

## CULTURE, ADVERTISING AND THE PLAY WITH 'RELIGION'

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The primary purpose of this article is to identify theoretical fundamentals that can be used in research in the context of culture and advertising research. An additional aim is to identify future research directions for advertising building theory in relation to religion.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A conceptual framework is grounded in the literature review. As few cross-cultural studies have been absorbed, the theories and their presentation will likely progress in the future.

**Finding** – There is a choice for moving advertising strategy onward from religious advertising and its influence in our culture to one in which the focus is on the exchange of values beyond self-interest.

**Research limitations/implications** – Since this article is only a primary attempt to develop an understanding of the advertising approach to social and cultural trends in society, which provides a strong stimulus for the further conceptual development of the symbolic religious consumption concept and valuation of its use and usefulness in the real world.

**Practical implications** – The proposed conceptual framework provides marketing strategists with a template for a radically different approach to advertising management and a new glance into religion, which offers the potential for enduring customer loyalty.

**Originality/Value** -- This paper contributes a new perspective on advertising and religion in it.

**Keywords:** Advertising, consumerism, culture, religion, religious economy, market theology.

**Research type:** general review.

### Introduction

XXI century culture symbolizes new informational and communication technologies by making use of the flow of mass media. Its Media influences affect our worldviews, moral values, and even our personal beliefs (convictions). Moreover, there is a new millennial generation that grew up with new cultural, informative and educational TV programs, social networks, TV stars and influencers and all this is defined as pop culture. In order to elucidate the role of advertising in modern culture, we will introduce keywords, definitions and terms.

We tend to clarify the link between religion and culture in particular. We also need to consider the popular culture of today, since this has a real impact on advertising. As Jhally (1987) states, children recognize Santa Claus and Mickey Mouse from Disneyland more easily than the Christian cross or other religious symbols. This is the kind of cultural context in which we are living\.

We live in times of a religious mix with different or new religious movements cropping up on a daily basis. From this perspective, one may be very critical of this religious confusion or spiritual 'shopping,' but this is an undeniable phenomenon in our pluriform and democratic

society (keeping in mind Western society). The question arises if this kind of spirituality is acceptable? It brings about many misunderstandings and questions. Concepts which were clear for many years lose their meaning: for instance, as to what religion or symbols mean in the context of advertising? How does advertising in our consumer-driven community try to replace spiritual meanings and is this an irreversible fact? How has this misunderstanding of religious values come into our lives and to what extent does it change us or our shopping attitudes/values? Our daily needs?

In this article we are going to demonstrate the present situation in our culture and on part of it – advertising. We will elaborate on the definition, the meaning and how it operates in our daily society, how advertising became a part of religion and how it became unclear where religion started and where just a simulacra of it is in commercial. This present situation has created a new phenomenon – market theology (religious economy), or the “play” of spiritual messages in advertising and especially symbols.

### **Theoretical background**

Culture is quite difficult to describe. One could broadly say that the word ‘culture’ could fit into many categories that fall outside the classical approach of culture in the past. Moreover, it could be derived from how we react in our daily lives to things which we feel or are impressed by. Culture gives us language, categories, narratives and other organizational schemes by which we make sense of ourselves and everything we deal with. Consequently, scholars from various disciplines have tried to describe culture differently (Hofstede 1991, Fischer 2009, 2001, de Mooij 2013; Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; McSweeney 2013; Triandis 2018). Supportively, scholars have detailed that culture is shaped from people’s mutual environmental context (Hofstede and Minkov 2010), life understanding (Heine 2008), and basics of life (Keith 2011). Essentially, Matsumoto (2009) emphasized that culture survives for pursuing a happy and significant life. For sure it is almost impossible to find a consensus regarding culture’s definition; therefore, culture is a part of an individual’s link to physical and psychological well-being.

We must take into account that culture represents or portrays our lives, and even more, the popular arts popularize and glamorize the ideals, values, attitudes and beliefs that exist within our culture to shape our lives. Romanowski (2001) argues that: “Culture involves both creating meaning for things and living. It shapes experience and expectations, and gives us a means of coping with the new and unexpected. A culture can shape what we come to know and value – how we understand “God’s word”.

In a KFC, McDonald’s and H&M world, we become part of our fast-paced society. More often we communicate via smart phones instead of seeing real people and more often forget real things. Even more people prefer short relationships than real love and marriage. We become “McDonaldis” ourselves. We are used to drinking from plastic cups, eating from paper plates, and it is not just fast food, but we have also become fast thinkers and fast talkers. Moreover, it has become a part not just of our culture; therefore, it has become who we are. Instead of choosing an unknown director, we watch cheap and easy Hollywood movies. We could talk for hours about the last advertisement we saw, and we have no idea what the exhibition was about in our town’s art museum. A book becomes important when it has been bought by enough people or sufficiently advertised (becomes one of the best if it is on the shelf of the ‘best-sellers’). As for more, the market stands as the ground of our postmodern being according to Detweiler and Taylor (2003). It is already normal to live in a society of “cut and paste”, bricolage, cafeterias, take-away coffee keeping in mind that these words already express current culture.

Despite acknowledgment and persistent pointing out cultural issues for many decades academics have endlessly worried about the importance of culture in advertising (Okazaki and Mueller 2007, de Mooij and Hofstede 2010; Taylor 2005, 2018, House, Quigley, and de Luque 2010; La Ferle and Lee 2012). We consume everything: health services, things and ideas, political representation, even all kinds of culture (Twitchell, 1999). We can conclude that it is not so easy to eliminate the changes in the world. Even if we do not like them, we have to adjust.

### **The Advertising Plot and Religion**

The most debatable source of present culture influenced by consumerism and moral relativism is advertising. Advert could be small and quickly forgotten, or it can be huge with colourful images in front of your face which you cannot forget all day or maybe all week.

In order to give a more secure description of the term “advertising,” one of the dictionaries of religion says, “Advertising donates a competition-oriented form of mass communication, through various media, for economic, cultural, or religious purposes” (Petley, 2003) describes this term more precisely, and he argues that advertising means, “The goods or services are promoted to the public. The advertiser’s goal is to increase sales of these goods or services by drawing people’s attention to them and showing them in a favorable light” (Petley, 2003). Yet it has been suggested that the word “advertising” originates from the Latin word “advertere,” which means “to turn around.” In the marketing context, “advertising” has been defined “as a paid and non-personal form of presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor” (Kumar & Mittal, 2002). To define more precisely what we mean by advertising, according Singer (1986) the verb “to advertise” means to take notice of rather than to call attention to, which is our modern meaning. The latter nuance then branches out into three related functions of advertising: the first function is “to call attention to”; the second is “to inform,” for advertising contains information that seeks to meet different levels of standards; and the third - taken from the point of view of the interests of the adviser - is “to persuade” (Singer, 1986).

Furthermore, through advertising, the advertiser intends to spread his ideas about his products or offerings among his customers and prospects (it is the basic aim of the activity). Today, we cannot find anything the same as it used to be (not even comparable with the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Advertising is almost everything and everywhere and it includes our consumer behaviour, markets fostering our little traditions (or even addictions) in malls or supermarkets. Moreover, we could say that, from a psychological point of view, one can understand someone’s personality and worldview just simply based on someone’s participation in buying and in everyday shopping. Furthermore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, advertising manipulates, rules, plays, seduces, and easily leads us into temptation (Singer, 1986). It is generally agreed that advertising and consumption are not as pure as they were in the beginning (keeping in mind the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and that now even our identity is based on production, distribution and consumption, all characteristics and functions of modern consumer culture (Chasin, 2000).

Advertising is no longer just a way to present products and to attract consumers. It has become a guru, a religion, a prayer. It has become a way to salvation. Moreover, we advertise ourselves every day in our daily life, and we do that so naturally and regularly through our behaviour and our body language that we do not catch ourselves doing this. It has even become second nature, like thinking (Tiwari, 2003). The reason why advertising is so attractive is that it helps us be recognizable for others, like flowers with their colours and smell in order to attract bees. As Tiwari (2003) states, humans are the most creative of all

animals and natural creatures because they have the artificial commination to get the effect out of each other. He says, "Though the basic animal instincts remain the same, man-made cues like seductive clothing, cosmetics, lighting, music, visual imagery, vocabulary, etc. often acts as overt and gestures and signs" (Tiwari, 2003).

Advertising operates as a connection between society and the economy. Most of the time, the goal is to advertise a product or brand with specific advantages. Companies who present the same product compete with each other and one of their goals is to promote the advantages of specific brands (Wiener & Lohnert, 2007). In another way, in the commercial world, advertising is meant to communicate to the consumers how the advertised product or service can satisfy some relevant need of theirs in a meaningful way: "Advertising also provides the option to choose one partner (brand) that will satisfy his or her needs the best" (Tiwari, 2003). Meanwhile, it creates a better living standard by nourishing people's consuming power, showing one the goals of a better home, clothing and food for his or her family and himself.

The most important aspect is not the commercial itself but the way it decides to show a product, the form which reaches the customer and what kind of value makes this product special and desirable.

In a consumer-oriented society advertising demonstrates the free way of everything related with goods "wrapped" in sexuality, which have become just the tool for the mass media and massive production of goods helps to multiply brands and increase "brands values" (Baudrillard, 1998).

Hence, we may continue to state that advertising has a strong influence on the present cultural situation and on the market. Moreover, the role of advertising today is to transmit rich, intimate and astute, cultural and subcultural messages and images as well as universal, biological desires, to seduce us and leave us with wonderful images and dreams, which will inspire us to fulfill them, so we need to work more, in order to spend more and find even spiritual satisfaction.

### **The Place of Religion in Advertising**

Religion is as much a global phenomenon as advertising is. Some people take advertising as a religion. Religion is one of the main elements of social behaviour and effects consumers as well as society (Mokhlis, 2009). Consumer behaviour is directly influenced by the religion its decrees and taboos. One of these behaviours is fasting, and Muslims, Hindus as so Christians have the same tradition. The term religion is to be understood in a lot of different ways, and it is more than mere spirituality. In its original Latin usage ("religio"), Cicero defined it as the giving of proper honour, respect and reverence to the divine, by which he meant the gods. This thinker distinguished "religion" as a dutiful honouring of the gods, from "superstition," an empty fear of them (MacRea, 2016). Unfortunately, this definition does not fully describe religion as a part of belonging to consumerism and believing it is divine. Apparently, it is necessary to find out how it influences our spiritual experience. It is useful to start with this narrower definition of religion as a belief in God or gods, together with the practical results of such a belief as expressed in worship, ritual and a particular view of the world and of nature as well as a destiny of man and the way someone ought to live his daily life. It is also useful to distinguish, as Cicero did, between religion itself and other things which may be associated with it or are a part of it (Cenkner, 1990). According to cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1966), religion can be described as a cultural system in five categories: 1) A system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4)

clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Sheffield, 2006).

Looking from a different perspective, in addition to these definitions, a different term could be used. It is called “implicit religion,” practiced in religious education to cover the study of things which are not religious themselves but can have religious significance to religious people (Cenkner, 1990). This dispute raises the question if (to improve the term of “implicit religion”) for instance, Buddhism is a religion or not. In its broader forms, where there is worship of gods, and perhaps of Buddha himself, it is clearly a religion. Meanwhile, in its narrow form, it may be considered as a philosophy of life. Keep in mind that Buddhists state that they do not have a God, but just a teacher and a system of religious praxis. On the contrary, everybody agrees that one of the main world religions is Buddhism, of course, not without a reason, as we are trying to claim. It cannot be just a system of teaching.

We can argue that, just as Buddhism has no god but just a teaching system, the same goes for consumerism, and we already have a new religious movement which shares the same characteristics. Furthermore, consumerism has a strong theory as well. Advertising will fit in this category very clearly and all the magazines full of worship advice (what to buy and what not to), could be compared to religious books.

In other words, “advertising” (along with religion has a clear vision, a sense of belonging, an enemy, sensory appeal, storytelling, grandeur, evangelism, symbolism and rituals) can have some conventional religious aspects, even if it does not have a formalized ideology as religions usually do. Furthermore, in the way “advertising binds together certain groups of people through class differences, purchasing power, and brand names into a recognizable community through image, language, ritual, and seemingly supernatural powers, it is very much as religion” (Sheffield, 2006)

True religion has to be distinguished from sects (movements with the same implicit form of religion). Let us look at some examples. For instance, looking from a different point of view, Marxist analysis argued that advertising functioned as a fetish religion in late capitalism. Jhally states, “A fetish is an object believed to have magical properties and thought to contain the spirit of its creator, or a spirit that will serve some practical, everyday value.” The author continues to say that advertising is related to fetish religion, whereby fetishism is not a total spiritual belief system, but rather a part of a larger belief or higher spiritual power, such as a Supreme Being (Sheffield, 2006 ).

Exist an opinion that advertising could be a religion itself but despite the fact that advertising borrows icons and images from religion to increase its power it does not make it one. Advertising uses and evokes already familiar images which are easy to recognize and attribute to traditional religious symbolism (Sheffield, 2006). For example, in an advertisement for mobile phones, a woman and a man are entering a wonderful garden, and they both look very happy. Birds are singing, flowers are blowing in the wind, and it is obvious, that it has used an image of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Paradise). However, from this image we do not feel more sacred than before.

Whether the strong feelings in religion come directly from God, or whether they are generated at least in part by association, they are at any rate linked with religious belief. According to psychologists So, Achar, Han, Agrawal, Duhachek, & Maheswaran (2015), the emotions involved in sports and in religion may be very similar but that does not justify including sports in the category of religion, as some do. The similarity is only superficial and on one level. The present situation of mass media, as the dictionary describes, it is presented in general through films, sports, advertising and music, which puts the religion on the defensive. Consequently, it makes new waves, but it does not mean that traditional religion will disappear.

## Postmodernity and Religion

The question rises as to how religious and economic products (advertising) started to be mixed together in the pop culture of our society. One of the answers could be that religions are capable of fostering reflection and conviction. Popular culture purveys and instantiates a religion, as well as religious and quasi-religious impulses. Scholars raise the question that if pop culture and advertising have an impact on our society and one of the answers is on the affirmative: "The cultural context of advertising may capture lifestyles, demographic characteristics or values" (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). It is argued that "to create the economic impact of selling goods, advertising operates psychologically, changing attitudes, images, cognitions of values and feelings" (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). Advertising frequently contains values relating to leisure, productivity, being modern and traditions which change. The three most common values used in advertising include pleasure, wisdom and family security. The study concludes that advertising has a more constant cultural character than may appear on casual inspection (Williams, Lee & Haugtvedt, 2004). The main difference between religion and advertising is that religion speaks about the afterlife, prepares the soul for the next world, while advertising addresses the here and now. We contradict the idea that religion speaks just about the past. It speaks about the present as well, unfortunately, as for more it is not the essence of this research paper (Detweiler & Taylor, 2003).

Religion helps us to make decisions, develop values, and take risks. In our consumer-driven society, advertising often serves as our language (Detweiler & Taylor, 2003). In fact, not so much is known about religion in advertising even though religion significantly influences culture in many countries. Consequently, advertising has a significant effect on the wealth of companies and plays a significant role on consumer behaviour (Li & Lo, 2015), which affects peoples' attitudes towards advertisement (Soares et al., 2007; Yılmaz and Enginkaya, 2015; Makienko, 2014).

One of the reasons why companies are using religious symbols and even Jesus himself is, "There is a cause: a God" (Barton, 2011). The main purpose for using Jesus in advertisements is because his legend has survived for twenty centuries, and he is one of the most potent influences in the world. In this perspective, Bruce Barton continues to state that Jesus is effective: "Foremost, it could be recognized as the basic principle that all good advertising is news. He was never trite or commonplace, he had no routine. Second, he was advertised by his service, not by his sermons" (Barton, 2011).

Advertising reflects not only some cultural values, but also religious thoughts and symbols which may be reflected in different contents. Religion functions in society in a lot of ways, such as personal values, beliefs, icons, symbols, rituals and social gatherings. Of course, it is not surprising that religious organizations have led very successful boycotts of products and promoted the use of others.

Further, modern and popular culture is heavily mass-mediated and commodified. In its mass-mediated and commodified forms, it appeals especially to the crowd. We should keep in mind that the crowd's characteristics include a tendency to take on a life of its own, overwhelming the considered judgment and stifling the imagination of the individuals and communities who comprise it. The crowd is motivated by the grossest, simplest, most elemental dreams and dreads; the crowd is easily manipulated by demagogues or demagogic techniques (Laytham, 2014).

## Does Advertising Replace Religion?

During the past few decades, advertising has made extreme changes in the perspective of their expressions and ways to reach the audience. More in particular, advertising has “appealed to economic-utilitarian motives, to psychological needs or ‘instincts’, and most recently, to social motives, we should admit, including religious needs as well” (Barton, 2011). Advertising suggests all kind of promises strongly related with religion we start to think, that belongings can help us become more attractive to another person as well give us power over other people’s affections, cure us of all illnesses, capture and package nature for our use and become desirable persons in a community we belong.

The most evident difference between religion and advertising is that religion expresses how to talk about the “beyond,” while advertising talks about the “here and now” (Twitchell, 1999). Therefore, the best approach to understand advertising is to state that it is like religion. First of all, it has an organizing system of meaning for surpluses (plenty). In both cases, the system appears to be coming from the top down, from the priests to the parishioners, from the producers to the consumers. In truth, it works just as well the other way around. To a considerable degree, the parishioners (consumers) set the agenda and the priests (producers) are forever predicting where the demand will appear next. These two comparable objectives share the same meaning and make the same promise, “the same redemption with ‘one through faith’, together with a promise of salvation” (Twitchell, 1999).

Advertising, at the same time, has a lot of power, as we have mentioned before, from the arts to the science of building brands through persuasive communication and positioning them in the consumer’s perception, with a constant vigil on the market situation and consumer expectations. It gives the possibility to change even social rules and adapting new paradigms, such as visual, economic, sociological and political ones (Kumar & Mittal, 2012). The reason why people sometimes change a product into a symbol which is marked by the religious influence it becomes the “object with an aura of the sacred” as well it opens the new segment of buyers (Sheffield, 2006).

On the contrary, “advertising also has its own collective rituals.” In a way, they change an object into a product, and in this manner expresses, as Sedgwick says, “intimacy and happiness which we lack” (Sedgwick, 2009). Commercials express themselves through coding themselves and goods as a type of sacrament. In advertising, symbols can become everything – words, objects, goods by themselves. They start to be desirable. Then advertising companies put in them a type of divine grace that brings the people (community) together for a time of appreciation and reminiscence.

The sacraments are a religious ceremony or ritual that gives divine grace, or a symbol that communicates in the sacred. In advertising, through the meaning of sacramentality, this grace becomes imported to the individual, who could purchase more. Thus, it could be, for instance, diamonds or fancy shoes. By transforming an object to a product and afterwards to a symbol, the divine is present and subsequently imparted to the consumer. Of course, we do not try to destroy the understanding and we respect the meaning of the sacraments, but rather we wish to demonstrate the assimilation with advertising.

The power of advertising has generated such an image around the purse that people desire to be a part of a certain consumption class. Sacramentality here becomes the consumer person by the image attached to the object. “Advertising, through the religious dimensions of a divine mediator, sacramentality, and ultimate concern, maintains the binaries of culture in such a manner that the fiction of a ‘nature order’ is given legitimacy by appeal to the religious. For instance, it is natural to be hungry or thirsty, but these conditions of nature were shifted into consumer desires as the US developed as an industrial society.” (Sheffield, 2006).

Insofar as advertising bestows identity through the ownership of commodity-totems, it rewards those whose objects (images) subtend normative practice of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Advertising, then, according to Sheffield (2006), maintains the fictive practices of normative binaries through sacramental symbols. Advertising mediates the image of the object to the individual, and then he or she has an ability to become a part of a “consumption community” marked by object. For instance, Rolex has an image considered to be a symbol of wealth. The community then forms a clan (Rolex clan) linked through the totem and the image given to it by advertising.

## Conclusion

We all have a strange relationship with advertising. On the one hand, we cannot stand it, it is everywhere, we find it annoying and frustrating, we cannot escape from it, we cannot make our own decisions or be in a quiet and still place to reflect on them, advertising disturbs it as the most powerful force. On the other hand, we cannot imagine our lives without these distractions. They are not just sparking views or exaggerated words. They help to make decisions and even shape our preferences and they show our selves around our social attitudes and character features. They even have become a way to communicate with God (or super natural powers). Advertising with symbolic religious meaning does not just shock or wake us up, but it embarrasses us as well. It demonstrates the weak sides of our society, the fragile and tempted soul in ourselves. To make this statement more argumentative, Twitchell (1999) says that advertising is “ubiquitous, anonymous, syncretic, symbiotic, profane and, particularly, magical.” Complexity and misunderstanding starts, as we mentioned before, in these times. Human beings are surrounded by thousands of advertisements like being exposed to technologies all the time. It is anonymous because the sponsor of advertising is almost never known. It is symbiotic since there is a link between advertising and trends in a world of culture. It is also profane; therefore, it directly reaches ephemeral goods as well as services. And it is always magical. You never know what a symbolic meaning refers to beyond itself with the seductive idea that it will solve all your problems.

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