

# International Marketing and Spirituality: is there a relationship?

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**Framing of the research.** Defined by Cleveland et al. (2013) as the most pervasive and thorny element which affects consumer behavior, culture has significantly emerged as a decisive factor in international business. In fact, awareness of cultural differences across the world is essential in order to successfully penetrate different markets in the world (Steenkamp, 2001): on one side, international marketing strategies cannot be implemented, especially in some areas, with a lack of knowledge of local cultures; on the other, disregarding these differences can cause damages to a product or brand image.

Involving the most intimate part of a human being, religion is an important component of a people's culture (Cohen, 2009), as it embraces a system of values which affect cognition, attitudes, and behavior (Saroglou and Cohen, 2011). Research, to this end, has shown the influence of religion on consumer behavior (Essoo and Dibb, 2004): Owens (2015) studied religion as a determining factor for global strategies, while Agarwala et al. (2019) highlighted that faith affects some behaviors linked to materialism, intolerance, ethics, risk aversion and consumer attitude toward religious products and economic shopping behavior.

Insights of this relationship are provided by Izberk-Bilgin and Nakata (2016), who name this phenomenon as faith-based marketing and highlight the opportunity it provides for companies, and by Mathras et al. (2016), who reveal that religion affects consumer psychology and behavior through four dimensions: beliefs, rituals, values and community.

Interestingly, Singh et al. (2021) stress the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, with the first one discouraging consumer indulgence in unrestrained buying, and similarly Arli et al. (2016) investigate how these kinds of religiosity impact on the attitudes towards luxury brands. Impact of religion is further visible on marketing mix, according to Hashim and Hamzah (2014), who asserts that the same mix can differ from the traditional one if applied to Islamic marketing; this, confirming Cornwell et al. (2005), who underline cross-cultural differences in terms of ethical positions among Christian, Muslim and Buddhist consumers. Religious percepts also impact on food habits and preferences (Pettinger et al., 2004) and this is particularly evident in Islam and Judaism, where the relevance of faith is further shown by different product characteristics required by consumers.

**Purpose of the paper.** Research on the relationship between religion and marketing is growing (Ogden et al., 2004) although it still is an under-researched topic in marketing (Cleveland et al., 2013). Research is also fragmented (Kumar et al., 2022), focused on single religions only and not on religion in general, or connected to social sciences, medicine and psychology, rather than marketing (Oviedo, 2016). To our knowledge, existing systematic reviews (Christofi et al., 2021) focused on international marketing does not explore the relationship with spirituality: specifically, the performance of religion and international marketing as a field of research remains unknown. On these premises, this research aims at systematically reviewing current research on international marketing and faith, considering the role of religion in driving marketplaces dynamics (Cruz et al., 2018), and that of culture in international business (Lopez-Duarte et al., 2016). This, to generate new knowledge on the state of art for academics and practitioners, identify eventual research gaps and suggest future research perspectives. On these premises we selected articles that:

- 1) specifically interconnect international marketing with religion;
- 2) describe how faith impact on international marketing strategies;
- 3) focus on Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism;
- 4) are published in top marketing journals.

Articles focused on culture in general were not considered, as well as those with no international perspective. No differences were applied between the companies and consumers sides.

**Methodology.** To investigate the existing evidence, we applied the methodology of systematic review, following the stages described by Tranfield et al. (2003): planning, conducting, reporting, dissemination.

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Once defined our research question, whose answer has to clarify how current literature explains the relationship between international marketing and religion, we started to select the papers on EBSCOhost Research Database, due to its coverage of relevant disciplines (Christofi et al., 2021; Bhimani et al., 2019). The research strings we considered are these ones: religion OR religious OR church OR mosque OR synagogue OR temple OR Christian OR Muslim OR Islam OR Jewish OR Sikh OR Buddhism OR spirituality OR religi\* OR faith AND marketing OR customer OR consumer OR export OR market OR entry OR internationalization OR network OR innovation OR product OR price OR promotion OR distribution OR channel OR brand OR Internet OR international marketing OR finance OR banking.

Tab. 1: Source of the selected keywords

Keyword used (in detail)	Source
“religion”, “religious”, “church”, “mosque”, “synagogue”, “temple”, “Christian”, “Muslim”, “Islam”, “Jewish”, “Sikh”, “Buddhism”, “spirituality” are from	Tracey (2012)
“religi*”, “faith” and “spiritual”	Kumar et al. (2022)
“marketing”, “customer”, “consumer”, “export”, “market”, “entry”, “internationalization”, “network”, “innovation”, “product”, “price”, “promotion”, “distribution”, “channel”, “brand”, “Internet” are from	Christofi et al. (2021)
“international marketing”, “finance” and “banking”	Battisti et al. (2021)

**Results.** Once selected the keywords, we established the following inclusion and exclusion criteria, in coherence with the leading systematic review (Vrontis and Christofi, 2019):

- 1) academic peer-reviewed articles related to marketing area were included, excluding books, book chapters, magazines, and editorials;
- 2) academic papers written in English and published on peer-reviewed top journals were selected, with reference to ABS (Association of Business Schools' Academic Journal Guide, www.charteredabs.org) 3, 4 and 4\* ranking. This, in order to be methodologically rigorous and guarantee the selected papers are the best in terms of quality and in terms of debate among scholars (Christofi et al., 2019).

Finally, all the data were extracted and analyzed systematically by an analytical and deductive approach. This suggests that research is at an early stage (Younis et al, 2022; Kumar et al., 2022).

Our final sample consists in 36 articles (35 from database research + 1 from cross-reference).

With regards to publication outlets, the Journal of Business Research is the host journal for religion and international marketing papers (n=8, 20.5%), followed by the Journal of Business Ethics (n=5, 12.8%), and the Journal of Consumer Research, which published 3 articles (7.7%); then, the International Marketing Review, Marketing Theory, the European Journal of Marketing and the Journal of World Business, both hosting 2 manuscripts (5.1%). In details, the Journal of Business Research published on Religion and Consumption and Consumer Behavior in International markets (Sood and Nasu, 1995), International Marketing Communication (Iyer et al., 2014), Ethnic identity and religiosity (Cleveland and Chang, 2009) and Religion in multicultural marketplaces (Cruz et al., 2018). The Journal of Business Ethics published papers on the role of Spirituality in International Business Ethics (Jackson, 1999), Religion and International Market Entry (Ning, 2008), the role of Moral for Business Leaders (Thompson, 2010) and, like the previous journal, Consumers' faith and International business decision (with a Christian perspective in Swimberghe et al., 2011, and a Muslim one in Tsalikis and Lassar, 2009). With regards to the Journal of Consumer Research the focus is Religion and International Firms or Brands (Hyodo and Bolton, 2021). We identified 71 different authors from 15 different countries. Only three authors appear to have published 2 papers based on religion, that are Jafari Aliakbar, Özlem Sandıkçı, and Mark Cleveland. Considering the first author's institutions, we find that American Universities are the most represented (15.49% n= 11 authors), followed by the United Kingdom (14.08%, n= 10 authors) and Canada (5.63%, n= 4 authors). Other contributions come from Pakistan, Australia, Egypt, Malaysia, Turkey, the Netherlands, China, Qatar. With reference to the number of authors, most of the papers are co-authored by two authors (36.1%, n=13) or are one-author article (33.3%, n=12). In 25% of the sample the authors are 3, while only 5.55% of the papers are coauthored by 4 scholars.

Not surprising, considering the topic, that most of the papers are written by authors based in different countries (44.4%, n=16), then there are the articles written by only 1 author (33.3%) and those published by scholars who work in the same country (22.2%, n=8).

In terms of citation index, which is a relevant tool of measurement of manuscript quality and its contribution to current knowledge the most cited papers are:

- 1) Belk et al. (1989): 963
- 2) Dow and Karunaratna (2006): 432

In terms of methodologies adopted, most of the considered papers are quantitative studies (44.44%), followed by qualitative ones (27.78%), conceptual/theoretical papers (19.44%), literature reviews (5.55%) and editorial (2.78%). It is evident that quantitative studies are well distributed along the period 1987-2021, with a peak in 2013, despite concentrated to two main journals, which are Journal of Business Research and Journal of Business Ethics. Qualitative papers are, furthermore, present especially in the two-years period 2006-2007 and 2013-2014. In terms of journals, there are few publications on this topic (per journal) and, usually, limited to 1-2 articles since 1987 to 2021. Empirical evidence along with theoretical insights suggest the important role of religion in international marketing processes among different cultures. Despite this, research seems to be concentrated to Christianity and Islam and there is little

work in marketing or management (Li, 2008). It is relevant, therefore, to push the research to a more focused investigation on implications for companies, also considering the increasing number of them entering the global market through cross-borders alliances (Li, 2008) and the particular sensitivity required for accessing markets by leading on faith and spirituality (Longenecker et al., 2004). As underlined by Cleveland et al. (2013), religion affects consumers towards brands and products, even though Cruz et al. (2018) revealed that some companies avoid considering its marketing influence and ignore its role in facilitating entry in different marketplaces. Younis et al. (2022) considered religion as one of the most relevant forces of internationalization, especially for SMEs; in the same way, Richardson (2014) underlined the role of religion in reducing cultural distances between countries in the internationalization process, specifically in this case with reference to Islam, and Beugelsdijk et al. (2017) demonstrated how cultural differences could affect subsidiary performances. Kuzma and Kuzma (2009), moreover, indicated the need for further research, especially with regards to the role of spirituality in driving consumers' choices.

To better comprehend the international marketing content of our sample we applied the pattern-matching technique (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010), finding subjects to match to international marketing. Considering that marketing is a large field of research, we used the scheme developed by Rodriguez Cano et al. (2004) and by Christofi et al. (2021). This is useful to explore the aspects of religion present in international marketing strategies. Morality (Horner and Bordelon, 2006; Thompson, 2010) and spirituality (Jackson, 1999) are founded to be the drivers that affect international strategies, with their role in discriminating what actions are tolerable and what not. Specifically, the topic of morality is linked to globalization (Demangeot et al., 2015), which presents moral challenges connected to social issues, such as economic inequity, human rights, in particular for the Hebrew, the Arabic and the Hindu faith.

Spirituality, on the other side, is conceived as the foundation of freedom and creative imagination in international business ethics (Jackson, 1999) given its influence on consumer behavior (Kumar et al., 2014).

Both morality and spirituality play a key role in the implementation of international marketing process and in managerial practices, in particular relating to decisions on market entry.

As a matter of fact, Li (2008) highlights that when partners are from Christian countries, they should consider religious moral restraints, which may limit opportunism and, of consequence, transaction costs, and improve trust between them. On the contrary, when partners are from atheist countries, opportunistic behaviors could be mitigated through organizational control (e.g. joint ventures). Moreover, spirituality impacts on networks' participants, specifically on their contribution and demand (Kurt et al., 2020) as spiritual values can develop trust and reducing differences in case of home and host countries context (Lo Turco and Maggioni, 2018). In terms of consequences, different religions can impact differently on consumer behavior (Sood and Nasu, 1995) and advertising effects (Fam et al., 2004), with brand concept being influenced by religious values (Hyodo and Bolton, 2021; Minton et al., 2022). Scarce attention has been given to American and European contexts, which means that there is room for further research. Unfortunately, there is not abundant presence of comparative studies, and papers on the impact of Islam represent the majority of the selected articles.

**Research limitations.** This systematic review is not without limitations. The same nature of the systematic review has its own limits, first of all because it is not a detailed review, and this should inspire new research to deepen the findings of this articles. In addition, we selected the articles by using only three databases (Science Direct, Emerald and Web of Science) which cannot represent the whole scientific production about religion and international marketing. Besides, we excluded articles written in languages different from English, meaning that some important articles could have been ignored.

Moreover, some papers could have been overlooked, especially in the filtering phase. Finally, we selected articles which strictly reported precise references to religion and international marketing in the title and in the abstract: however, this does not ensure that all the relevant articles have been selected.

Once clarified the limitations, it is evident that this study can provide theoretical and practical implications.

**Managerial implications.** Opportunities for international marketers also emerge from this systematic review. In particular most of the selected studies highlights the sensitivity to religious norms in Muslim countries, even tough differences could be among them, while having marketing relationships (Cosgrave and O'Dwyer 2020, underline that, by comparing different religious subjects, Muslims were the most influenced by faith-deriving beliefs). This is particularly important also considering that Islam is one of the most widespread faiths in the world, covering different geographical areas, from some parts of the Balkans to North Africa, from the Middle East to South-East of Asia.

Other religions should also be considered when relating to other cultures (Sood and Nasu, 1995) whose research highlight the relevance for American Protestants, also in terms of environmental concern (Felix et al., 2018).

It is clear that marketers should not ignore religion effects when concretizing international marketing strategies and, practically, faith is a key factor to relate with different cultures.

**Originality of the paper.** The connection between international marketing and religion, through a systematic review, represents the originality of this study. As a matter of fact, there is scarce attention, currently, to study this relationship with this methodology. Research on the impact of culture for marketing is fundamental, and this is particularly true with regards to religion as well. This is the reason why research on religion and international marketing is increasing, despite there is need for further research, also observing the variety of faiths in the world and the different impact they can have. In an international perspective, studies on Christianity influence would play an important role, considering that it is widespread in Europe, Northern and Latin America, Oceania, and Philippines.

Deeper research should also regard Eastern religions, considering the emerging role of the Eastern economies (e.g., China, Japan and India) in world economy. For example, Lu and Wu (2020) studied the impact of Buddhism in

private firms in China, with findings revealing that religious entrepreneurs have higher accounting performances and spend more in safety for employees: further research should consider a similar analysis, from Chinese consumers' point of view of.

The role of spirituality and religion, in addition, is deeply felt in India (Suchday et al., 2018, Kattimani, 2012): spirituality is an essential part of Indian culture, and this is visible also in tourism marketing (the state of Kerala markets itself as "God's own country", as observed by Bandyopadhyay and Nair, 2019) and India is considered the favorite spiritual destination for Western tourists (Norman, 2012).

**Keywords:** Spirituality, religion, International marketing, International Business, culture

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