**Exploring the Effects of Religious Self-Discrepancies on Compensatory Consumption**

Claire Evelyn Stovalla, FNU Al-Amina, and Veena Chattaramana

*a Department of Consumer and Design Sciences, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA*

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***Background and Theory.*** Religion provides a set of values and principles that shape individual behavior (Bailey & Sood, 1993), bestowing a philosophical framework for transforming beliefs about the world (Engelland, 2014). Religion offers hope and can bolster mental well-being (Koenig et al., 2001) by reducing anxiety and depression (Rosmarin et al., 2009) and granting strength in stressful times (Lewis & Cruise, 2006). Yet, adherents may struggle to meet their religious doctrine, leading to emotional vulnerabilities and behavioral changes resulting from gaps in individuals’ actual, ideal, or ought selves, as posited by Higgins’s self-discrepancy theory (1987). Within the context of the current study, religious self-discrepancy can be described as the gap between an individual’s actual self and their ideal/ought self, defined by an adherence to God’s desires for their life (Ausubel 1955, Higgins, 1987). Higgins (1987) suggests that discrepancies can lead to emotions like anxiety and shame, prompting certain behaviors that aim to cope with these feelings (Mandel et al., 2017). Despite studies on religion-affiliated product consumption (Syahrivar, 2022) and religion’s influence on consumer behavior from the lens of theories such as attribution theory, self-determination theory, social learning theory, information integration theory, and social identity theory (Bailey & Sood, 1993; Hirschman, 1983; LaBarbera, 1987; Mittelstaedt, 2002; Rindfleisch et al., 2009; Sood & Nasu, 1995; Taylor et al., 2010; Wilkes et al., 1986), prior work has not explored compensatory consumption in religious settings, leaving a gap in examining underlying psychological motivations and coping strategies of religious consumers.

***Purpose and Research Questions.***The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between religion and self-discrepancy in relation to consumer behavior and identify emotional consequences and compensatory consumption-based coping strategies used to alleviate the discrepancy. The study applies the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) to identify religious consumers’self-discrepancies, namely, Actual-Ideal-Self, Actual-Ideal-Other, Actual-Ought-Self, and Actual-Ought-Other, influenced by one’s motivation to live in greater accordance with the desires of God or influenced by others and the compensatory consumer behavior model as a theoretical framework (Mandel et al., 2017). The latter theory describes the psychological motives that drive the discrepancy and associated coping strategies such as direct resolution, symbolic self-completion, dissociation, escapism, and fluid compensation. Additionally, since Christianity and Islam influence over half the global population (Pew Research Center, 2012), this study aims to describe the possible differences between the self-discrepancies and coping strategies of Christian and Muslim consumers. The following research questions were posed:

***RQ1:*** *Do the* *four types of self-discrepancies (Actual-Ideal-Self, Actual-Ideal-Other, Actual-Ought-Self, and Actual-Ought-Other) emerge in the domain of religion and the self-concept? Do the religious self-discrepancies of Christian and Muslim consumers differ?*

***RQ2:*** *What emotional consequences result from the four types of self-discrepancies (Actual-Ideal-Self, Actual-Ideal-Other, Actual-Ought-Self, and Actual-Ought-Other)? Do the emotional consequences of Christian and Muslim consumers differ?*

***RQ3:*** *What compensatory consumption-based coping strategies are used to reduce the different types of religious self-discrepancies? Do compensatory consumption based-coping strategies of Christian and Muslim consumers differ?*

***Method.*** This study used an exploratory method with an open-ended questionnaire based on Ali and Birley’s (1999) guidelines to allow respondents to express their opinions freely. The study sample included second-generation Christian or Muslim participants (i.e., born in the U.S.), who are “active” to “highly active” in their faith practices through prescreening questions. Participants recruited via Prolific completed a nine-item Qualtrics survey designed to explore their faith journey (RQ1), adherence to religious ideals (RQ1), motivations (RQ1), emotional responses (RQ2), consumption of religious products (RQ3), and outcomes, aiming to reveal self-discrepancies, emotional consequences, and coping strategies. Data were content-analyzed using a thematic coding guideline by two coders, yielding an intercoder reliability of .97.

***Results and Discussion.*** The survey included 42 second-generation participants, 19 males, and 20 females, with 3 preferring not to answer, averaging 28.6 years old. Among the 20 Muslims and 22 Christians who participated, 75% of Muslims and 86% of Christians reported religious discrepancies.Top of Form

According to Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory, individuals can be motivated by “self” or “others”. In this study, one Muslim cited “others” motivation ("my husband makes me a better Muslim"), while seven Muslims and six Christians were motivated by "self", responding that “it makes me feel proud” and “my own drive”. Data analysis indicates "God" as a third and new motivator for religious discrepancies, with participants aiming to "bring glory to Him" and feeling they "failed God" when falling short, observed in five Muslims and ten Christians, necessitating further exploration in both religious and nonreligious contexts. Additionally, discrepancy types—actual-ought or actual-ideal—emerged based on reported emotional consequences predicted by the self-discrepancy theory.

Regarding **RQ1**, actual-ideal and actual-ought discrepancies were noted in religious self-concept, aligning with Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory. Christians more often showed actual-ideal discrepancies, while Muslims predominantly exhibited actual-ought discrepancies, with counts being three and nine for Christians, and eight and five for Muslims, respectively. Six cases were indeterminate. The prevalence of actual-ought discrepancies among Muslims may stem from second-generation immigrants preserving their faith in the U.S., a non-majority religious setting, as Voas and Fleischmann (2012) suggested. In relation to **RQ2**, achieving religious goals elicited feelings of fulfillment and peace, while not reaching them led to disappointment, shame, and guilt, consistently expressed across both Christian and Muslim participants, aligned with the emotional consequences mentioned in Higgins's (1987) theory of self-discrepancy, indicating the profound emotional impact of self-discrepancies as well as the similarity in nature of these emotions between the two faiths. In context to **RQ3**, it was found that individuals with discrepancies use direct resolution, a compensatory consumption that directly remedies self-discrepancy through a type of goal-oriented behavior (Mandel, 2017). We found that both Muslim and Christian participants were goal-oriented when it came to addressing their discrepancies, frequently through products/services like worship, music, Bible/Qur’an, podcasts, discussions, and charity, while the direct resolution was evidently satisfying their needs. Within this study, other types of compensatory consumption behaviors were not found.

***Implications.*** This study highlights religion's significant impact on self-concept and consumer behavior, emphasizing the importance of understanding religious self-discrepancies to support congregational well-being. It identifies common emotional consequences— shame, disappointment, guilt—and suggests these insights can help religious organizations develop better support strategies. Moreover, it unveils a universal aspect of religious experiences across Christian and Muslim practices, suggesting opportunities for more inclusive market offerings. The discovery of 'God' as a key motivator in religious behavior signals the need for more research into its role across religious and secular domains, potentially enhancing support for faith-oriented consumers. Further, this research highlights the potential for companies to market towards religious groups and the impacts religion can have on one’s consumer behavior.

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