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Religion and Marketing Practices in Nigeria - The Socio-Theological Issues

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines how religious beliefs shape marketing practices and consumer behaviour in Nigeria, a highly religious and religiously-plural society. Drawing on consumer behaviour theory, consumer culture theory, social identity theory, and ethical decision-making models, the paper synthesizes relevant extant literature to explain how religion influences marketing practices, consumption norms, brand relationships, and ethical expectations in the Nigerian marketing environment. The analysis highlights the strategic opportunities and ethical risks associated with religiously informed marketing, emphasizing the need for cultural competence and moral restraint. The paper contributes to marketing theory by contextualizing religion as a central cultural institution in developing economies and provides actionable insights for firms operating in religiously diverse markets.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Marketing Practices, Consumer Behaviour, Ethics, Nigeria, Economies.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion constitutes a powerful institutional force shaping social life and economic behaviour in many developing economies. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, provides a particularly salient context for examining the interaction between religion and marketing. Christianity and Islam dominate Nigeria's religious landscape, alongside enduring traditional belief systems, creating a pluralistic environment in which religious norms strongly influence values, identity, marketing practices and consumption decisions (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Concurrently, Nigeria's marketing environment has become increasingly dynamic due to urbanization, digitalization, and a growing middle class. While these developments have intensified competition and expanded consumer and client choices, they have also heightened the importance of culturally and religiously sensitive marketing practices. Prior research demonstrates that religious beliefs influence product acceptability, brand trust, and consumer and client loyalty in Nigeria (Adeleye & Eboagu, 2019; Johnson & Aminu, 2018; Iyer, 2020). Yet, religion within theological teaching remains under-theorized in mainstream marketing scholarship, particularly in developing-country contexts.

This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing theoretical and empirical literature on religion and marketing in Nigeria. It seeks to explain how religious language within theological beliefs shape marketing practices and consumer and client behaviours, identify ethical challenges and strategic opportunities arising from religious diversity, and develop a guide for future empirical research engagements. The significance of this paper lies in its contribution to the understanding of the role religion plays in shaping marketing decisions and consumer/client preferences in a developing country context (Nigeria). It offers a perspective on how religious and theological language shape by beliefs intersect with marketing practices and strategies, which is crucial for businesses aiming to establish a strong presence in religiously-diverse economy like Nigeria. This paper is particularly relevant in the current global economic climate, where understanding the cultural and religious underpinnings of consumer/client behaviours is essential for business organizations seeking to expand in emerging markets such as Nigeria. It also contributes to relevant academic debate in marketing and consumer behaviour, thereby filling a gap in the relevant extant literature which often overlooks the religious dimensions of marketing practices in developing countries.

SOME THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Generally, religious beliefs heavily express in theological language, have been implicated to influence buying behaviour in Nigeria (Uzoma et al., 2018). Also, Adekoya (2019) argues that specific marketing practices and strategies have been utilized in religious

contexts within the Nigerian marketing environment. Like Islam forbids, drinking alcohol and eating poke meat. Some of the theoretical underpinnings associated with this paper include:

Consumer Behaviour Theories:

Within the realm of consumer behaviour, this paper principally draws upon Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1980). Ajzen's TPB posits that individual behaviour is driven by intentions, which are themselves influenced by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. This theory is particularly pertinent in examining how religious norms and attitudes in Nigeria influence purchasing decisions of consumers and clients (Ajzen, 1991). For instance, religious teachings and values can significantly impact consumer and client attitudes towards certain goods or services. This will thereby guide the relevant marketing practices to be adopted by organizational marketers.

Furthermore, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, which identifies key dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, provides insights into the cultural underpinnings of consumer and client behaviour (Hofstede, 1980). Nigeria's high score on collectivism and uncertainty avoidance indicates a societal preference for group harmony and a tendency to avoid ambiguity (Hofstede Insights, 2020). In a religious context, this implies that Nigerian consumers and clients might prefer goods and services that align with their religious group's norms and values, highlighting the influence of religious affiliation on consumer and client choices. This insight will thereby influence the relevant marketing practices to be adopted. Okonkwo (2020) applied the Hofstede's cultural dimensions to the Nigerian marketing context and analyzed how cultural values and elsewhere, theological language can influence consumer and client behaviour.

Therefore, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB**)** provides a useful foundation for understanding religion-based consumption in Nigeria. In this vein, religious doctrines shape attitudes toward products, define subjective norms within faith communities, and constrain perceived behavioral control through moral prescriptions. Consequently, purchase decisions often reflect compliance with religious expectations rather than purely economic considerations. Also, Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory further explains why religious norms exert strong influence in Nigeria's collectivist culture, where group approval and social harmony are prioritized. Empirical studies confirm that cultural, religious and theological values jointly influence Nigerian consumers' brand preferences and conformity behaviors (Okonkwo, 2020).

Religious Sociology Express in Theological Theories:

From a religious sociology perspective, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers relevant valuable insights. This theory posits that individuals' self-concepts are partly derived from their membership in social groups, including religious groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The Social Identity Theory suggests that religious groups in Nigeria may exhibit distinct consumer or client behaviours and loyalty patterns, influenced by their shared beliefs and values (Turner, 1987). This theoretical approach is crucial in understanding the ways in which religion impacts consumer or client behaviour in Nigeria. In Nigeria, where religious affiliation is a significant aspect of social identity, this theory helps to explain how religion can shape consumer or client preferences and product brand loyalty. It explains the observed group-based purchasing patterns and brand preferences among different religious communities or market segments in Nigeria, as individuals align their consumption habits with their religious identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This knowledge will guide organizational marketers in designing appropriate marketing practices and strategies.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT):

The Consumer Culture Theology (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) provides a lens to understand the dynamic relationship between consumer/client behaviour and cultural environment, including religious beliefs, and can be used to analyze how religion shapes consumer/client behaviours and marketing practices in Nigeria.

Therefore, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership. This assertion does arise from the doctrinal teaching most Nigerians receive from theological reflections. In Nigeria, religious affiliation functions as a salient social identity, shaping loyalty, trust, and consumption patterns (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This explains the observed tendency for consumers to favour brands aligned with their religious values or endorsed by religious leaders. Also, from a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective, religion operates as a symbolic and moral resource through which consumers construct meaning in the marketplace (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Religious symbols and narratives influence how Nigerian consumers interpret marketing messages and evaluate brand authenticity.

Ethical Decision-Making Model in Marketing:

This model, by Hunt and Vitell (1986), can be applied to understand how ethical considerations intersect with marketing decisions in a religious context, thereby providing a framework for examining ethical dilemmas in religious marketing practices in Nigeria.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory:

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 1995) helps in understanding how new goods, services, or ideas that align with religious values are adopted within religious communities or market segments in Nigeria.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM):

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) offers insights into how religious beliefs might influence the persuasion process in marketing communications and how consumers and clients in Nigeria process religiously-oriented marketing messages.

Therefore, the Hunt–Vitell ethical decision-making model (Hunt & Vitell, 1986) highlights the ethical complexity of religious marketing. Marketers must balance commercial objectives with moral obligations, particularly when religious symbols or values are invoked. Ethical lapses can lead to reputational damage and consumer backlash in highly religious markets (Chukwu & Obi, 2021). Also, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 1995) explains how religious leaders and institutions act as opinion leaders influencing product adoption. Similarly, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that religious cues can function as powerful persuasion mechanisms when aligned with deeply held beliefs.

These theoretical frameworks, each offering a unique lens, collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the intersections of marketing practices and religion in Nigeria. They contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious beliefs influence marketing strategies and consumer and client behaviours in the Nigerian context. Therefore, integrating these theoretical frameworks provides a framework for analyzing the intersections of marketing practices and religion in Nigeria because this integration allows for a comprehensive understanding of how religious beliefs shape consumer and client behaviour, in addition to associated marketing practices in the Nigerian marketing context.

MARKETING PRACTICES AND RELIGION IN NIGERIA

The marketing environment in Nigeria, like many developing economies, reflects a dynamic combination of conventional practices and contemporary strategies, which are deeply influenced by the country's distinct cultural, economic, and technological contexts. Historically, Nigerian marketing revolved around local marketplaces and trade fairs, integral to the communal culture, serving as both commercial hubs and social-cultural gathering spots (Adeolu, 2017). The colonial era introduced Western marketing concepts, but it was in the post-colonial period that a significant evolution occurred, shaped by global trends and the influx of multinational corporations (Ibekwe & Okoye, 2019). With a thriving internet-user base exceeding 100 million in contemporary times, digital marketing has ascended to prominence in Nigeria. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram, among others, are pivotal for brand promotion and customer and client engagement (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). The high mobile phone penetration has steered mobile marketing strategies to the forefront, utilizing SMS, mobile apps, and USSD codes to reach relevant and diverse customer and client segments.

Generally, Nigerian consumers and clients show a strong allegiance to product brands that resonate with their cultural values and meet their quality and service expectations. The market is predominantly price-sensitive, emphasizing affordable yet quality options (Eze, 2022). Economic fluctuations, influenced by factors like oil prices and political instability, significantly impact consumer and client purchasing power. Additionally, infrastructural inadequacies and logistical hurdles pose challenges in efficient product distribution, especially in rural regions of Nigeria (Akinbode & Adegbuyi, 2018). Also, navigating the variable regulatory landscape in Nigeria presents complex challenges for marketers. However, there are some opportunities. For instance, the expanding middle class represents a significant market for organizations offering quality and value. Moreover, the potential for innovation, particularly in digital marketing and localized content, is immense, as is the untapped potential of rural markets. Therefore, understanding the Nigerian consumer and client, adapting to economic and infrastructural realities, and respecting cultural and religious sensitivities are crucial for successful marketing practices in the Nigerian environment. As Nigeria continues to evolve technologically and economically, so do the opportunities and strategies for effective marketing (Ibekwe & Okoye, 2019).

Religion which is guided by simple and deep theological analysis presents a substantial influence on marketing practices in Nigeria, given the country's deep-rooted religious traditions. This impact manifests across various consumer and client behaviours, from product choices to shopping patterns. Religious beliefs dictate preferences, such as Muslims favouring halal (alcohol, poke meat) products and Christians avoiding items (condoms, abortificients) considered taboo by their faith. Additionally, marketing advertisements respecting religious norms are better received, and services accommodating religious needs, like Islamic banking, are popular among certain segments (Suleiman & Aminu, 2019). Also, consumer and client spendings in Nigeria fluctuate around religious festivals like Eid-al-Fitr, Christmas, and Easter, with spikes in specific categories such as food, clothing, and gifts (Adeolu, 2017).

Generally, religion plays a central role in shaping social values, norms, and consumption practices in Nigeria's pluralistic society (Adebayo & Olalekan, 2017; Iyer, 2020). With Christianity and Islam dominating public life alongside traditional belief systems, marketing activities often intersect with deeply held religious convictions. Adebayo and Olalekan (2017) argue that religious diversity introduces ethical and operational challenges for marketers, particularly in message framing, product symbolism, and channel selection. These challenges are intensified in Nigeria due to the salience of religion in everyday decision-making (Uzoma & Chikwe, 2018). These add value to the role religion helps to shape market consumption.

Also, empirical studies consistently show that religion significantly influences consumer attitudes, preferences, and decision-making processes in Nigeria. Adeleye and Eboagu (2019) demonstrate that religious beliefs affect perceptions of product appropriateness,

trust, and moral acceptability. Similarly, Uzoma and Chikwe (2018) find that religious doctrines shape consumption choices by guiding what consumers consider permissible or desirable.

From a consumer culture theory (CCT) perspective, consumption is embedded within broader cultural and symbolic systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In Nigeria, religion functions as a key cultural resource that consumers draw upon to construct identity and meaning in the marketplace (Johnson & Aminu, 2018). This aligns with Eze's (2022) observation that while Nigerian consumers are price-sensitive, moral and religious considerations often moderate purely economic decision-making.

Ethical concerns are particularly pronounced in religious markets. Drawing on Hunt and Vitell's (1986) general theory of marketing ethics, scholars argue that marketers must consider both deontological (moral rules) and teleological (consequences) evaluations when operating in religious contexts. In Nigeria, ethical lapses in advertising or product positioning can provoke consumer and client backlash and erode trust (Chukwu & Obi, 2021; Onwuegbuzie, 2021). Also, Kareem et al. (2021) emphasizes that navigating religious sensitivities requires cultural intelligence and ethical reflexivity, especially in heterogeneous markets. Misalignment between marketing messages and religious values can damage brand credibility and long-term relationships.

In addition, religion has also been shown to influence brand loyalty and engagement in Nigeria. Johnson and Aminu (2018) report that product brands perceived as respecting religious values enjoy stronger emotional attachment and repeat patronage. This finding resonates with Kumar and Pansari's (2016) engagement-based view of competitive advantage, where trust and value intersections enhance customer–brand relationships.

In this context, marketers in Nigeria must be cognizant of religious sensibilities because religious insensitivity can lead to backlash, while tailored religious products and campaigns can be effective but require deep understanding of the religious groups (Suleiman & Aminu, 2019). Nigeria's marketing environment, steeped in religious diversity, demands a balanced and respectful approach to engaging with and meeting the needs and wants of its varied market segments. Aligning with religious values and practices is key to building deeper connections with customers and clients, thereby fostering loyalty and trust.

The relevant extant literature and pieces of empirical evidence demonstrate that religion is a major issue in the Nigerian marketing environment. For instance, it shapes consumer/client behaviours, ethical expectations, product brand relationships, and strategic marketing decision-making. For marketing researchers, this underscores the need for context-sensitive marketing management models that integrate religion, culture, and ethics. For marketing practitioners, effectiveness in marketing practices is a function of ethical alignment, cultural competence, and respectful engagement with religious diversity.

Therefore, Nigeria's marketing environment reflects a blend of traditional exchange systems and modern marketing strategies shaped by globalization and digitalization. Traditional markets remain culturally significant, while digital platforms have transformed consumer engagement (Adeolu, 2017; Olanrewaju et al., 2020). Religion guided by deep theological reflections continues to mediate marketing practices and consumer and client responses to both traditional and digital marketing practices. Empirical evidence indicates that religion influences product choice, consumption timing, and brand loyalty in Nigeria. Also, religious festivals stimulate seasonal demand, while faith-compatible products (such as halal foods and Islamic financial services) command strong loyalty among religious consumers and clients (Suleiman & Aminu, 2019). Organizational products perceived by relevant market segments as respecting religious values seem to enjoy enhanced trust and engagement (Johnson & Aminu, 2018).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE INTERSECTIONS OF RELIGION AND MARKETING PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

The connection between marketing practices and religion in Nigeria presents both opportunities and challenges, which require a careful and strategic approach by marketers. There are some opportunities associated with the intersections of marketing and religion in Nigeria. First, organizations that align successfully with religious values can foster deeper trust and loyalty among specific market segments. For instance, engagement with religious communities, through sponsorships or community initiatives, can enhance product brand presence and acceptance (Kareem, et al., 2021). Second, tapping into religious festivals and events can offer substantial opportunities for seasonal marketing strategies, and tailoring goods or services to these events can cater to niche market segments and drive sales (Adeolu, 2017). Third, goods and services adhering to religious prescriptions (such as halal products or Sharia-compliant banking) address a growing market segment, and opportunities exist to develop product offerings that transcend religious boundaries, thereby promoting inclusivity and broader market appeal (Suleiman & Aminu, 2019). Finally, educating consumers and clients about religious practices and promoting harmony can foster goodwill and respect for the product brands, and social responsibility initiatives aligned with religious values can resonate strongly with religious communities (Chukwu & Obi, 2021).

However, there are some challenges to the intersections of marketing and religion in Nigeria. First, Nigeria's diverse set up are cast in religious environment, these necessitates that marketers are cognizant of the beliefs and practices of multiple religious groups or segments because inadvertent religious insensitivity in marketing practices can provoke public backlash and damage product brand reputation (Kareem et al., 2021). Therefore, maintaining sensitivity to religious sensibilities is crucial to avoid offending any relevant group or market segment. Second, the exploitation of religious sentiments for marketing purposes raises ethical concerns because the over-commercialization of religious elements or issues in marketing practices can engender skepticism among consumers and

clients, thereby potentially harming product brand credibility (Chukwu & Obi, 2021). Therefore, ethical marketing practices must balance commercial objectives with respect for religious sentiments. Thirdly, creating marketing strategies that appeal to diverse religious groups or market segments without alienation is a complex task which requires an understanding of different religious beliefs and practices (Adebayo & Olalekan, 2017).

So, in Nigeria, religious diversity presents both strategic opportunities and some ethical challenges. Alignment with religious values can enhance brand legitimacy and loyalty, while insensitivity or exploitation of religion can provoke public backlash (Adebayo & Olalekan, 2017; Kareem et al., 2021). Therefore, effective marketing practices in Nigeria require ethical reflexivity, cultural intelligence, and inclusive communication strategies.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper has discussed the complex interplay between religion and marketing in Nigeria by noting the integration of religious beliefs into marketing practices. In Nigeria, a country with pronounced religious diversity, recognizing and respecting religious sensibilities is both a cultural imperative and a strategic necessity for business organizations (Kareem et al., 2021). The paper has isolated the distinct challenges that this diversity poses for marketers (Chukwu & Obi, 2021). Additionally, the task of targeting diverse religious audiences or market segments, along with the dilemma of customizing marketing strategies versus standardization, further compounds these challenges. However, the intersection of marketing practices and religion also presents some opportunities. For instance, aligning marketing practices with religious values can engender significant product brand loyalty and trust, especially when organizations and their brands exhibit genuine respect and commitment to these values (Adebayo & Olalekan, 2017). Also, religious festivals and events offer fertile ground for targeted marketing practices, while the demand for religiously-compliant goods and services opens innovative avenues (Adeolu, 2017). Additionally, engaging in educational and socially responsible marketing strategies that align with religious values can promote goodwill and bolster a company's presence in the market segment of business interest (Suleiman and Aminu, 2019). Therefore, the intersection of marketing practices and religion in Nigeria has both challenges and opportunities. Success in this domain necessitates marketers to have a comprehensive understanding of religious beliefs and practices and employ marketing strategies that are respectful, sensitive, and ethically grounded. As Nigeria continues to progress both economically and socially, the insights from this paper offer invaluable guidance for marketers aspiring to effectively navigate this complex yet rewarding marketing environment.

Religion is a central organizing force in Nigeria's marketing environment, shaping consumer and client behaviours, ethical expectations, and strategic marketing decision-making practices. This paper underscores the need for marketing theories and practices that integrate religion, culture, and ethics, particularly in developing economies. By offering a context-sensitive synthesis, the paper contributes to both theory and practice and provides a foundation for future empirical research.

Regarding further research, comparative studies across different regions or geopolitical zones in Nigeria can be used to compare how religion influences consumer/client behaviours and marketing practices in various Nigerian regions. This would provide deeper insights into regional variations, thereby enhancing the understanding of localized marketing strategies. Also, longitudinal studies on changing religious dynamics can be undertaken to examine how evolving religious beliefs and practices over time impact marketing practices and consumer/client behaviours in Nigeria. This can help in understanding trends and predicting future shifts in relevant market segments of interest. In addition, the impact of globalization on religious marketing can be assessed to explore how global marketing trends influence local religiously-informed marketing practices in Nigeria. This proposed line of study would shed light on the interplay between global influences and local religious-marketing practices. Also, consumer/client perceptions of religiously-targeted marketing strategies can be used to investigate how Nigerian consumers/clients perceive and react to marketing strategies that specifically target religious sentiments. This is because understanding consumer/client perceptions can guide marketers in creating more effective and respectful marketing strategies. Finally, the influence of religion on online consumer/client behaviour can be studied with the objective to examine how religious beliefs influence online shopping behaviours and e-commerce marketing strategies in Nigeria. This is because, with the growing importance of digital commerce, understanding its interaction with religion is crucial.

These suggestions for further research are designed to deepen the understanding of the complex relationship between religion and marketing practices in Nigeria. Specifically, the suggestions for future research aim to address gaps in the extant literature, provide practical insights for marketers, and contribute to academic debate and engagement in this interesting field. By exploring these areas, future research can offer valuable contributions to both theory and practice regarding religion-influenced marketing practices that might arise from interpretation of theological and doctrinal beliefs cut-across Christianity and Islam in Nigeria.

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