



## **SPIRITUALITY AND CONSUMERISM: CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AMONG MUSLIM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Spirituality is a motivational variable that relates to many aspects of consumerism and economic constructs in terms of personal perceptions and behaviors. The study examined the influence of spirituality in the materialistic interest of consumers. Samples of students of undergraduate and postgraduate in Malaysia were included in this study and the analysis was carried out to see the bi-directional causality of spirituality and consumerism and to see the effect of one on the other. Results showed that those scoring high on spirituality have less interest in material acquisition. The findings also showed that the orientation of the respondents is not reflected in the way they give charity as majority of them will only spend a small portion of their extra money on charity and more on their personal expenses. This clearly shows that the propensity to give out is low. This study, therefore, concludes that spirituality can be positively related to economic attitudes that favored a more social responsibility orientation, supporting programs and individual initiatives that were responsive to the economic suffering of people. The study hereby recommends that individuals should have a sense of giving as spirituality encourages a high level of charitable activities.*

**Keywords:** spirituality, religiousness, consumerism, economic attitudes

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Spirituality is linked to various aspects of human functioning. It has become increasingly important to study spirituality today in order to understand well-being holistically. On the other hand, consumerism

is seen as a dominant lifestyle and negatively related to well-being in a community (Sweeting et al. 2012). Despite the unique role that spirituality plays in an individual's life, not much attention has been given to spirituality and its economic implications.

Moreover, a number of studies have shown that the pursuit of material pleasures is often at odds with religion (Bakar et al. 2013; Baker et al. 2013; Ilter et al. 2017; Rahman et al. 2017; Taheri 2016). This is because consumers for whom religion is vital, there might be a predicament of reconciling religious values, for example, basic living and modest possession with living in the present society flooded with the belief system of consumerism with its abundance of good and publicity of the materialistic great life. Also, psychologists found that materialistic values may stem from early insecurities and are linked to lower life satisfaction of which more wealth may only provide a partial fix (DeAngelis 2004). It has also been argued that consumerism and overspending have for many people become a way of life. This has led to confusion between wants and needs.

Much research has explored different factors that contribute to consumer behaviour. Four factors that are frequently discussed in the literature are psychological, personal, social and cultural. Psychological occurs when individuals' internal needs such as security, social, esteem, and self-actualising needs are activated. Psychologists can include perception, learning experience, attitude, and beliefs. Personal, social and cultural factors are thought to develop and be influenced by many circumstances including age, occupation, financial situations, lifestyle, self-personality, family role, status, and social class. Research has suggested that higher educational attainment is associated with consumer behaviour and consumption, maybe because of introduction to new thoughts and encounters with diverse people. Spirituality has also been investigated as a predictor of consumer behaviour and motivation. It has been suggested that spiritual utility needs to be incorporated along with other utilities when considering product and service benefits (Kale et al. 2004). Less is known, however, how spirituality affects consumer behavior among Muslim students, particularly in higher institutions in a country with a majority identifying as Muslims. In Malaysia, 61.4% of individuals identified as being Muslims (Pew Research Center 2017). The current study intends to extend past research and investigate the influences of spirituality on consumer behaviour among a sample of Muslim university students in Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although, the idea of spirituality has inspired many studies in management and related disciplines for a few decades now, still, many management scholars, it appears, shy away from digging deep into the impact of spirituality on consumer behavior (Kale et al. 2004). Reviews of literatures reveal that several studies exist to show the role of spirituality on consumer motivation and behaviour. Rook (1985) examines the interplay between ritualised activities and consumer behaviour, i.e. the activities people participate in their homes, work, and play as individuals and as members of a community. Rook observe that these ritual experiences (which also occur in graduations, marriages, and deaths) have largely failed to be recognised in the consumer research behavioral domain. Also in investigating the influential factors that affect spirituality and ethical behaviour in the workplace, the role of spirituality (as opposed to religion) as a better construct for understanding the relationship between the individual and modern pluralistic workplaces was highlighted as positively influencing numerous organisational outcomes (McGhee & Grant 2008). While noting the current research gap that exists in how an individual's spirituality may translate into ethical behaviour within an organisational context and the impact of this conversion, McGhee and Grant (2008) mentioned they developed a model which explains the link between values and virtue leading to ethical behaviour in the workplace.

On the other hand, Rindfleish (2005) presents the ‘commodified production of self-actualization’ in a consumer society and examines how the discourses and practices in selected texts from New Age spiritual thinkers take the form of a ‘social product’. Rindfleish states that the discourse and practices of New Age spiritual thinkers can be said to have aligned themselves with consumptive behaviour by secularising, homogenising and over-simplifying scientific, social scientific and traditional religious discourse and practices into ‘social products’ for consumption. The work also gave additional insight into how New Age spiritual thinkers are engaged in a process that could be described as the ‘consumption of the self’. Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) examine the concept of ethical consumer behavior among practitioners and academic researchers. They observe that the idea is indeed generating an increasingly disjointed knowledge on the topic. Hence, empirical research on ethical consumer behaviour was carried out in order to guide future research on the topic. Marmor-Lavie and Stout (2016) critically examine the views of consumers and ask what meanings may emerge from their responses to spiritually dense commercials. Marmor-Lavie and Stout state the importance of commercial messages rich with spiritual core ideas which can be found in *Spirituality in Advertising Framework*. Marmor-Lavie and Stout, however, note that four themes emerged from their study, they are authenticity, the journey, inspiration, and nature. These were examined in terms of their theoretical and practical bases as well as in the light of the ethical issues raised leading to a positive approach to spirituality in advertising.

Furthermore, to show the link between spirituality and consumerism, there have been ample researches on consumers of New Age spirituality products and spiritual supermarket (Aupers & Houtman 2006; Redden 2016; Sutcliffe & Gilhus 2014). Several findings overlap while others complement each other. For example, Davies and Freathy (2014) discuss the different physical and virtual channels through which consumers may access goods and services in a ‘spiritual supermarket’ which emphasises borrowing from different varieties of cultures. Stephenson (2003) examines how Irvine Welsh reads Ecstasy’s (MDMA) problematic relationships to consumer capitalism and to the otherworldly states that are loosely described by his characters as ‘spirituality’. Apart from identifying key relationships to consumer and otherworldly states, Welsh’s work is additionally about consumerism and spirituality similarly as it is about drugs, and his investigation of the subject places of MDMS clients is bound up with double study of late capitalism and house culture that uncovers the hazardous associations between them. Sandıkcı (2018) investigates the interplay between Islam, consumption, and market with a focus on “conceptualizations of Muslims in relation to the changing market dynamics and the broader socio-political and economic structures” (Sandıkcı 2018: 453). The findings of the study reveal that Muslims as present-day consumers looking for distinction and propriety comes to rule the perspective of Muslims as non-consumers in terms of “exclusion, identification, and stylization”. Wong (2007) observed that consumer culture in many Islamic societies is often seen as a threat to religion due to its support of hedonism, pleasure, individualism and an expressive lifestyle. With a focus on Malaysian Muslims, the study identified how various interpretations of Islam affect modern Muslims in the country.

Many of the works cited here, although showing the important spirituality and consumerism, however, the areas in which spirituality can affect consumer behaviours and motivations need to be examined. This study seeks to obtain data which will help to address the research gaps in Muslim university students in Malaysia.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Spirituality is a conscious effort on the self which may involve borrowing from religious traditions, but

can still be regarded as independent of religious traditions and sometimes as opposed to religion. It entails ‘inner dimension’, ‘the spirit’, ‘spiritual core’, ‘deepest center’, ‘transcendent’, and ‘ultimate reality’ of a person’s experience and practices. In this paper, it is a motivational variable that relates to personal perceptions and behaviors. Spirituality, therefore, affects the willingness to adopt certain materialistic tendency. In addition, spirituality refers to whatever inspires someone into a reality from which one derives his or her zest for life, sense of meaning and purpose, basic worldview and fundamental values (Mason 2010). This research is conducted among university students. Therefore, the implications of the findings of this study are more relevant in this context.

As for the concept consumerism, it is a social and economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-greater amounts. Historically it was keynesianism that brought its emphasis into economics. The idea behind it was that the increase in consumption will lead to a rise in economic growth. But the focus of this paper is not centered on consumerism as it affects the economy but on its relationship with spiritual consciousness.

Consumerism also applies to social movements and pressure groups that plan to advance customer rights and protection. The usage in this study, however, is in the sense of “the experience of life in a consumer-oriented culture” (Shaw 2003: 33). In any case, consumerism may connote either bad or good value depending on the context. According to Shaw,

Positively, it connotes among other things a social order that allows autonomous enterprising individuals to pursue their own goals without unnecessary constraint by or dependency on the state. Negatively, consumerism connotes the replacement of active citizenship and participation in the public sphere by the calculative gratification of individual material wants (Shaw 2003: 33).

Consumerism in the context of this study is regarded as ‘the calculative gratification of individual material wants’.

## MEASUREMENT

Demographic questionnaire: Participants completed information online via a Google form survey and responded to questions about gender, nationality, age, religious affiliation, level of education, and income level.

Material Values Scale (Short Form): Developed by Richins (2004; see also Richins & Dawson 1992), this scale consisted of 15 items on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The scale examines materialism as a value that impacts the manner in which people interpret their environment and structure their lives (Richins 2004). Three correlated dimensions are assessed,

1. Success which examines the extent to which individuals find material acquisition an indicator of personal / professional success (e.g., “Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions”).
2. Centrality which examines how important luxuries are in a person’s life (e.g., “Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure”).
3. Happiness which assesses the extent to which a person needs to acquire things in order to be happy (e.g., “My life would be better if I owned certain things I don’t have”).

Several items were reversed scored. Richins (2004) examined 15 data sets (alpha reliabilities ranged from 0.79 to 0.91 for the short form) as well as published studies (alpha reliabilities ranged from 0.77 to 0.88 for the long form). Mean scores for the subscales were within acceptable ranges. She reported construct validity with additional measures of materialism such as the Belk Materialism Scale.

**Windfall Spending Measure:** Developed by Richins and Dawson (1992), this scale consisted of seven items. Participants were asked to imagine a scenario where they received a windfall of \$20,000. They were then asked to indicate the amount of money they would spend in categories such as “Buy things I want or need,” “Give or lend to friends or relatives,” “Travel” and “Pay off debts.” Given the fixed nature of the amount of money to allocate, this task is designed to determine the spending preferences of individuals in terms of what they value and what they do not value. However, in this research, the scenario was modified. Respondents were asked to imagine a situation where they received an unexpected gift of RM5,000. In a scale ranging from RM500 and below to RM2,001-RM2,500, they are to indicate how much they would spend to “buy things I want or need,” “travel”, “pay off debts” and so on.

**Belk Materialism Scale:** Developed by Belk (1985), this scale consisted of 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Three subscales are assessed,

1. Possessiveness which examines the extent to which an individual is concerned about maintaining control over his / her possessions (e.g., “I tend to hang on to things should probably throw out”).
2. Nongenerosity reflects an unwillingness to share one’s possessions with others (e.g., “I don’t like to lend things, even to good friends”).
3. Envy which assesses the displeasure one experiences towards the success, possessions, and reputation of another.

The focus of this scale is on the upset one feels about another possession (e.g., “There are certain persons I would like to trade places with”). Several items were reversed scored. Belk (1985) noted Cronbach’s alphas of 0.66 and 0.73 for the total scale as well as test-retest reliability of 0.68.

**Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS):** Developed by Piedmont (1999), the STS contained 23 items; respondents completed a 5 point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Items addressed the facets of Universality, Prayer Fulfillment and Connectedness. The manual (Piedmont 2010) noted alpha reliabilities of 0.95 for Prayer Fulfillment, 0.86 for Universality, 0.60 for Connectedness, and 0.93 for Total Score. Evidence for cross-cultural, convergent, discriminant, construct, and incremental validity for the ASPIRES instrument has accrued (see Chen 2011; Piedmont 2010; Wilkins et al. 2012). For example, the scale has been shown to generalize to an atheistic culture (Rican & Janosova, 2010), and the STS demonstrated very little overlap with the domains of the Five-Factor Model (Piedmont 1999).

**DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS**

Table 1 Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Respondents

<b>Characteristics/Nature</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	107	52.71
Female	96	47.29
<b>NATIONALITY</b>		
Malaysian	88	43.35
International	115	56.65
<b>AGE</b>		
18-25	131	64.53
26-35	64	31.53
36-45	7	3.45
46-55	1	0.49
<b>RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION</b>		
Islam	203	100
<b>LEVEL OF EDUCATION</b>		
Undergraduate	116	57.14
Postgraduate	87	42.86
<b>INCOME LEVEL</b>		
RM500 and below	97	47.78
RM501 - RM1000	46	22.66
RM1001 - RM2000	33	16.26
RM2001 - RM3000	13	6.4
RM3001 and above	14	6.9

Source: Authors' computation 2018

The table above shows the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents and with a total of 203 responses. In the table, approximately 54 percent were male while 46 percent were of the opposite gender. Forty-two percent were of Malaysian nationality and fifty-eight were internationals, considering the fact that the survey was conducted in Malaysia. From the age group of the respondents, the study found that approximately 65 percent were between the ages of 18 - 25, 32 percent were of 26 - 35 ages, less than 4 percent were between the ages of 36 - 45 and those between the ages of 46 - 55 were less than one percent.

On the issue of religious affiliations, the study was focused on the attitude of Muslims, therefore all respondents were of the Islamic religion. The study also shows that majority of the respondents were undergraduates with approximately 57 percent and postgraduates having approximately 43 percent. And lastly on the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents is the income level where approximately 49 percent lives on less than RM500 in a month, about 22 percent lives between RM501 - RM1000, 16 percent on RM1001 - RM2000, 6 percent on RM2001 - RM3000 and only close to 7 percent lives above RM3000 a month.

Table 2 Relationship between the Level of Income (INL) and the Amount of Money an Individual Will Be Willing To Give Out For Charity (T1) of an Unexpected Gift of RM5000

<b>INL \ T1</b>	<b>RM500 and Below</b>	<b>RM501- RM1000</b>	<b>RM1001- RM1500</b>	<b>RM1501- RM2000</b>	<b>RM2001- RM2500</b>	<b>Total</b>
RM500 and Below	57	25	3	2	5	92
RM501-RM1000	29	6	2	1	1	39
RM1001-RM2000	22	5	0	2	1	30
RM2001-RM3000	9	2	0	0	2	13
RM3001-RM5000	8	4	2	0	0	14
Total	125	42	7	5	9	188

Source: Authors' computation 2018

The table above shows the level of income (INL) and the amount of money an individual will be willing to give out on charity (T1) if he receives an unexpected gift of RM5000. This shows that out of the 92 individuals in the income level between RM500 and below, more than half will be willing to part with RM500 and below and also 5 of them will be willing to give out between RM2001 and RM2500. As for those earning between RM501 and RM1000, 29 out of the 39 in the income range will be willing to give out RM500 and below as charity while only a single person will be willing to give out between RM2001 and RM2500. The statistics of those in the income range of RM1001 and RM2000 is not different from the earlier one where 22 out of the 30 individuals have the willingness to give out RM500 and below and only one person for RM2001 and RM2500. Equally, 9 out of the 13 of those in the income range between RM2001 and RM3000 will be willing to give out RM500 and below while only 2 individuals will be willing to give out between RM2001 and RM2500. And lastly, 8 out of 14 in the income range of RM3001 and RM5000 will be willing to give out between RM500 and below while none in that region will be giving out up to RM1501.

This clearly shows that an individual's propensity to consume an unexpected income is very high while the propensity to give out charity is very low.

Table 3 Value Scale Analysis

<b>S/No</b>	<b>Nature</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>1</b>	Admiration for materialistic people (s1)	34 (16.59%)	31 (15.21%)	75 (36.59)	47 (22.93%)	18 (8.78%)
<b>2</b>	The believe in materialism as the most important achievement in life (s2)	19 (9.27%)	39 (19.02%)	61 (29.76%)	73 (35.61%)	13 (6.34%)
<b>3</b>	The desire to impress with one's possession (s5)	41 (20%)	51 (24.88%)	48 (23.41%)	41 (20%)	24 (11.71%)
<b>4</b>	The feeling of unconcern to what other people have (s6)	12 (5.85%)	33 (16.10%)	55 (26.83%)	59 (28.78%)	46 (22.44)

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5	Not experiencing deep fulfilment and bliss through prayers (pf1)	69 (33.66%)	55 (26.83%)	41 (20%)	28 (13.66%)	12 (5.85%)
6	Feeling a disconnect from god (pf2)	67 (32.68%)	55 (26.83%)	50 (24.39%)	24 (11.71%)	9 (4.39%)
7	The desire to pray inorder to grow as a person (pf7)					
8	Spirituality is not a central part of my life (pf5)	108 (52.68%)	41 (20%)	31 (15.12%)	14 (6.83%)	11 (5.37%)
9	The feeling of god consciousness in prayer (pf6)	2 (0.98%)	3 (1.46%)	28 (13.66%)	51 (24.88%)	121 (59.02%)
10	The desire to prayer inorder to get closer to god (pf3)	4 (1.95%)	8 (3.90%)	34 (16.59%)	66 (32.20%)	93 (45.37%)

Source: Authors' computation 2018

The table above shows the perception of respondents towards materialism and spiritualism. In column one, the table shows an equal number of people with admiration for and against materialistic people while the majority of the respondents were undecided which means that they do not know whether they admire people with materialism or not. In column two, the majority of the respondents believe that materialism is the most important achievement in life with almost 42 percent of the respondents, while about 28 percent disagreed with the statement and about 30 percent were undecided.

In column three, about 49 percent of the respondents disagree with the notion that they tried to impress people with what they possess while approximately 32 percent agreed and 23 percent were undecided. In column four, a good number of the respondents were of the believe that they are less concerned to what other people have with more than 51 percent of them having this notion, about 22 percent were against it while almost 27 percent were indifferent. In column five, more than 60 percent of the respondents were against the notion that they do not feel deep fulfillment and bliss through their prayers while less than 20 percent were in support and 20 percent were indifferent. This shows that people have strong believe in their prayers.

Column six analysis the issue of closeness to God and approximately 60 percent have the feeling of being close to God, about 15 percent feels a disconnect from God while more than 24 percent were indifferent. In column seven, approximately 78 percent have the desire to pray for the purpose of getting close to God while only about 5 percent feels otherwise and just about 17 percent were indifferent. In column eight, approximately 73 percent believes spirituality is a central part of their lives, while about 11 percent do not believe so and about 15 percent were indifferent. This shows that majority of the people have belief in God. God consciousness is in column nine and approximately 85 percent of the respondents have feelings of God consciousness while less than 3 percent feels otherwise and about 14 percent being indifferent.



## REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The descriptive statistics of the study was conducted using the entire data collected but the regression analysis focused on the respondents that were Muslims given the objective of the study. Two models were built for the regression analysis. In the first model, the dependent variable was based on a materialism variable and the independent variables were some of the spirituality variables. In the second model, the reverse of the first model is the case by having the spirituality variable as the dependent variable and materialism variables as the independent variables. The essence of this is to determine whether it is materialism that causes a low level of spirituality or low level of spirituality is what leads to being materialistic.

### *Model One*

Where:

- S1 = Admiration for materialistic people  
 PF1 = Not experiencing deep fulfilment and bliss through prayers  
 PF2 = Feeling a disconnect from God  
 PF3 = The desire to prayer in order to get closer to God  
 PF4 = The feelings of wholeness in prayers  
 PF5 = Spirituality is not a central part of my life

Table 4 Result of Model One Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	P-Value
PF1	0.43	0.004
PF2	-0.316	0.077
PF3	0.028	0.884
PF4	0.252	0.176
PF5	0.393	0.009
PF6	0.175	0.336
Constant	0.048	0.967

No of Obs = 80, Prob (F-Stat) = 0.0027

The regression result above shows the effect of spirituality on materialism. The model is of good fit given the probability value of the F-statistics which is 0.0027. From the table, only two variables were significant given the significant level of 5% (0.05) and the variables are PF1 and PF5. The remaining variables can not be analysed because they are not statistically significant. PF1 is the variable that represents “not experiencing deep fulfillment and bliss through prayers” and PF5 represents “spirituality not being a central part of one’s life”. Therefore, PF1 and PF5 as regressed against S1 “admiration for materialistic people” shows that as for PF1 which has a positive correlation with S1 shows that not having deep fulfillment and bliss through prayers leads to having admiration for materialists. PF5 also have a positive effect on S1 shows that as individuals become less spiritual, then it increases one's love for materialism. The implication of this is that spiritualism is indirectly related to materialism, so as an individual level of spiritualism diminishes, his love for materialism increases.

**Model Two**

Where;

- PF5 = Spirituality is not a central part of my life  
 S1 = Admiration for materialistic people  
 S2 = The believe in materialism as the most important achievement in life (s2)  
 S3 = Not considering what people own as a sign of success  
 S4 = Considering what I own as a sign of success

Table 5 Result of the Model Two Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	P-Value
S1	0.279	0.01
S2	0.03	0.797
S4	-0.112	0.265
S5	0.072	0.462
Constant	0.975	0.03

No of Obs = 80, Prob (F-Stat) = 0.058

The table above provides the reverse of the first regression by examining the effects of materialism on spiritualism. The F-Statistics of 0.058 shows the plausibility of the model though only one variable was significant among the three variables. The S1 which represents “admiration for materialistic people was ran to see its effect on the low level of individual’s spirituality and the relationship between them is positive and this shows that as an individual tends to admire materialism, his spiritual level begins to drop.

**CONCLUSION**

The study examined a bi causality and the relationship between spirituality and materialistic tendencies of individuals. The material value scale was used in order to evaluate peoples’ attitude towards materialism and spirituality. The findings of the study, therefore, show that spiritualism is indirectly related to materialism in the sense that as an individual’s level of spiritualism diminishes, his love for materialism increases. The study also shows that as an individual tends to admire materialism; his spiritual level begins to drop. What these findings tell is that one cannot be having a high level of spirituality and at the same time be materialistic. The study also found that the attitude of individuals towards charity is very poor.

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