



Keeping the faith! Drivers of participation in spiritually-based communities [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2011

Received in revised form 1 December 2011

Accepted 1 May 2012

Available online 25 April 2013

Keywords:

Spiritual communities

Religiosity

Volunteering

Philanthropy

Social

Age

Income

ABSTRACT

Spiritually based communities (SBCs) provide a range of economic and social benefits to society. Declining memberships prompt a need for greater understanding and insight into the factors that drive participation in these communities. This study provides a conceptual model depicting religiosity as the core driver of donation of time, money and attendances at religious services. The model further indicates that the impact of belief in a 'higher being' on participation in SBCs is moderated by age, income, time available for socialization, desire to make a social contribution, and need for social interaction. A preliminary investigation in Australia provides strong support for the model, serving as a starting point for a number of future studies on the behaviors of SBC members.

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1. Introduction

Spiritually based communities (SBCs) refer to any religion-based organizations (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). SBC members hold strong beliefs in a 'higher, supernatural being' and a common set of moral values and principals, that is 'ideals' that guide their daily lives (Cleveland & Chang, 2009; Mokhlis, 2008). These communities provide significant social and economic benefits as a result of their members' contributions (Hassay & Peloza, 2009; Mulyanegara, 2011) through various philanthropic works and services that benefit the disadvantaged, marginalized, disabled, and others in need (Wilson & Musick, 1997a). Despite the increasing competition for donations in most developed countries, charities in the United States received an estimated \$290 billion of donations in 2010 (National Park Service, 2011).

In recent years, mainstream religious institutions in Europe and the United States are declining significantly in terms of membership and participation levels (Hirschle, 2010; Olson & Beckworth, 2011) with regular attendance at recognized places of worship steadily declining since the 1990s (Olson & Beckworth, 2011). While many people consider themselves spiritual, a smaller percentage commit to the perceived

constraints of an established religion (Bulik, 2009). Numerous reasons for this deterioration in commitment are known, including a lack of interest from younger audiences (Lee, 2010; Montgomery, Mitchell, Bauer, & Turner, 2000), greater opportunity for leisure-time pursuits due to strong economic growth (Hirschle, 2010), the detrimental effect of perceived wrong-doings in some SBCs (Von Sinner, 2007), along with disenchantment with the level of perceived value provided (Kuzma, Kuzma, & Kuzma, 2009).

The influence of religion in consumer behavior is a significantly under researched area (Cleveland & Chang, 2009). While scholars have examined antecedents of SBC memberships, most of the research has been theoretical or qualitative in nature (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Some studies have focused on enhancing memberships by marketing religion and/or God as a form of commodity (Chen, 2011; Haq & Wong, 2010) or investigated how religion (level of religiosity, denomination of religion, etc.) influences consumer reactions to marketing efforts and subsequent buying behaviors (Alam, Mohd, & Hisham, 2011; Arham, 2010). In contrast, this research explores the extent to which an individual's belief in a supreme being or other supernatural forces drives their desire to belong and actively participate in an SBC. Specifically, the dimensions of membership and participation identified here are: giving freely of time (volunteering), donating money (Bonyhady, 2008; Craig-Lees, Harris, & Lau, 2008) and attending religious services or formalized worship (Cornwall, 1989; Hollinger, Haller, & Valle-Hollinger, 2007).

The study takes an important step in addressing a significant gap in the current understanding of how individual characteristics such as age, income, desire for social interaction, time for socialization, and desire to contribute to society moderate the expected relationship between

[☆] The authors thank the three anonymous reviewers and Brian Engelland, the guest editor of this special issue, for their insights, suggestions and contributions to this paper. The authors thank Brett Scholz for his comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

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spiritual beliefs (religiosity) and levels of participation in these activities. A conceptual framework is supported by a number of hypotheses that encapsulate these relationships, and the results of a preliminary study are given that provide the foundation for future research into this important stream of research.

2. Theoretical background

The role of religion continues to interest social science researchers and the wider community (Khraim, 2010; Mokhlis, 2009). In 20th century Western Europe, religious institutions lost much of their influence, resulting in the decline of both religious practice and beliefs (Olson & Beckworth, 2011). In Great Britain and the United States, studies show relatively low religious influences in society (Hollinger et al., 2007); however, in many countries religion continues to play a central role in public and private life (Alam et al., 2011; Arham, 2010). Hence, greater understanding is needed of which factors, aside from religiosity, influence people's willingness to give their time and resources to SBCs.

2.1. Religiosity

While scholars define the concept in many different ways (King & Boyatzis, 2004; Mokhlis, 2009), religiosity consistently includes three core aspects, regardless of religion or sect. First, at the core of religiosity is a strong belief in some form of supreme being, God, or some form of supernatural forces (Alam et al., 2011). Second, a set of common doctrines, or ideals that prioritizes caring for the collective above the individual and a rejection of materialism and greed (through activities such as donating time and money). Third, religiosity results in attendance at some kind of formalized worship and associated ceremonies (King & Boyatzis, 2004). Reich, Oser, and Scarlett (1999) contrast the notions of spirituality and religiosity by stating that religiosity involves a relationship with a particular institutionalized doctrine about a supernatural power, a relationship that occurs through affiliation with an organized faith and participation in its prescribed rituals.

However, certain segments in modern society declare their belief in a higher being, but do not participate in an organized SBC (Bulik, 2009; Yip, 2011), indicating no inextricable linkage among the three dimensions of religiosity. Hence, for the purposes of this study religiosity refers to the degree to which an individual believes in the existence and power of a Supreme Being or God. Further, participation in SBCs is comprised of attendance at formalized worship services and donations of time and money.

Two precepts of conventional wisdom are prevalent among religious communities regarding contributions: (1) time and money contributions to the work of the religious communities are complementary, and (2) religious communities face growing competition with other charitable organizations for their members' contributions (Mulyanegara, 2011). However, other SBCs and secular charitable organizations are not the only competition they have. SBCs face competition from the increased demands placed on individuals in society stemming from work, family and desire to enjoy leisure activities (Gruber & Hungerman, 2008; Hirschle, 2010). Nonetheless, belief in a higher spiritual being (religiosity) positively influences different forms of giving, membership and participation within SBCs (Cornwall, 1989; Park & Smith, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997b). This relationship is consistent, in spite of the ever-increasing competitive pressures (Lee, 2010) and other demands on people today (Gruber & Hungerman, 2008). Based on this:

- H1.** Religiosity positively influences donations of time to an SBC.
- H2.** Religiosity positively influences donations of money to an SBC.
- H3.** Religiosity positively influences attendances at SBC worship services.

2.2. The impact of age

People typically experience SBCs during childhood but do not commit until later in life when they develop a greater understanding of specific doctrines and rules (Alam et al., 2011). Despite this trend, participation levels in SBCs traditionally remained stable with older people attending worship more frequently than younger people (Firebaugh & Harley, 1991). However, significant decreases in participation from younger audiences are noted (Lee, 2010). Declining attendance at more traditional SBCs may be due to the younger generation's wish to distance themselves from scandals and other organizational crisis scenarios (Von Sinner, 2007), and/or a feeling that the SBCs are out of touch with their needs and fail to deliver enough value (Kuzma et al., 2009).

However, making social contributions is still important to many young people (Parboteeah, Cullen, & Lim, 2004) with those between the ages of 25 and 40 years positive about volunteering (Burns, Reid, Toncar, Anderson, & Wells, 2008). According to Howe and Strauss (2004), hard work on the reconstruction of communities, teamwork and civic spirit will define the generation born from 1982 onwards. Further, statistics show a large proportion of people in the USA between the age of 18 and 34 years consider themselves spiritual but do not belong to a specific SBC (Bulik, 2009). Hence, a substantial proportion of this important demographic volunteers and makes monetary donations elsewhere, while turning away from formalized worship and contributions to an SBC, in spite of their stated belief in a form of God.

While numerous studies investigate the behavior of younger age groups, none investigate the potentially moderating influence of age on attendance at worship and donations of time and money to SBCs simultaneously.

H4a. Age moderates the influence of religiosity on donations of time.

H4b. Age moderates the influence of religiosity on donations of money.

H4c. Age moderates the influence of religiosity on attendances at SBC worship services.

2.3. The impact of income

Surprisingly, the relevance of the role of income with respect to participation in SBCs has received little attention (Schwadel, McCarthy, & Nelsen, 2009). Scholars suggest higher incomes lead to greater attendance at formalized worship (Sawkins, Seaman, & Williams, 1997), with some inconsistencies (Schwadel, 2011).

Sawkins et al. (1997) find that religious attendance increases when wages increase at the lower end of the wage spectrum, but the effect of wages is minimal at higher levels. As wages increase at the lower end of the spectrum, individuals' needs to work long hours reduce giving them more time to attend formal worship. In contrast, at the upper end of the earnings spectrum, individuals reallocate their time towards work, or if costs of non-religious leisure activities are higher than the costs of religious participation, those with high incomes can afford to substitute non-religious leisure time for less costly religious attendance (Sawkins et al., 1997).

Research on philanthropic pursuits also demonstrates that people are more involved in activities such as volunteering once their basic needs are satisfied through higher income levels (Parboteeah et al., 2004; Wilson & Musick, 1997b). The relationship between religious activity and civic activity (or philanthropy) is an individual-level relationship, with high-income members more prone to participate in these activities (Schwadel, 2005). Additionally, given an orientation to giving is a universal philosophy across all major religious groups, those with higher incomes are able to make regular donations of money to an

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