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Sacred Selling: Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Advertising in Contemporary Society

Sanja Adjaip Velichkovski

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the intricate link between religion and advertisement, focusing on how advertisers use religious signs, values, and tales to create a connection with consumers. The intersection of religion and advertising is a very interesting and ever-changing idea that has had a huge influence on the visual environment of our society. The adoption of religious symbols and images in advertisements has been on the rise. Starting from the sacred symbols to the unconscious religious themes, their integration is a carefully planned method that is intended to strike a chord with the consumers' deep cultural and emotional values.

This paper contributes to a new perspective on advertising and religion in it. It will highlight the historical context, psychological insight, soci-cultural analysis, and ethical dilemmas regarding the intersection of religion and advertising.

To gain an intuitive understanding of the complex relationship between religion and advertising, it is necessary to examine specific case studies that exemplify the incorporation of religious elements into marketing campaigns. This research mainly analyzes two case studies: Coca-Cola's "Hilltop" commercial and Nike's "Take It To The Next Level" commercial. These two campaigns are chosen for analysis because of their skillful incorporation of religious elements into their campaigns. The study will focus on showing how advertisers balance the sacred and the secular without offending anyone's religious sensibilities, all to reach mass audiences, conquer new markets, and perpetuate consumerism. The underlying question that propels the investigation is how advertisers can balance the sacred and commercial and what the implications are for individuals, communities, and society.

Keywords: religion, advertising, campaign, consumerism

Introduction

The intersection of religion and advertising is a compelling and evolving field that significantly affects contemporary society's visual and cultural landscape. The use of religious symbols and imagery in advertising has grown increasingly prevalent as advertisers strive to forge deeper connections with consumers. This strategic incorporation of sacred imagery and implicit religious themes aims to resonate with the profound cultural and emotional significance that these elements hold for many individuals (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006). This approach reflects a broader trend where advertisers seek to align their messages with consumers' deeply held beliefs and values, enhancing relatability and appeal. The relationship between religion and advertising has deep historical roots. Religious values have long been instrumental in shaping the cultural norms of societies (Beyers, 2017). These religious frameworks provide a rich tapestry of beliefs and symbols that influence individual identities and societal behaviors. By leveraging these deeply ingrained religious elements, advertisers tap into a reservoir of cultural significance that can evoke strong emotional responses and foster a sense of familiarity with their audience. Historically, the use of religious imagery in advertising can be traced back to various advertising campaigns that sought to exploit the sacred for commercial gain. This phenomenon is not new but has evolved alongside cultural shifts and changing societal attitudes. The strategic use of religious symbols in advertising reflects broader trends in consumer culture where emotional resonance and cultural alignment are pivotal for engaging target audiences. A range of theoretical perspectives helps explain why religious imagery is so compelling in advertising. The symbolic interactionist perspective, for instance, emphasizes the importance of symbols and social interactions in the construction of meaning and the formation of social reality (Mr Edward, 2024). Advertising that incorporates religious symbols taps into this symbolic interaction, leveraging the deep-seated meanings associated with these symbols to create powerful connections with consumers. Additionally, the concept of brand personality, as discussed by Jennifer Aaker and Susan Fournier (1995), provides insight into how religious symbols can influence consumer perceptions of brands. By associating a brand with religious values, advertisers can imbue it with a personality that resonates with consumers on a personal and emotional level. This alignment with religious values can enhance brand loyalty and foster deeper consumer engagement. The incorporation of religious symbols in advertising also raises significant ethical considerations. The ethical implications of using sacred imagery in commercial contexts are manifold. The po-

tential for offending religious communities necessitates a careful and respectful approach to avoid cultural insensitivity and exploitation. Ozlem Sandikci and Ahet Ekici (2009) explore the ethical dimensions of advertising practices in diverse cultural and religious contexts. Their research underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in advertising, highlighting that the misuse or misrepresentation of religious symbols can lead to backlash and damage to brand reputation. Advertisers are thus tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that their campaigns are both effective and respectful of religious sentiments.

In conclusion, the integration of religious symbols into advertising represents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with profound implications for both marketing practices and consumer interactions. By examining the historical context, theoretical underpinnings, and ethical considerations associated with this practice, this research aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of religion and advertising. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious imagery influences consumer perceptions and behaviors while highlighting the ethical responsibilities of advertisers in navigating this sensitive terrain.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background for this paper involves a multi-faceted approach combining historical context, psychological insights, sociocultural analysis, and ethical considerations.

1. **Historical Context:** The historical development of the use of religious symbols in advertising is examined, taking into account cultural shifts and sociological factors that have shaped the current landscape.
2. **Psychological Insights:** Psychological perspectives are used to understand the profound impact that religious symbols can have on consumer behavior, tapping into spiritual and moral sensibilities.
3. **Sociocultural Analysis:** The adaptability of advertising strategies to align with prevailing cultural narratives is analyzed, reflecting broader shifts in religious affiliations and societal attitudes.
4. **Ethical Considerations:** The paper underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity, the potential for exploitation, and the responsibility of advertisers to navigate the delicate balance between commercial interests and respect for religious beliefs.

Historical Context

The historical context of religious imagery in advertising dates back to the early 20th century when mass media emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion. In this period, product advertisers recognized the powerful emotional and cultural associations associated with religious symbols. A visual language was established to resonate with diverse audiences. Religious images have a long history in advertising, and their meanings can vary across cultures and times.

In the early 20th century, especially in the West, religious values had a profound influence on social norms. It was common for institutions such as banks to use religious imagery to emotionalize and communicate moral values, credibility, and trustworthiness. Thus, the lamps take the form of cathedrals or steeples, which are designed to resemble religious institutions, thereby establishing an association with concepts of religion. In the early decades of the 20th century, the first major non-print form of mass media—radio—exploded in popularity. Radios, which were less expensive than telephones and widely available by the 1920s, had the unprecedented ability to allow huge numbers of people to listen to the same event at the same time. In 1924, Calvin Coolidge's pre-election speech reached more than 20 million people. Radio was a boon for advertisers, who now had access to a large and captive audience (*Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, 2016). An early advertising consultant claimed that the early days of radio were a glorious opportunity for the advertising man to spread his sales propaganda because of a countless audience, sympathetic, pleasure-seeking, enthusiastic, curious, interested, and approachable in the privacy of their homes (Briggs & Burke, 2018).

In the mid-20th century, an emphasis was placed on home values and stability, which was considered to be the driving impetus for advertising. Religious emblems and felicitations are customary, and continuous moral and ethical aspects arising from religious teachings and doctrines evolved and could be integrated into family life. In 1955, TV outpaced all other media for advertising. TV provided advertisers with unique, geographically oriented mass markets that could be targeted with regionally appropriate ads (Samuel, 2002). The 1950s saw a 75 percent increase in advertising spending, faster than any other economic indicator at the time.

The End of the 20th Century was characterized by the increase in the variety of nations, and advertisers started to insert religious imagery from diverse traditions in their advert points to get maximum coverage and more return. The role of religious

imagery in an advertisement has become more symbolic, and now the advertiser would usually concentrate on the values universally related to faith, that is, love, compassion, and community. Another aspect arising from globalization is the need for advertising targeting the religious variety of the target audience. The church is under its duty to show cultural respect by avoiding both unintentional offense and misconstrued interpretations of religious symbolism.

In the 21st Century, it is evident that there is a growing correlation between societal and environmental welfare in the folds of many brand concepts. Certain advertisers are seen to employ religious imagery for ethical reasons, which seek to address moral issues such as society's overall well-being.

The rise of social media has changed the landscape of advertising, allowing for quicker dissemination of campaigns, but also leading to more immediate and widespread public reactions. Religious imagery in advertising campaigns is subject to rapid and diverse responses, and brands must navigate the potential for controversy carefully. Social media sites such as Facebook use the information users provide on their profiles to generate targeted advertisements. Many people have raised privacy concerns over this practice, yet it remains in use. Free e-mail services such as Gmail also depend on targeted advertising for their survival. Indeed, advertising is the only way such services could continue. Given the ongoing privacy debates concerning targeted Internet advertising, a balance between a user's privacy and the accessibility of services will have to be settled in the near future (Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication, 2016).

Undoubtedly, digital media and its development in recent years have affected social life, including the religious life of both church institutions and individuals. The media have become a place for the circulation of religious symbols and have contributed to a wider flow of popular and individualized elements of religion. This 'change' in itself is studied in the theory of mediatization (Stepniak, 2023).

Psychological Insights

Studies have demonstrated evidence for the powerful effects of religious and/or spiritual appeals on consumer attitudes toward advertising. Yet, our understanding of the effects of religion and spirituality in the advertising domain is still very much limited. This is because the majority of existing studies have largely examined the topic from a cultural perspective without fully considering the complexities of religion and spirituality in an advertising context (Waller & Casidy, 2021).

Psychological research, exclusively, revealed the rhetoric of religious imagery as a motivating force for interested consumers. Regardless of religious background, people tend to be touched deeply by finding the same symbol and it gives them a sense of belonging to the same spiritual and moral values. Advertising and religion have powerful shaping forces for human behavior and cognition, as well as some psychological aspects in affect and persuasion.

One of the consistent features of good advertising is that it creates a specific mood among the prospective customers, an emotional pleasure. In effect, the brand or product is being linked to the buyer himself. Emotion can be used as a tool to side the buyer to either happiness, a state of depression, fear, or the state of sadness as per the satisfaction that is gained. Religion frequently draws on more profound feelings of people, such as the feeling of a vivid reason for life, getting those social ties, and safety. In the practice of religions, symbolic ceremonies support attractive feelings related to sense perception (Aaker & Fournier, 1995).

A man of advertisement uses storytelling that has a force of attraction and holds water among the target audience. A powerful story makes the thing exceptional but also personal. Oral and/or written expressions of religious doctrines are often employed to embody religious teachings. This information is transmitted symbolically through stories and parables that interpret moral values, cultural norms, and teachings that bind the faith community (Keller, 2003).

Employers rely on symbols and pictures to communicate a certain statement before they can discover a regular person supporting them. Brands very carefully pull together colors, fonts, and graphical elements that should reflect the desired expression or connection. Symbols and icons mean a lot in terms of the parallel activities of the religion. The visual, ritualistic, and symbolic elements that are used to depict the essential values of the faith and strengthen the connection between believers and their faith are among the core elements that make up a religion (Goffman, 1974).

Celebrities and experts are frequently employed to enhance the credibility and trust in brands, while their voice is used as social proof. Consumers are much more likely to be confident in the product or brand when this association is made between the product and a celebrity or someone they believe in personally. Spiritual authorities, for instance, priests or pastors, are regarded on the same level as persons seeking after them. Dogmas and principles are the basis of religion; they may well be the embodiment of truth the world sees and its anchor (Erdogan, 1999).

Sociocultural Analysis

From a sociocultural standpoint, the use of religious icons in commercials is a manifestation of the major social phenomena and newspaper rates in religious trust. Advertisers commonly adjust their advertising strategies to the landscape, which includes distinct religious symbols and general themes of spirit, such as. Literature examines how such advertising reflects and embodies the public opinion on religion, how such advertising is used, and how it is offered as a reflection of the commercial understanding of sacred things.

The role of religiousness is explained by a positive relationship between religiousness and perceived advertisement trustworthiness because of religious people's general conformity to authority and because of religion's emphasis on the good of fellow human beings (Ketelaar et al., 2015).

Advertisers do not only evaluate the individual cases but also look at the major social patterns to match their advertising campaign. The placing of religious symbols among these adverts might show how much aware and responsive the marketers are to their consumer's culture and norms. Spirituality and religion are also subject to cultural expectation changes, and spiritual expressions might be no different (Colin Campbell, 2007).

Marketers continue to be convinced that campaigning style and the way people talk about brands largely determine how consumers view the brand. Through the inclusion of religious images, they make an effort to rise above the ceiling by their ways of lining up with different cultures and entwining these symbols to knowledge and deeply felt feelings of the culture or a particular cultural context. The idea is that they can draw on symbols that have particular contributions to the cultural or religious origin of the target group of people. Although it is related to feelings and signs, this method motivates the supporters to identify themselves with these religious symbols of association.

Advertising reinforces people's attitudes toward sacred imagery. The commercial implication of the sign may change accordingly.

Advertisements reinforce the status quo on the way people feel about spiritual elements and can be in a way that one peruses, interprets, and establishes links with religious symbols. Based on the kind of business the sign adverts for, its commercial meaning will evolve, too.

Using religious imagery could result in a series of consequences, whether it is just a respectful representation of society's sacred elements or a disturbance created by mixing traditional and non-traditional beliefs, depending on the situation.

Ethical Considerations

Religion continues to hold significant relevance in shaping ethical values and influencing moral decision-making for individuals and societies worldwide. The ethical teachings, rituals, and spiritual practices found in religious traditions provide valuable guidance and meaning for individuals as they navigate moral dilemmas and seek to live ethically meaningful lives. Moreover, religion's impact on social justice, environmental ethics, and broader societal values demonstrates its profound role in addressing pressing ethical challenges (The Role of Religion in Ethics: A Comprehensive Examination - RegA Academy, 2023).

The research papers on advertising ethics look closer at ethical issues that global advertising campaigns can encounter when they incorporate religious iconography. Many advertisers struggle with deciding whether cultural acceptance or taking offense is relevant while at the same time trying to find a way to present their mark to the consumers without disrespecting the religious bonds. The belief that advertising has an ethical imperative to take into account the ad practices in the contexts of different religious and cultural settings is based on the understanding of ethics in advertising (Hyman et al., 1994).

Ethics depicted in the advertising debates warrant cultural sensitivity. The scientists will be able to determine whether modern advertising approaches draw on and encounter cultural and religious contexts. Symbolism, as such, is no problem in itself, but problems arise when it is in contradiction with the norms and when deeper meaning is not taken into account by these symbols.

The field of advertising ethics highlights the responsibility to be cautious about the possibility of adopting offensive content; therefore, religious emblematic signs would be an example. Experts can figure out cases in which advertisers are taking measures regarding the possibility of campaigns becoming offensive to religions and whether they concern themselves with making modifications in the campaign to avoid inappropriate behavior (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009)

The highlighted ethical dialogue calls on advertisers to carry a liability to stay within the acceptable limit of both commercial interests and respect to religious beliefs, whether they commit to ethical practices by foreseeing the probable effect of their messages on individuals and communities with no preference to either.

Methodology of Research

A case study is one of the most commonly used methodologies of social research. Case studies are a qualitative research methodology that involves an in-depth, contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their interrelations. They are widely used in social sciences, psychology, business, and education to explore complex issues in real-life settings. This approach allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied, considering the unique characteristics and dynamics of each case. By examining individual cases, researchers can uncover patterns, generate hypotheses, and build theories that might not be apparent through other research methods. Case studies are particularly valuable for studying rare or unique instances, understanding processes over time, and providing detailed insights that can inform practice and policy. To gain an intuitive understanding of the complex relationship between religion and advertising, it is necessary to examine specific case studies that exemplify the incorporation of religious elements into marketing campaigns so; they gain insight into the impact.

Specific case studies, such as Coca-Cola's "Hilltop" commercial and Nike's "Take It To The Next Level" commercial, are analyzed to provide concrete examples of how advertisers employ religious elements in their campaigns and their impact on consumer perceptions. Each case offers a unique lens through which we can examine the impact of such choices on consumer perceptions, brand formation, and the broader cultural discourse surrounding the intersection of religion and advertising.

By employing this comprehensive methodology, the research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the intersection of religion and advertising, providing valuable insights for both marketers and scholars interested in culture, ethics, and society.

Coca-Cola "Hilltop" Commercial

Coca-Cola's "Hilltop" commercial (1971) is an outstanding example of a global brand using universal themes, including religious ones, to connect with multiple audiences. The campaign features engaging ads in a time of joy and harmony, often based on cultural diversity. One advert that stands out showed a multicultural group gathered on a hill, reminiscent of a diverse congregation, sharing a Coca-Cola as a symbol of community unity. This story provoked insight into how advertisers use inclusive images, working with spiritual resonance to generate ideas and feelings of shared values.

Image 1.

Coca-Cola 'Hilltop' Commercial (I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing)



Note: Image 1 available from: <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/about-us/history/creating-id-like-to-buy-the-world-a-coke>

The idea behind the campaign is that The Coca-Cola Company invites billions of people worldwide who enjoy drinking the beverage and continue to enjoy one of life's simple pleasures (Le Cordeur, 2010).

The Coca-Cola 'Hilltop' Commercial (I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing) is an example of the use of universal themes that transcend cultural and religious boundaries. Focusing on feelings of happiness, Coca-Cola aimed to create a campaign that would reach people around the world regardless of their culture or religion.

The campaign subtly added a religious undertone without explicitly endorsing any specific religious beliefs. Commemorating the diversity of congregations, the gathering on the hill, as shown in Image 1 (Creating "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke," n.d.) is a symbol of unity and solidarity, drawing a spiritual image of multiculturalism.

The diversity of cultures and people used in advertising reflects a commitment to inclusion. By reflecting different cultures, Coca-Cola wanted to appeal to a wider audience, creating connections between people from different lifestyles.

The Hilltop Ad where people share Coca-Cola as a symbol of civic solidarity reinforces the campaign's focus on shared values. The painting suggests that a moment of joy and harmony is universal, transcending cultural and religious differences.

The campaign used emotional resonance to reinforce the brand's association with positive emotions. The brand aimed to create a positive emotional connection with consumers by aligning Coca-Cola with a desire for universal happiness and unity.

The Coca-Cola 'Hilltop' Commercial (I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing) during its development period reveals how Coca-Cola changed its messaging in response to lifestyle changes, cultural changes, and customer and stakeholder feedback. During the mid-1970s, a new version of the ad was reworked with a Christmas theme and re-aired each holiday season for several years. Fast forward to 2014: The message of 'Hilltop' evolves into "It's Beautiful" — which shows a culturally diverse America enjoying Coca-Cola.

The case study is a classic example of examining the intersection of religion, culture, and advertising in a global context. This case study provides a lesson for future advertisers on how to approach the use of inspirational images. Understanding the nuances of cultural and religious symbols, maintaining authenticity, and prioritizing complementarity are important considerations for targeted brands to engage with diverse global audiences.

Nike's "Take It To The Next Level" Campaign

Nike's "Take It To The Next Level" campaign featured a first-person perspective narrative following a soccer player's rise from grassroots to professional levels. 'Take It to the Next Level' advert, directed by Guy Ritchie, was nothing short of spectacular, especially considering it was created in an era where the family camcorder still came out every Christmas and HDMI was still not far from being deemed extra-terrestrial technology by some (Wilks, 2023). The ad cleverly employed religious imagery, portraying the protagonist's journey as a pilgrimage with challenges and triumphs. This case study invites an exploration of the use of religious archetypes and narratives to elevate the ordinary into a sacred journey, aligning the brand with themes of dedication, perseverance, and achievement.

Image 2.

Nike: Take It to the Next Level Commercial



Note: Image 2 available from: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9773924/mediaviewer/rm2872026881/?ref_=tt_ov_i

The use of a pilgrimage narrative adds depth to the campaign, framing the soccer player's journey as a sacred quest. This archetypal structure often involves challenges, personal growth, and a transformative experience, contributing to the campaign's emotional impact.

Religious archetypes often include symbolic challenges and triumphs. In the campaign, the soccer player shown in Image 2 (*Nike: Take It to the Next Level*, 2008) faces obstacles and overcomes them, mirroring the hero's journey found in many religious and mythological narratives. These challenges serve as rites of passage and contribute to the narrative's universality.

By framing the soccer player's journey as a pilgrimage, Nike elevates the ordinary act of playing football to a sacred and meaningful experience. This strategy enhances the perceived significance of the sport and aligns it with themes of dedication,

discipline, and personal growth.

Religious archetypes often emphasize values such as dedication, perseverance, and discipline. The campaign strategically aligns the brand with these values, positioning Nike products as essential tools for individuals committed to their personal and athletic journeys.

Religious archetypes often involve aspirational goals or ideals. In the campaign, the protagonist aspires to reach the next level in his soccer career. This mirrors the human desire for self-improvement and achievement, tapping into universal aspirations shared by diverse audiences.

Religious archetypes often evoke deep emotional responses and a sense of transcendence. By utilizing this narrative structure, Nike aims to create an emotional connection with viewers, tapping into shared human experiences of struggle, growth, and triumph.

The clever incorporation of religious imagery, such as the pilgrimage theme, demonstrates Nike's ability to use symbolism effectively. It adds layers of meaning to the campaign, making it more resonant and memorable for the audience.

As Mitchell Wilks (2023) emphasizes, if you can look past his (director's) rather strange obsession for splatters of vulgarity throughout then you can seriously appreciate the creative genius of the ad. It had everything and stands the test of time today as not only something with stunning hits of nostalgia but also with something made with one eye on the future and creative freedom as the driving force.

In summary, the analysis of Nike's "Take It To The Next Level" campaign, with its clever use of religious archetypes, invites a nuanced exploration of how brands can infuse ordinary narratives with sacred themes to connect with audiences on a deeper, more emotional level. It also raises considerations about cultural sensitivity, potential controversies, and the overall impact on brand perception.

Conclusion

Through this interdisciplinary exploration, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complex and evolving relationship between religion and advertising in contemporary society. The findings have implications for not only advertisers seeking to resonate authentically with diverse audiences but also for scholars and society at large, fostering a more informed and reflective discourse on the ethical and cultural dimensions of advertising practices.

When it comes to the use of religious imagery in advertisements, the point should be emphasized that the correctness of this may differ greatly from culture to culture, region to region, and individual to individual, and what meets the eyes of one may be good while with another culture maybe not.

More recently, with the advent of digitization, a growing number of religious and spiritual groups use increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques—from on-line influencers to free streaming services—to promote their content (Taylor & Einstein, 2022). The use of religious archetypes in advertising can be sensitive, as it may be perceived as appropriating sacred themes for commercial purposes. So advertisers need to consider whether the campaign strikes a balance between leveraging archetypes and respecting the sanctity associated with religious symbols.

Another important point that needs to be considered is emphasizing cultural relevance and inclusivity. While religious archetypes can have universal appeal, it is important to consider whether the symbolism employed is culturally sensitive and resonant across diverse audiences.

Throughout our exploration, it became evident that advertisers strategically leverage religious symbols, values, and narratives to connect with diverse audiences. Historical perspectives illustrated the evolution of this practice, highlighting its roots in the recognition of the emotional and cultural resonance tied to religious imagery. Psychological insights delved into the profound impact that religious symbols can have on consumer behavior, tapping into spiritual and moral sensibilities.

Sociocultural analyses revealed the adaptability of advertising strategies to align with prevailing cultural narratives, reflecting broader shifts in religious affiliations and societal attitudes. Ethical considerations underscored the importance of cultural sensitivity, the potential for exploitation, and the responsibility of advertisers to navigate the delicate balance between commercial interests and respect for religious beliefs.

Case studies provided concrete examples of how advertisers from various industries and regions employ religious elements in their campaigns, illustrating diverse strategies and their impact on consumer perceptions. Consumer responses, influenced by cultural affiliations, perceptions of brand trust, controversy, and societal commentary, further enriched our understanding of this multifaceted relationship.

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