

A COMPARISON OF CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARD CREMATION

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Abstract

This study examines the importance of consumers' attitudes toward cremation as an alternative means of body disposal. The psychographic characteristics of potential users and non-users of cremation were analyzed for their possible relationships to the future purchase behavior using discriminant analysis.

Introduction

Although for most Americans a traditional funeral service and casket burial is an accepted practice for taking care of the deceased, in recent years selection of an alternative body disposal such as cremation is becoming more popular in certain states. For example, in California and Florida cremation accounts for about 30 percent of body disposals (U.S. Industrial Outlook, 1979).

What motivates consumers to choose cremation instead of casket burial: Are users of cremation significantly different from users of burial in terms of their psychographic characteristics? Can the funeral industry identify its market for cremation in terms of geographic variables such as region, county, city or Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA)? What sort of marketing implications are involved? These are some of the unanswered questions that funeral establishments have to deal with when making managerial decisions concerning the addition of cremation for their prospective customers.

Much of the previous research in consumer behavior dealt with how consumers buy products and services (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat, 1978; Bettman, 1979). However, relatively little or no research has been undertaken to study how consumers make actual choices between cremation and earth burial. When choosing between the two different types of body disposal, the consumer is influenced not only by psychological but also sociological factors such as influences from reference groups, as a recent study indicates. Consumers may accept reference group influence because of the group's role in terms of informational, utilization, and value expressive benefits (Park and Lessig, 1977).

In addition, one of the situational factors that has a definite bearing on consumer behavior is time pressure. The decision as to what kind of body disposal to choose has to be made very quickly. People do not have time to compare and evaluate the alternatives and the key decisions about funerals must typically be made in a short period of time.

Since prior studies of how the consumer makes an actual choice of funerals is literally nonexistent, this study was designed to determine: (1) the psychographic characteristics of potential users of cremation and earth burial; (2) the relationships between people's attitudes toward cremation and the factors which influence the consumer's choice behavior in choosing between cremation and burial.

Methodology

Data was collected by personal interviews. Three hundred subjects living in the Clarion, Pennsylvania, area were selected at random from the telephone directory as possible study participants. Each prospective respondent was contacted first by telephone and pre-screened in terms of his/her family composition. When pre-screened respondents agreed to participate in the study, they were informed that they would be paid two dollars for cooperating in the study. The total sample size used was 270.

Respondents were categorized as negative, neutral, and positive to cremation by their responses to the following question: How do you feel about CREMATION as a method of body disposal? A. Unfavorably; B. Neutral; C. Favorably. Respondents who gave response A were categorized as negative; those who gave response B were classified as neutral; and those who gave response C were classified as positive. Attitudes toward earth burial and cremation were measured by using Likert scales. The means of each aspect on the Likert scales were compared among potential users of the cremation and burials. Statistically significant differences among means were determined by using one-way analysis of variance.

Findings

As shown in **Table 1**, those who have favorable attitudes toward cremation rated higher than do those who have unfavorable attitudes on the following dimensions: (1) cremation is an acceptable manner of displaying ceremonial respect to the deceased; (2) cremation is a much cheaper method of body disposal; (3) cremation is a method that closely matches to current religious beliefs; (4) earth burial includes a very high maintenance cost for graveyard; (5) earth burial requires excessive use of scarce land resources; and (6) burial is a more expensive method of body disposal as compared to cremation.

Furthermore, statistically significant differences existed on all but two dimensions measured. They were: (1) earth burial and cremation are quite comparable in costs; (2) choice of cremation by the deceased reflects a strong self-image and a flamboyant lifestyle. On these two dimensions, differences among the three groups were not statistically significant.

In order to discover the psychographic characteristics that distinguish negative, neutral, and positive attitude groups, discriminant analysis was performed. Discriminant analysis weighs and combines variables so that the three groups are forced to be as different as possible from each other on some linear combination of variables. With three groups, two discriminant functions were possible.

TABLE 1
A COMPARISON OF THE MEAN RESPONSES FOR CREMATION

	ATTITUDES TOWARD CREMATION			
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	F
I believe that cremation violates one's personal religious beliefs.	4.07	2.90	2.13	26.20*
Cremation is an acceptable manner of displaying ceremonial respect for the deceased.	3.58	4.77	5.68	35.58*
Cremation is a much cheaper method of body disposal.	5.37	5.72	5.98	3.95**
Cremation is a method that closely matches to current religious beliefs.	2.99	3.49	4.30	14.47*
Earth burial includes a very high maintenance cost for the graveyard.	4.52	5.03	5.38	5.35*
The deceased soul would be subject to disrespect by resorting to cremation.	3.17	2.48	1.77	15.52*
Earth burial requires excessive use of scarce land resources.	4.38	5.08	5.51	8.78*
Earth burial and cremation are quite comparable in costs.	2.54	2.74	2.40	N.S.
Choice of cremation by the deceased reflects a strong self image and a flamboyant lifestyle.	2.73	2.92	2.59	N.S.
Resurrection of the soul is affected by a choice of body disposal method.	2.09	1.56	1.52	5.18*
Burial is a more expensive method of body disposal as compared to cremation.	5.41	5.56	6.03	4.52*
The public ought not to be concerned about the depleting land resources.	2.59	2.56	1.93	4.17**

As can be seen in Table 2, the results of the discriminant analysis indicated that four dimensions significantly discriminated the three groups. They were: (1) cremation is an acceptable manner of displaying ceremonial respect for the deceased; (2) cremation violated one's religious beliefs; (3) cremation is a method that closely matches current religious beliefs; and (4) earth burial and cremation are quite comparable in costs.

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF MULTIPLE DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS
AMONG NEGATIVE, NEUTRAL, AND POSITIVE
GROUPS TOWARD CREMATION

Discriminant function	1	2
Eigenvalue	0.456	0.065
Percent of variance	87.577	12.43
Canonical Correlation	0.560	0.247
Wilkes lambda	0.645	0.939
Chi-square	113.23	16.205
d.f.	38	18
Significance	0.0000	0.578

Variable	Discriminant Coefficients
Display of ceremonial respect for the deceased	0.568*
Violation of religious beliefs	-0.373*
Close match to religious belief	0.244*
Comparable costs	0.231*

*Significant at .01 level.

Implications and Conclusions

An implicit assumption of this study is that favorable attitudes toward cremation on the part of consumers may be closely linked with actual purchase behavior of such funeral services. However, the final decision as to which form of disposition the consumer chooses may be dictated by other social and situational variables. Therefore, expecting too much from a knowledge of people's attitudes toward cremation may be misleading, since attitudes are only one factor that may influence purchase behavior of cremation.

*Significant at .01 level
**Significant at .05 level

At present, a relatively small percentage of the consumers of funeral services prefer cremation as an alternative form of body disposal. However, in the long run, the percentage of people who prefer it for themselves and others might increase, depending on geographic regions and other demographic variables such as religion and additional information available on cremation. Although the large majority of consumers still prefer earth burial, funeral service directors will need to recognize that cremation is an alternative which certain segments of our society may opt to choose and therefore must be prepared to provide such services in the future.

In terms of implementing marketing strategies, a clear knowledge of exactly what services funeral directors can offer might be helpful for those who are not familiar with the cremation process. Promotion may emphasize various advantages of using cremation as an alternative funeral arrangement. Many types of information dissemination are possible, through either pamphlet forms or broadcast media such as radio. While information on funeral price has not been readily available to the general public in the past, funeral directors should incorporate price information on cremation as well as earth burial if they want to reach key market segments to which promotional activities might be directed.

Additionally, an institutional advertisement in newspapers may help boost the image of a full service funeral home. Funeral service directors could widen their contacts with church groups and nursing homes so that the idea of using cremation as an alternative to earth burial can be promoted through word-of-mouth advertising.

References

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