

Exploring the Relationship Between Religion, Happiness, Distress and Fear Levels After the First Corona Outbreak in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Religion is one of the constants in our society and its power and influence is still strong. The aim of this study is to analyze if religion can alleviate fear and distress levels and improve happiness levels in respondents after the first Corona outbreak in the Netherlands. The method used to undertake this was by analyzing data from one of the largest longitudinal panels in the Netherlands composed of thousands of respondents. Results showed that religious individuals tend to be slightly happier than non-religious ones and also that members of certain denominations have higher happiness levels and lower fear levels than members of smaller denominations. So it appears that religion might act as a buffer in times of crisis for certain individuals.

Key words: religion, corona crisis, happiness, fear, distress

J.E.L. classification: M310

1. Introduction

When the Corona crisis hit Europe and the world, everybody was in shock and panic levels were very high. Churches started closing down and the media seemed to do more harm than good by sowing panic and distress. Could religion alleviate the fear caused by the Corona outbreak? That is the main question of this paper. Even though religion has been around for thousands of years, the many ways it impacts the individual is still unknown. That is one of the important contributions of this paper, to add to the under researched area of religion and consumer behaviour by analyzing the relationship between religious affiliation, religious denomination and fear, distress and happiness levels. This undertaking has been put together by using data from one of the largest longitudinal panels in Europe and just after the first Corona outbreak started.

2. Theoretical background

Religion “may fill the human need for finding meaning sparing us from existential angst” according to (Azar, 2010). Religion has been around for more than 100.000 years and it’s power and influence is not going away any time soon. Some scientists (Barber, 2012) portrayed that religion will lose its appeal and people who are religiously unaffiliated will be more numerous than those who are religious. But the reality and also the projections paint a different picture. Worldwide, 84% of people identify with a religious group (*The Global Religious Landscape*, 2012) and the numbers are on the rise. It is estimated that 30 years from now, around the year 2050, the number of individuals unaffiliated with a religious group will drop from 16% in 2010 to 13% in 2050 (Lipka & Posts, 2015). Also, the composition of religious groups is very volatile, with almost 28% of Americans leaving the faith in which they were raised for another religious group or no religion at all (*Religious Landscape Study*, 2015). So it appears that we live and will still live in a world that is dominated by religion.

Religion can be defined as a “sense of power beyond the human, apprehended rationally as well as emotionally, appreciated corporately as well as individually, celebrated ritually and symbolically as well as discursively, transmitted as a tradition in conventionalized forms and formulations that offers people an interpretation of experience, a guide to conduct, and an orientation to meaning and purpose in the world.” (Oxtoby & Hussain, 2010).

Even though religion is a key component of understanding human behaviour it has been under analyzed in the marketing research literature. Most studies have dealt with the topic of segmentation, which divides the marketplace based on different religious affiliation or religious commitment (E. A. Minton & Kahle, 2013). Some examples would be the avoidance of advertising products that do not comply to Jewish or Muslim religious laws (Ahmad, K., Rustam, G. A., & Dent, M. M., 2011; Alserhan, 2010; Shafie & Othman, 2006). Other research topics have dealt with the influence of religion regarding media preferences (Kahle & Valette-Florence, 2012), store patronage (Mokhlis, 2006), shopping behaviour (Essoo & Dibb, 2004), ethics (Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Patwardhan et al., 2012) and sustainable consumption (E. Minton, 2013).

But still prominent scholars call the need for further analysis on this very important issue. For example, according to E. A. Minton et al. (2016), the coalescence of religion and consumption behavior is still under researched and poorly understood. Also, according to Mathras et al. (2016), studies on the effects of religion on consumer psychology and behavior are scattered and have yet to be systematized, and much more remains to be discovered and explained. The above mentioned authors have identified how many articles mentioning "religion" were published in peer reviewed marketing journals (Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing, and Marketing Science) from 1992 to 2014. According to them, only 180 articles were published in 22 years, and just a small part of these had religion as the main research topic.

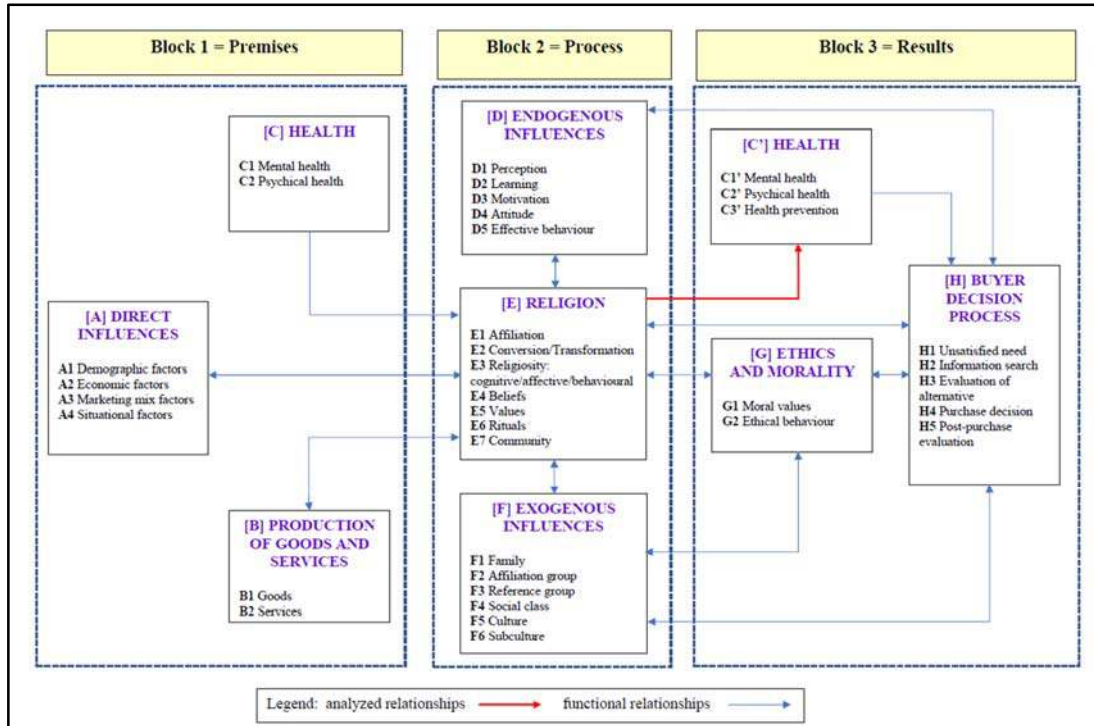
Also it appears that adults tend to come closer to religion in uncertain times and when they feel a lack of control in order to find meaning, according to Whitson & Galinsky, (2008).

The times that we live now with the Corona crisis hitting the whole world can be categorized as chaotic to say the least. For example, according to Rodríguez-Rey et al., (2020), in Spain "about 36% of the participants reported moderate to severe psychological impact, 25% showed mild to severe levels of anxiety, 41% reported depressive symptoms, and 41% felt stressed" during the first Corona lockdown. This paper portrays the premise that religion can act as a buffer against the negative psychological outcomes of the Corona crisis. So an analysis of the relationship between religion and psychological factors such as fear, distress and happiness in these times of uncertainty can shed more light on the way religion is shaping individuals' lives.

3. Research methodology

This paper is using a theoretical cognitive model (Figure no. 1) for analysing the relationship between religion and different aspects of consumer behaviour. The model is segmented into three main blocks, each of which containing different sub-block and variables. The first section of the model is entitled "Premises" and includes Health, Direct Influences and the Production of Goods and Services. The "Process" block contains Endogenous influences, Religion in the center and Exogenous influences. And the "Results" block includes: Health results, Ethics and morality and Buyers decision process. The present conceptual model is encompassing the most relevant theoretical streams that tie religion with other constructs in the cognitive model. For the current paper, the author will analyze the relationship between religious affiliation and three mental health constructs: happiness, distress and fear levels.

Figure no. 1: Cognitive model of religions influence on consumer behaviour



Source: Developed by author

Research questions

In order to analyse the relationships between religion, happiness, distress and fear levels, the following research questions were created:

- Rq 1. Is there a difference regarding happiness levels between religious and non-religious individuals?
- Rq 2. Is there a difference regarding distress levels between religious and non-religious individuals?
- Rq 3. Is there a difference regarding fear levels between religious and non-religious individuals?
- Rq 4. Is there a difference regarding happiness levels between individuals from different religious denominations?
- Rq 5. Is there a difference regarding distress levels between individuals from different religious denominations?
- Rq 6. Is there a difference regarding fear levels between individuals from different religious denominations?

Participants

This paper makes use of data provided by LISS Panel Data Archive, n.d. (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences), a panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the panel every year, covering a large variety of domains including work, education, income, housing, time use, political views, values and personality. The author did not have access to any identifying information about the participants as the data were anonymized and de-identified prior to author access.

For this current paper, the twelfth wave (most recent) of the LISS data panel was used. The data was collected from the religion and ethnicity part of the study and also from the personality study. The data for the religious and ethnicity were collected between 05-08-2019 and 24-09-2019 and the

data for the personality studies were collected between 04-05-2020 and 30-06-2020, corresponding with the ending of the first wave of the Corona outbreak in Europe.

The number of respondents was initially 4.417, out of which 1234 declared being a member of a religious group and 3183 were not religiously affiliated.

Measures

Respondents answered questions regarding their religion, which are part of the religion and ethnicity core studies from the LISS panel. Regarding religious affiliation, the respondents were asked if they considered themselves members of a certain religion or church community and those who declared that they are religiously affiliated were also inquired about their affiliation. These were the independent variables of the research. The dependent variables used were happiness, distress and fear levels. The personality questions were: "On the whole, how happy would you say you are?" (ten point Likert type scale), "Indicate to what extent you feel, right now, that is, at the present moment distressed?" (seven point Likert type scale) and "Indicate to what extent you feel, right now, that is, at the present moment scared?" (seven point Likert type scale).

Procedures

For analysing the relationship between religion, happiness, distress and fear levels SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 19 was used on a Windows computer using Windows 10, 64 bits operating system. Regarding the statistical treatments applied, the author used the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in order to compare the different religious groups on a number of different, but related, dependent variables.

4. Findings

Table no. 1 presents the main results of the statistical analysis performed.

Table no. 1. Research results

Research question	Results	Details
Rq 1. Is there a difference regarding happiness levels between religious and non-religious individuals?	Yes	A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate religious affiliation differences in psychological wellbeing. Three dependent variables were used: happiness levels, distress levels and fear levels. The independent variable was affiliation to a religious community.
Rq 2. Is there a difference regarding distress levels between religious and non-religious individuals?	No	There was a statistically significant difference between religious and non religious respondents on the combined dependent variables, $F(3, 4413) = 6.001, p = .000$; Wilks' Lambda = .996; partial eta squared = .004. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only difference to reach statistical significance, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017, was happiness levels, $F(1, 4370) = 8.698, p = .003$, partial eta squared = .02. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that members of a religious community reported slightly higher levels of happiness ($M = 7.51, SD = 1.29$) than non-members ($M = 7.38, SD = 1.41$).
Rq 3. Is there a difference regarding fear levels between religious and non-religious individuals?	No	

Rq 4. Is there a difference regarding happiness levels between individuals from different religious denominations?	Yes	A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate religious denomination differences in psychological wellbeing. Three dependent variables were used: happiness levels, distress levels and fear levels. The independent variable was religious denomination. There was a statistically significant difference between different religious denominations on the combined dependent variables, $F(39, 3583) = 2.51, p = .000$; Wilks' Lambda = .923; partial eta squared = .026. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only differences to reach statistical significance using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017, were happiness levels, $F(13, 1212) = 2.397, p = .003$, partial eta squared = .025. and fear levels, $F(13, 1212) = 3.534, p = .000$, partial eta squared = .037.
Rq 5. Is there a difference regarding distress levels between individuals from different religious denominations?	No	
Rq 6. Is there a difference regarding fear levels between individuals from different religious denominations?	Yes	

Source: SPSS output

5. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the relationship between religious affiliation, denomination and happiness, distress and fear levels. The psychological outcomes were measured after the first Corona outbreak in Europe so there were objective reasons for fear and distress. The goal of this research was to explore if religion can be a buffer against the fear and panic caused by the Corona outbreak. As the results show, participants who declared being a member of a religious group were slightly happier than respondents who were not affiliated. Even though the results were statistically significant the difference in means was rather small. Also, when it came to fear and distress level there was not a statistically significant difference between groups. So it appears that religious affiliation did not have a powerful effect on respondents regarding their mental wellbeing.

Diving into specific religious denominations one can observe that different religious groups scored differently on the three psychological measures. When it comes to happiness level, Christian denominations such as Catholics, Protestants, Reformed Christians and Evangelicals had the highest mean values, over 7.5 points out of 10. On the other side, smaller groups such as Eastern Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims had lower happiness levels with mean values of 6.7 point out of 10. Interestingly, this also coincides with the number of members in each religious group - the bigger the group the higher the levels. Also, another explanation might be that more members of smaller religious groups could be immigrants, so their happiness levels could be influenced by the fear of leaving the Netherlands due to job loss.

The pattern continues also with distress and fear levels, members of the smaller religious groups reported higher fear and distress levels compared to their counterparts from bigger religious groups. So it appears that respondents from smaller religious groups who might not be natives feel a higher level of distress, fear and dissatisfaction. They could be very affected by the Corona crisis, much more than other categories. The results can have implications for consumer behaviour because respondents who feel frightened and distressed can modify their consumption behaviour by spending less, buying cheaper items and saving more in order to protect themselves from a future economic crisis.

Regarding the academic implications of the current paper, by adding to the under researched area of religion, economy and marketing can be considered a worthy contribution. Moreover, by using for analysis data from a representative longitudinal panel offers more validity to the results since the sample used was rather high. As limitations, the current paper did not analyse different cultural settings around the world and could have also used more detailed and refined variables. Also incorporating religiosity, that is the level of religious commitment into studies regarding religion might be a worthy avenue for further research.

6. Acknowledgments

This paper, the research behind it and the cognitive model used would not have been possible without the exceptional support and guidance of prof. univ. dr. Teodorescu Nicolae (ASE), prof. univ. dr. Anghel Dan-Laurențiu (ASE), prof. univ. dr. Zaharia Răzvan (ASE) and prof. dr. Turcescu Lucian (Concordia University).

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