

# CONSUMING SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY ON PRODUCTS OF SPIRITUAL LEADERS IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Spirituality is rapidly changing the beliefs and behaviors of consumers in the world. Spiritual motivations are not just confined to the selection of a specific sect, guru, or religion. Spiritual gurus are the new face to the FMCG sector the sale of their products and services are increasing with a rapid pace in India. People are consuming these products as they are ayurvedic and do not contain any adulteration. The product sold by these gurus are so popular that they are giving tough competition to giant MNCs and domestic companies that have been deep-rooted in India for several decades. The objective of this paper is to identify factors of spirituality that motivates consumer buying behavior of products offered by spiritual leaders. The paper is qualitative in nature where in-depth interviews were conducted with the followers of various spiritual leaders in India and then by applying grounded theory the constructs were generated from them. The paper is relevant for FMCG retailers to take insights and shift the focus of their products as per Indian culture and traditions taking into consideration the sentiments of Indian consumers as Indian consumers believe in faith and are spiritual.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality; Grounded Theory, Spiritual Leaders; FMCG.

## INTRODUCTION

The term 'spirituality' is one of the main keys in the present scenario; this is popularly used in cultural products, social interactions and individual beliefs usually termed as new age, shaped under new category. Spirituality in the twentieth century underwent to a major shift where a new definition for spirituality emerged with a contrasting effect with the term religious as many people in the west side are more spiritual as compared to being religious. The acceptance of this phrase has increased to an extent which gave an acronym to this term as SBNR. India has emphasized spirituality for almost 2000 years, which is older than any other culture in the world. The emphasis on Indian spirituality can be ascertained from the work where he provided long list of Indian spiritual leaders for over 2500 years which supported the notion that India values spirituality. An examination of the list depicts that Indian spiritual gurus were not limited to any particular caste for having the privilege of being a guru. They were diverse in their religions as they belong to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Jainism and Sufism. Therefore, it can be proclaimed that spirituality in India is a cultural phenomenon. Gurus in India have their own significance as billions of people from India as well as from other foreign countries are worshipping and following the spiritual gurus for insight and wisdom. The spiritual gurus in India are not only changing the behaviour of their followers but are also prompting them

in changing their consuming behavior (Sardana et.al. 2018). Spiritual leaders in India like Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Mahant Swami Maharaj and Jaggi Vashudev are among those leaders who have started lending their names to FMCG products and have entered the business world in India. The products offered by these spiritual gurus are consumed by their followers as they get attracted to spirituality and this spiritual behaviour changes their buying behaviour. The followers of these spiritual gurus are buying the products offered by them as they consider the products as spiritual. Therefore, in this paper we have defined the products offered by these spiritual gurus as 'spiritual products'. The research in spirituality majorly focuses on healthcare spirituality (Ross et. al. 2018) and spirituality in workplace (Van der walt, F. 2018). There are very limited studies concerning how spirituality is used in the area of marketing which poses a gap. The research question for the current study is to identify the consumer intention behind buying spiritual products.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Spirituality & Spiritual gurus

Even though there has been an outburst of literature on the topic of spirituality in the last two decades, articles and books about spirituality reveals small agreement as to the definite meaning of the term. Ghaderi et.al. (2018) described spirituality as a "human reply to God's generous call to a connection with himself." Kapadia et.al. (2019) have mentioned spirituality as an internal state of person, or the heart or energy within a being. Spirituality is a subjective occurrence of the divine, whereas a researcher described it as a transcendent feature within human experience in which the person questions the meaning of their presence and try to situate the self in a "wider ontological context."

Several guru's organizations nowadays have an international reach, with branches not only in Indian towns and cities but also in the other countries of the West and to some other places with a large population of Indian immigrants, like Caribbean islands, Malaysia, and the Singapore (Mahipalan et.al, 2018). These spiritual gurus have their presence on television, various journals and magazines on spirituality and even they have their own websites for promotion of their products and services (Lewis, 2016). They even take advantage of print media by printing pamphlets and advertising on newspapers about their spiritual discourse or prayer sessions. Further, they offer audio tapes, videocassettes to their followers which are produced by the organizations of spiritual gurus as a part of their promotional strategy. Some of them have even started there YouTube channels or separate TV channels for their promotions.

### Spiritual Marketing

Spiritual marketing is an emerging area for retailers to build their brand, it involves traditional management practices to capture the consumer minds and hearts. The focus of traditional management is to analyze the consumer's heart, feeling, emotions and mind. Traditional management practices alone in this current era are no more competitive therefore, retailers should focus on spirit of a consumer other than focusing mind and heart. The role of spirituality in marketing has become an important hot topic to discuss as it influences the consumption pattern of people. Therefore, the business bring run by these gurus is efficient as they are selling their own product line to the customers to capture the Indian markets. Several authors have put their efforts to the area of spirituality where many of them have primarily

focused on the perspective of spiritual organizational leaders and entrepreneurs (Godwin et.al, 2016). The view was even supported by kale (2006) and reported that spirituality has great scope to be turned into a big business. The buying behaviour of the consumer is affected by spirituality as consumers usually gets attracted towards spiritual behaviour and hence poses a need to analyze the change in consumption patterns of consumer because of spiritual beliefs.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The literature in the context of spirituality has been thoroughly researched whereas the effect of spirituality on consumers purchase behaviour hasn't been studied as of now. None of the studies in the area of spirituality talks about customer perspective which formed the bases for the study. The study follows qualitative approach centered on grounded theory. Grounded theory as defined states that "it is characterized through the systematic collection and analysis of data related to specific task or a phenomenon". The sample for the study was collected from four states in India that is, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out for the process of data collection the interviews were performed by the authors and a total of 16 interviews of spiritual followers who were directly linked with the spiritual leader were conducted. The interviews were stopped at 16 when the data from the interviewees seemed to saturate. Data saturation means that "with the continuous collection and analysis of additional data, no new concepts are developed, and additional data does not require changes in condition, characteristics or consequences of existing categories". We approached spiritual followers at different locations such as spiritual ashrams of various spiritual gurus, satsang areas (where spiritual leaders offer their preaching's) and brick and mortar stores offering products of spiritual leaders.

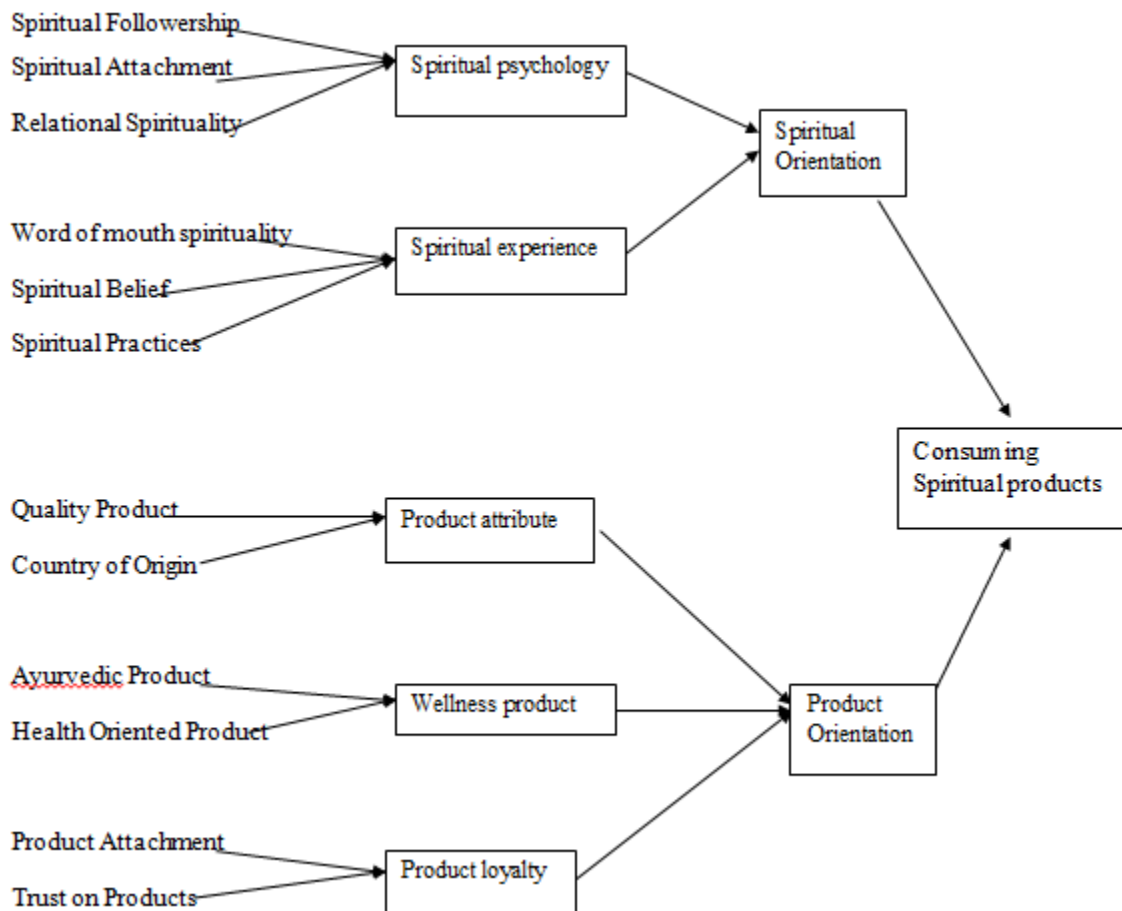
## Findings

Consumer intention behind buying spiritual products emerges as a multidimensional concept and the elements which combine to form the intention to buy spiritual products are because of two orientations namely spiritual orientation and product orientation. The Spiritual orientation includes two factors i.e. spiritual psychology and spiritual experience which motivates a consumer to buy the products because of his/her spiritual motives and on the saying of their followed guru which they treat as spiritus. The second orientation is the product orientation which includes three factors i.e. product attributes, wellness products and product loyalty leading to customer purchase behavior of products offered by spiritual leaders based on the benefits offered by use of such products.

## DISCUSSION

Our study adds significant contributions in the field of spiritual marketing. Our study shows growing interest among consumers to buy spiritual products. The main contribution of this study is the construction of consumption behaviour model to explain the spiritual product acceptance by the followers of spiritual leaders. The study contributes to new consumption behaviour literature with reference to spiritual products which is very limited with hardly any study reported on spiritual product acceptance by followers of spiritual leaders. In the current study we have mentioned that spiritual products are those products that are offered by the various

spiritual leaders’. There has been very little interest paid on this current topic where consumption is studied due to spiritual behaviour. We address this gap by studying the factors that motivates the consumers to buy spiritual products promoted by various spiritual leaders in India. The popularity of various Indian spiritual leaders (either contributing to yoga or self-help Indian gurus) is testament to the growing popularity of spiritual products in India. Our study shows that the consumers are buying the products offered by spiritual gurus because of two prime inclinations. First, because of consumer’s spiritual orientation towards the leader that includes the spiritual psychology and spiritual experience of the individual. Second, because of the consumer’s product orientation, under this orientation the consumer decides rationally and considers various other aspects also and do not purchase the product by just blindly following the spiritual guru, here, the various product related aspects are seen by the individual before making a final purchase that includes product attributes, wellness product and product loyalty in Figure 1.



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