

Controversial And Religious Symbols In Advertising: Grounded Theory Approach

Gintarė Kriauciūnaitė-Lazauskienė

Mykolas Romeris University, Ateities str. 20, Vilnius, Lithuania
gintare.laz@gmail.com

Abstract

This article investigates the motivations for the use of religious symbols in response to offensive advertisements—where brands and/or marketing experts are attempting to sell a contradictory or shocking aspect of Christian religion and use its symbols as an expression of religion and culture. The author investigates Christian Millennials' perceptions through a series of posted advertisements, individual interviews, diary entries, and ladder coding procedures (grounded theory methodology). Marketing experts still have an unanswered question: how to predict buying trends and what influences them within a moral context. The presence of war made us think about the moral value and lasting value of goods. An educated, digitally connected, traveling Christian demographic in Lithuania that grasped the influence of religious symbolism in advertisements was found in this study to define offense as provocative, sexist, or annoying advertisements where the message or theme neglects their intelligence. Additionally, mothers are distracted by controversial advertising and the product's influence on their children. Finally, an environmental paradox exists where restricted living conditions, juxtaposed in parallel with the escapism offered by social-media consumption, lead millennials to be more accepting of advertising that could be classified as offensive.

This study benefits of its value to professionals in the fields of advertising, research, consumer behaviour observation, marketing communications, and economics.

The originality appears in a new grounded theory model that is based on consumers' faith and belonging to religious groups (millennials) and their consumer practices. The theoretical model is designed to explain the stepwise process of Christians' opinion-forming, behaviour, and consumption based on controversial advertisements.

Keywords: advertising, symbolism, moral values, consumer decision, cultural values.

INTRODUCTION

The changing social situation is influenced by the post-covid19 epidemic's, the freedom of choice of people is also influenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. This political situation also affects advertising and the use of symbols in it, by using various methods to try to determine the impact on the consumer. Recently, advertising has become an integral part of our culture and state of morality, which changes, transforms, and moves to other virtual spaces, where buyers associate their identity by buying products with symbolic meaning or various symbols hidden in products. Moral values become choice-influenced individualization as an inseparable market relationship with the consumer. Marketing experts still have an unanswered question - how to predict buying trends and what influences them? The symbolism of the product demonstrates dedication, achievements it compromises to show more hellish and more clearly interpreted consumer behaviour patterns, thus the wider use of not only symbols, but also the language of signs semiotics.

Theoretical Background / Literature review

Consumers are exposed to thousands of advertisements per day, with the higher numbers reflecting every time a consumer passes by a label anywhere (Haenlein et al. 2020). As a result, controversial advertisement strategies, also recognized as thought - provoking attempts to appeal or offensive advertisement, have grown into the obvious answer to targeting customers for many practitioners. Today, marketers take different lengths to capture the attention of consumers to beat the advertising giants. Some of the most effective symbols in advertising are shocking and controversial symbols. Among the controversial depictions of advertising, after sexuality and brutality, religious symbolism is thought to garner the most reactions. Religion, depending on the cultural context, is still considered taboo, as well as religious symbols, images, icons. However, a supportive part of communication is shock: "It depends heavily on breaking social or cultural taboos, and provocation is more likely when a large part of the audience is shocked by what they have seen" (Pope, Voges, & Brown, 2004, p. 77). The quote perfectly reflects the old saying that even bad advertising is still advertising, and shocking advertising leaves not only a deep impression, but also causes deep discussions, especially, they touch on topics that sensitize moral beliefs.

Theoretical studies have confirmed that the positive or negative attitude of consumers towards shocking advertising is influenced by social and demographic factors - religiosity, moral principles, age, gender. Significant contributions to this research include Prendergast and Hwa (2002), Andersson and Pettersson (2004), Sengupta and Dahl (2008), Dahl et al. (2009), Liu et al. (2009), Sawang (2010), Brugiére and Barry (2011), Sabri (2012). Religious values and symbols that can be reflected in different contents. Religion functions in society in many ways, such as: personal values, beliefs, icons, symbols, rituals and social gatherings.

Religious and controversial symbols in advertising have a great influence not only on the decision of buyers to buy, but also on advertising creators who create trends and predict which products to advertise. Religious communities also have great power to boycott some products while encouraging the use of others. We have mentioned before that culture and religion often seem to merge into one whole, it is believed that if society is homogenous, there is no separation, and differences are only noticeable between those cultures that hold different religious beliefs, which is caused by controversial advertising. These differences can have a very dramatic effect on culture, covering many aspects of business and marketing (knowing that both religion and advertising are global phenomena).

The question that arises for marketing researchers, why religion is important for advertising symbolism, lies in the answer that more than 80% of the world's population consider themselves religious (Pew Forum, 2019; Hunt and Penwell 2008). Religion can influence a variety of consumer behaviors (Mathras et al., 2016; Minton, 2015; Rinallo, Rinallo & Alemany Oliver, 2019), including long-term consumption (Minton, Kahle, & Kim 2016), brand attitudes (Rindfleisch, Wong, & Burroughs 2010), spirituality in business (Lee, Lovelace, and Manz 2014), market recognitions (Minton 2016), as well as consumer life in general (Diddams, Lee Whittington, and Davigo 2005). Religiosity has a strong influence on consumer attitudes, values, and actions, as confirmed by numerous studies. Extant literature reveals that there is a significant relationship between religiosity and various aspects of consumption such as materialism (Stillman et al., 2012), status seeking (Essoo and Dibb, 2004), impulsivity (Yousaf, Shaukat-Malik, 2013), new product adoption (Mansori, Sambasivan and Md-Sidin, 2015), rebranding (Choi, 2010), ethics (Vitell, 2009), risk (Delener, 1990) and consumerism (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012). In addition, religiosity affects product evaluation (Mokhlis, 2009), product pricing (Essoo and Dibb 2004; Mokhlis 2006, 2009) and promotions (Shyan-Fam, Waller, Erdogan, 2004; Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013; Mansour and Diab, 2013). 2016).

Recent times, have been several studies that have applied the grounded theory approach to explore the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising. These studies have focused on various aspects, such as the impact of controversial and religious symbols on consumer attitudes and behaviors, the ethical considerations of using such symbols in advertising, and the cultural and religious factors that influence the perception of these symbols.

Another study by Brakus et al. (2017) focused on the use of religious symbols in advertising and its impact on consumer attitudes. The study found that the use of religious symbols can positively influence brand attitudes, but only among consumers who are highly religious and have a strong personal connection to the symbol. The study also found that the effectiveness of religious symbols in advertising is influenced by the cultural and religious context in which the ad is presented. In a more recent study by Husnayain et al. (2021), the authors explored the ethical considerations of using religious symbols in advertising. The study found that the use of religious symbols can be perceived as unethical, especially when the symbol is used for commercial purposes or in a way that disrespects the religious beliefs and values of the target audience. The study also highlighted the importance of considering cultural and religious sensitivities when using religious symbols in advertising. Overall, the literature suggests that the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising can have both positive and negative impacts on consumer attitudes and behaviors. The effectiveness of such symbols is influenced by various factors, including the cultural and religious context in which the ad is presented, the personal connection of the target audience to the symbol, and the ethical considerations of using such symbols for commercial purposes. Applying the grounded theory approach to explore these factors can provide valuable insights into the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising. In a study by Radosavljevic et al. (2018), the researchers used a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Serbian consumers towards the use of religious symbols in advertising. The findings showed that while some consumers found the use of religious symbols in advertising appropriate and meaningful, others perceived it as inappropriate and disrespectful. The researchers suggested that marketers need to be sensitive to the cultural and religious context of their target audience and avoid using religious symbols in a way that can be interpreted as offensive.

Another study by Ye et al. (2019) used a grounded theory approach to explore the use of controversial symbols in advertising among Chinese consumers. The findings revealed that consumers' perceptions of controversial symbols were influenced by their personal values, cultural background, and level of exposure to Western culture. The researchers suggested that marketers need to be aware of the potential risks of using controversial symbols in advertising and carefully consider the cultural context and values of their target audience.

In a more recent study by Zeng et al. (2021), the researchers used a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising among Muslim consumers in Malaysia. The findings showed that while some consumers found the use of controversial

and religious symbols in advertising acceptable, others perceived it as disrespectful and offensive. The researchers suggested that marketers need to be mindful of the cultural and religious sensitivity of their target audience and avoid using symbols that can be interpreted as disrespectful or offensive. Overall, these studies suggest that the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising can be a complex issue, with consumers' perceptions and attitudes influenced by various factors such as cultural context, personal values, and exposure to Western culture. Using a grounded theory approach can provide a useful framework for exploring consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of controversial and religious symbols in advertising, and can help marketers make more informed decisions about their advertising strategies.

Methodology

Qualitative analysis is helpful for revealing implications and correlations throughout connections, and the method becomes an essential component of the method rather than merely an evaluative tool (Morrison et al 2011). The research was conducted with fifteen religious young professionals who consider themselves Christians and/ or belongs to religious groups or attends Mass at least once per week as for more, study was based in Lithuania.

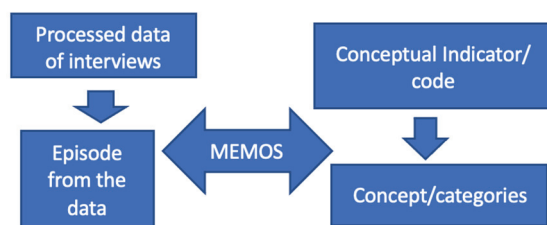


Table 1 – Grounded theory approach sampe to this research.

Collecting and transcribing the data in a constructivist grounded theory method study is a somewhat time-consuming task: fortunately, much of the remaining analysis can be assisted by the use of computers. Open coding of the transcripts led to the development of data categories: the initial reading of the transcript generated almost 30 possible categories, but these were amalgamated into a final five categories of data, which were defined as shown in Table 2.

This study addresses five specific research questions described below. RQ1 and RQ2 aim to understand what Millennial Christians in Lithuania perceive as offensive (as an emotion) and offensive in advertising. In RQ3 religiosity is defined from the viewpoint of Millennial Christians in Lithuania. RQ4 explores the attitudes of Millennial Christians in Lithuania towards offensive advertising. Lastly, RQ5 investigates the extent of the relationship between the views of Millennial Christians in Lithuania and offensive advertising, religiosity, and purchase intention.

Here, exploring whether offensive advertising strategies can survive the Christian young professionals' perceptions in Lithuania that was translated into the following research questions: What do Millennial Christians in Lithuania perceive as offensive (RQ1)? What do Millennial Christians in Lithuania perceive as offensive in advertising (RQ2)? What is the attitude of Millennial Christians in Lithuania towards offensive advertising (RQ3)? How do Millennial Christians in Lithuania define religiosity (RQ4)? Is there a link between the attitudes of Millennial Christians in Lithuania towards offensive advertising, their religiosity, and their purchase intentions (RQ5)? Based on the above, the following categories and subcategories were created by the selective coding process (Table 2).

Table 2. Emergent themes from the Selective Coding according to Constructivist GT

Selective Code	Selective Sub Codes	Open codes
Respondents' profiles and characteristics	Demographics Psychological and sociological factors	Age, gender, name, education, and marital status. Profession, hobbies, activities, lifestyle, media utilisation and emotions.
	Psychological and sociological factors	Profession, hobbies, activities, lifestyle, media utilisation and emotions.
	Identity	Psychological, demographical, and sociological factors.
Religiosity in Lithuania	Personal definition Varied cues of religiosity Distorted views on religiosity	Depends, views and opinions, judgement, treatment, etc..... Reactions, understanding, events, appearance, symbolism, etc....
Offensiveness	Personal thoughts and emotions	Disappointment, anger, abuse, judgements, etc....
	Gender	As a (female) as a feminist, as a husband, as a father/ mother, harassment, rituals, etc....
	Personal thoughts and emotions	Sometimes, always, daily, usually, unacceptable, tolerable, wrong but, etc....
	Reasons for offence	Sexual, religious, cheapness, mock of images.
	Personal experience of offence	Emotions, actions, treatment, hints, etc....
	Offence to Christians	Nothing, depreciating religion, traditions, image, liturgy, etc....
Offensive Advertising	Perception	Unacceptable, debasing, frustrating, etc....
	Offensive vs. Provocative	Strong emotions, lifestyle, comparisons, etc....
	Reasons for offence	Beggar, intelligence, status quo, morals, etc...
	Live examples Purchase intention	Affect, effect and new Vs old product.

As shown in Table 2, the researcher organised the open codes into subcategories, then reorganised them into five main categories/themes, Charmaz (2006) calls this stage 'focused coding'.

The problem described in this text is the application of a constructivist grounded theory method to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Millennial Christians in Lithuania towards offensive advertising. The study aims to answer five research questions related to the participants' perceptions of what is offensive, offensive advertising, religiosity, attitudes towards offensive advertising, and the relationship between attitudes towards offensive advertising, religiosity, and purchase intention. The study involves collecting and transcribing data from fifteen religious young professionals and using open coding to develop categories of data. The text also mentions that although the data collection and transcription process can be time-consuming, computer-assisted analysis can help with the remaining analysis.

Results

Many marketing experts agree that companies that use religious symbols in their advertising are trying to add a specific message with additional meaning or association. For example, an apple is no longer just an apple, but a piece of fruit used for temptation in paradise. This advertising language, which uses religious language or symbolic meanings, tries to make a "divine" offer that would be difficult to refuse (Muniz and Hope, 2005). It has been argued for some time that the desire of advertising companies today to obtain additional spiritual value is a sign that religious (spiritual) needs are still important in a so-called secular society. For most buyers, it is not acceptable to get instant gratification from traditional religions or traditional ways (Muniz & Hope, 2005) because it does not exist. Meanwhile, thanks to the product, the buyer receives not only it, but also what is behind it, and the symbolic meaning in it makes it even more real and accepts it into the consumer community.

After collecting information- interviewing, the analyst moved on to the phase after finishing the open coding interviews (at which point no new open codes indicated oneself and the categories became saturated) and evaluating them twice to change them from purely descriptive codes to analytical and descriptive ones. Since Glaser (1992) supports only three elements of analyzing: open, selective, and theoretical coding. The researcher chose the Glaser (1992) strand to allow the data to express itself instead of forcing it through preconceptions, which means that the second step was selective coding. In selective coding the open codes are organised into selective codes that will contribute to the core categories of the theory (Urquhart, 2013:49). Put simply, selective coding is scaling up codes into those categories that are essential to the research problem (Urquhart, 2013). Also, the researcher opted for manual analysis of the data rather than using computer software. It made more time consuming and still putting some categories mentioned in the table 2. Since, the research, which consists of ten selected Lithuanian advertisings demonstrates that understanding of advertising symbols in advertising and offensiveness in general depends on the buyer's education or life experience also as in personal religiosity. Most of respondents in this research in recognize controversy in these kinds of advertisings and most of them felt offended or disappointed in regards of product or visualisation advert company have made. The objective of this study is introspective, with research being a valued method of discovering "what is happening; seeking new insights; asking questions and assessing phenomena in a new light" (Robson 2002: 59); in this data analysis to gain insight views on offence and religiosity. The ability to adapt and be flexible to changes is the most significant advantage of exploratory research. The methodology of the article is chosen in accordance with the purpose of the study (research design). It ought to be mentioned that methodology and research method are not the same thing (Wahyuni, 2012).

Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of a religious consumer society has important effects at the individual level. Individuals increasingly demonstrate consumer-relevant expectations related to religious organizations (quality, entertainment, product customization); they are behaving more and more like consumers as they 'shop around' and combine what is important to them. Although researchers have suggested that purchasing and consumption in a consumer society becomes "religious" or "spiritual", this can only be substantiated by empirical, society-specific research. There are definitely specific consumption and shopping phenomena (i.e. soccer fans, followers of "influencer" culture) that can be called secular or hybrid spiritual practices. The religious dimensions mentioned earlier are shared by both official religions, and advertising has its own elements, so the quest to be independent or to feel good is another task of marketing experts.

The qualitative research was made by using grounded theory principals brought from millennial professional careerists' religious people selected via very known Lithuanian Catholic Church community, participants were among the age of 25-40 years old. Most of them during the interview, which took approximal one hour, said a lot of personal information, identified their marital status number of kids and of course their consumer habits, all this information provided a clear view of the personal opinion. The results in the case of Lithuanian consumers, which approved that consumer view on shocking advertising is affected by all main elements of shocking advertising – vulgarity, sexual references, profanity, impropriety, moral offensiveness, and religious taboos as well as socio-demographic cause – moral principles. Furthermore, it was revealed that consumers' perceptions of shocking advertising influence consumer purchasing behaviour.

Based on the findings of this study, a typical company can learn and improve by being more aware of the potential impact of using religious symbols in their advertising. They should recognize that religious symbols can have a deeper meaning and association beyond their literal representation, and that using them in advertising may be perceived as offensive by some consumers. Companies should consider the education level, life experience, and personal religiosity of their target audience when developing advertising campaigns.

Furthermore, companies can improve by conducting their own research and analysis to gain insight into how their target audience perceives their advertising. This will allow them to better understand what works and what doesn't, and make informed decisions about how to effectively communicate their message without offending or alienating their audience.

It is important to mention, that for companies to be adaptable and flexible to changes in consumer attitudes and beliefs. Exploratory research can be a valuable tool for companies to stay current with changing trends and understand the evolving needs and expectations of their target audience. Overall, companies should approach their advertising strategies with sensitivity and awareness of the potential impact on their audience. By being open to feedback, conducting research, and being flexible in their approach, companies can improve their marketing efforts and build stronger relationships with their customers.

The main problem when applying the grounded theory approach is that it tends to rely on the researcher and his/hers a deep connection with the data. All the data are coded and all the information which are segmented below took to analyse mechanically without using any of computer program.

Conclusions can easily take several years to come; the research itself is never regarded "finished," and data analysis is inherently subjective and necessitates substantial navel-gazing on the person conducting the study. Grounded theory, like other interpretive research methodologies, does not claim to show up at an objective, generally applicable truth; rather, it seeks to advance theory.

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