view of religion as a vital construct in the study of consumer behavior.

Interviewees highlighted the point that "religiosity is one of the central cultural forces and a key influence in buyer behavior" as mentioned in some previous studies such as Delener (1990a) and Essoo and Dibb (2004). A number of interviewees consider

that religion is very important in their day to day activities; more than one interviewee stated that “I do not drink wine and I do not eat pork because it is prohibited in Islam religion”. This means that Islam affects the consumption patterns of Muslims to some prohibitions and restrictions that Muslims are expected to adhere to.

This was stressed out by Khraim (2010) who stated that the Islam plays an important role in the peoples’ day-to-day lives and influences heavily their social etiquette, consumption behavior. Therefore, although the literature referred to the influence of religion on consumer behavior generally, the findings emphasised further the particular and effective influence of religion’s symbols on consumer purchase behavior.

6.2 Globalisation and consumption behavior

Several interviewees indicated that globalisation has some influences and make Saudi people change some of their old traditions. One of the interviewees stated that “I am consuming more and more foreign brands and products with time, products that I didn’t use before”. Another interviewee said “most of the products that I daily consume can be considered as International brands”.

However, although globalisation has some impacts on Saudi people, it does not lead to a general loss of religion’s significance in Saudi; which is an example of eastern culture. Therefore, the study findings support Rice (2004) who showed that although the Saudi lifestyle is very advanced and high-tech, Saudi Arabia is a yet considered a conservative country and a lot of its people still prefer to preserve their traditional religious values.

The effectiveness of Saudi Arabia boycott is different from political boycotts and it is fuelled by religious belief. Findings supports Fam *et al.* (2004) view that culture is very dynamic in a society, but the system of beliefs still forms a stable and static pillar in the society. The findings of the current study also support the views of Willer (2006) who notes that modernisation did not lead to a decline in religion’s role in the society as originally expected by some. In other words, globalisation will not lead to a decrease in the influence of religion on people day-to-day lives and in turn on their purchase behavior (Donkin, 2006). This is clear particularly in a collectivist cultures such as Saudi Arabia. Evers and Siddique (1993) elaborate:

Social scientists long assumed that religion would fall victim to the process of rationalization and modernization [. . .] Evidence against these interpretations is the dramatic development of religious and primordial movements’ world-wide.

As a result, findings of this study indicate that the assumption of globally homogeneous consumer does not reflect reality. Therefore, findings of this current study support De Mooij and Hofstede (2002) viewpoint, that consumers’ convergence is only a myth of international marketing. This study also supports Willer (2006) who stresses that cultures responds differently to the modernisation and will remain unique.

6.3 Collectivism and consumer behavior

Arab (Islamic) culture is highly collective in nature partially because of the Islamic beliefs. All of the interviewees mentioned that they often have their meal with family members or with friends or relatives; they stated that “Most of the time I don’t like to eat alone; I usually have my meals with my family, relatives, or friends.” Another interviewee also stressed that: “even in my workplace, I tend to gather with my colleagues to share a bite, we usually eat together most of the time”. Shopping is one other thing that

the interviewees indicated that they usually do with someone else, they stated that “when I go shopping I usually call one of my friends or go with one family member”. This is an evidence that collectivism can affect purchasing behavior especially through peer and family influence on buying decisions and choices.

The collectivist nature is very important in shaping individual behaviors. One of the interviewee stated that “my family and friends have boycotted Danish products because of the cartoons. Therefore, I have boycotted Danish product as well.” On the other hand they revealed that in some instances this effect of family members, relatives and friends can be minimal when living abroad in a non-Muslim country, one of the interviewee stated that:

Whenever I travel abroad, I do not really consider boycotting products that I otherwise do not use in my home country, because I feel that the effect will be minimal when I am alone.

Yet another interviewee indicated that: “I boycott Danish products because of the caricatures. I am also a part of the Muslim campaign for boycotting”.

These findings are consistent with Lindridge (2005) who stressed that religion is a central tenet in the eastern culture and societal behavior and this is apparent in the need of individuals to engage in groups through consumption encounter.

6.4 Conspicuous consumption

Findings from interview respondents showed that consumer purchase behavior is influenced by conspicuous consumption. Most of the respondents mentioned that some times they buy products for practical reasons but most of the time they purchase particular products to portray a certain image about themselves. Respondents 1-4: “Some times I buy products that I really need but some time I buy products for other reasons”.

Respondent 1 added:

Although the practical purpose is the most important factor when I buy any thing. However, some times I buy things not to consume or for practical purposes but to give certain image about myself.

Respondent 2 also added:

As a student when I go shopping on my own I tend to purchase cheap products. However, when I go shopping with my friends I purchase the most expensive brands not for practical reason but in order to show that I am a rich.

Moreover, a number of respondents clarified the reason that encourages them to consume Lurpak butter. Respondents 1 and 3 “I used to buy and consume Lurpak butter because it is advertised as luxury butter”.

Therefore, findings from interview respondents have shown similar results highlighting the point that one important motivating force that influences a wide range of consumer behavior is the desire to gain status or social prestige from the acquisition and consumption of goods (O’Cass and Frost, 2002) and to provide prominent visible evidence of their ability to purchase expensive products (Wang and Chen, 2004).

Moreover, several interview respondents indicate that their purchase behavior as a consumer is influenced by the symbolic meaning of some products. Respondent 4:

In order to give my visitors an image of myself as a religious man, I have bought a Quran and put it in my room, even though, I do not read it often.

Therefore, findings from Arla case studies have shown similar results as Govers and Schoormans (2005), who showed that consumer purchase behavior is influenced by the symbolic meaning of some products more than their practical utility.

In addition, many interview respondents try to give a certain image about them selves by boycotting certain products or brands, not for practical purposes. Respondent1:

I boycott Danish products and particularly Lurpak butter to give the image that I am furious from the caricatures that insulted the prophet and I am part of the Moslem campaign for boycotting.

Therefore, findings from Arla case studies have shown similar results as Schroeder (2000) who mentioned to that consumer often define themselves by what they do not buy.

Moreover, findings from a number of interview respondents indicated that people some times, though not always follow their religious rules in order to give a certain image about them:

Respondent 3. When I was in my country I used to go to mosque once week every Friday, not because I like it or prefer to go there for praying, but because my father, brothers and relatives, friends go. It is considered a shame if I do not go with them.

Respondent 2. Although I believe in my religion, sometimes I have to ignore my religious beliefs and rules because of what people might think of me.

Respondent 3. As I am living in UK now, I do not follow all my religious rules, e.g. I visited many local pubs on many occasions with my classmates and I had drunk wine even though it is prohibited in my religion. This is because I like to involve myself in the UK's culture in order to feel socially accepted and to give my peers the impression that I am like other people, I am modern and open minded and I am not Fundamentalist and not intolerant and unfashionable or have a static brain.

Therefore, findings of this research indicate that there is relationship between conspicuous consumption and religiosity particularly in a collectivist culture, and these factors together influence the consumer purchase decision.

6.5 Country-of-origin effects and animosity

The issues of country of origin and animosity were also indirectly mentioned by the interviewees. Many of the interviewees indicated that the influence of the country of origin affects their perceptions and influences their buying decisions. One of the interviewees stated that "I used to eat Danish dairy products because they have a reputation for their high quality, but I stopped consuming it after the cartoons".

Amine *et al.* (2005) argued that consumers avoid purchasing products made in countries that have engaged in unfriendly military, political, or economic acts against the consumers' home country. Findings of the interviews analysis have shown similar results, the country of origin is directly linked to consumers' image. The findings are also consistent with Piron (2000) who considered that product's country of origin has more effect on consumer's purchasing decision when the product is used publicly under the influence of reference groups. It can be concluded that in a highly collectivist culture; reference groups and country of origin have a bigger influence on the buying decision.

7. Conclusion and implications

The current study investigated the significant role of religions in influencing social and consumer behavior toward global brands. The study findings showed that perceptions and attitudes towards Danish products (especially dairy products) in the Middle East have changed dramatically since the Danish Government has rejected to condemn the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper. Moreover, they showed that consumers in the Middle East were always loyal to Danish brands and these brands were always perceived as being of high quality (relates to conspicuous consumption), this position has been shifted and the seller-buyer relationship has changed from loyalty to boycotting. This is strong evidence that companies' sales and revenues tend to be critically endangered by consumers' anger (animosity) towards the companies' home country.

Animosity can be mitigated by making use of appropriate competitive marketing strategies (Amine *et al.*, 2005). However, even with the best marketing planning efforts, companies may face unexpected changes in the international environment resulting in the failure of the plan.

Unlike the boycotts of US products, which soon faded, the boycott of Danish products is ongoing because it is deeply rooted in matters of religion. The animosity to Denmark due to religious grounds and it is not justified by political or economic factors. Therefore, it is proving effective and long lasting effect. Danish products might return to the Middle Eastern markets in the future, but this is expected to take considerable long time, not only due to offending the symbol of Islam; prophet Mohamed, but also because of the current international environment which is showing a growing gap and conflict between the West and Muslim communities.

The findings also support the fact that consumer behavior is becoming influenced progressively by religion as an important element of the culture in the contemporary world. However, it is considered that there are other factors which influence consumer purchasing behavior such as conspicuous consumption and culture; particularly in a collectivism culture. The research also provides new insights into the relative emphasis of the various factors that influence purchasing behavior in present days. The study stresses that there is a strong relationship between; religiosity and consumer purchasing decision particularly for international brands in Arabic countries.

Consumer boycotts are a historic phenomenon worldwide in modern society. The growing number of protests has forced authorities to recognise the economic and political impact of such activities, consequently multinational companies (MNCs) and host countries have begun to see the historic and cultural perspective of these events in addition to the conventional consumer behavior perspective (Smith and Li, 2010). For boycotting to become less harmful, MNC management need to understand what makes local consumers so affronted. The results of the evaluation can potentially help to understand other hostile market situations.

8. Limitations and future research directions

The results of this paper must be approached with caution due to some limitations. The study scope is limited due to the small sample size and the fact that all of the respondents are only from one country namely: Saudi Arabia. However, it is encouraging to see that consumers in this nation have unique perceptions associated with status consumption. This suggests a need for further comparative studies involving other Arab/Muslim countries and cultures.

Moreover, due to the exploratory nature of this study, more studies involving other product categories and countries are needed to provide generalisable evidence about the factors influencing consumer behavior in this era. It is also suggested that further research should conduct more interviews on a larger scale and target a bigger sample of not only Saudi students but also other social types and classes over a larger geographical area.

The size of this sample is relatively small; a sample larger size would yield more reliable results. However, evidence supports many of the results drawn from this research and a non-probability purposive sampling was effective in providing rich information to explore the research questions in short time (Saunders *et al.*, 2006). This study can be considered as a basis for further deeper studies of consumer boycotting behavior in other countries.

The study supports the opinion of Fam *et al.* (2004) who mentioned to the need of further studies which may try to identify particular groups within the broad religious denominations; Shiite Muslims or Sunni Muslims.

Also, there seems to be a high potential for social desirability bias in the religiosity scale administered to Muslims. Muslims tend to avoid admitting engagement in "Haram" activities such as "drinking wine" even if they really do so in private. I think this bias is much more pronounced in Islam than other religions since Islam is one of the only religions that permeates cultures as well as everyday lives. Answering these questions in a socially desirable manner would jeopardize results.

In addition, in order to increase the reliability and validity of data, the current study proposes that a future research should make a further investigation to the themes which rose from the literature and by means of a survey. Quantitative approach and hypotheses should be developed based on previous research and any relevant models and theories that exist taking into account that research will be carried out in a totally different culture since Western countries tend to be rather individualistic whereas Asian countries for example, tend to be more collective (Hofstede, 2001).

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