

ICONIC AND SYMBOLIC RELIGIOUS SIGNS IN PRINT ADVERTISING: IMPACT ON BRAND AFFECT AND BRAND TRUST

Abstract

Consumers do not buy brands merely for their functionality, but also for their symbolic meanings and associations. A brand symbolically represents many qualities and virtues, which create consumer attitudes that are crucial in making purchase decisions. However, brands are not built in vacuum and advertisements play a vital role in the complex process of building brand identities and images.

There is evidence that using relevant cultural and ethnic images in advertisements can lead to positive results. The inclusion of subtle religious cues has also been suggested as a means to improve brand advertising results. Religion is one of the central elements of social behavior and has both direct and indirect influence on consumers. Further, visual imagery and signs are a necessary aspect in most religions. Thus, we deem a strong connection between brand advertising, religious imagery and consumer behavior and propose that there are benefits in using religious signs in brand marketing communication.

Based on evaluative conditioning theory and the foundational analyses of trust, it is argued that employing religious signs in print advertisements can positively influence brand affect and brand trust, which are vital antecedents of purchase intention. Consumer's individual religiosity is proposed as a moderator in the above relationships. Further, based on a semiotic classification, two kinds of signs, namely the icon and symbol are distinguished and it is argued that the religious icon has performance advantages over the religious symbol.

Two laboratory experiments are conducted with educated, urban Hindus and provide empirical support for our main and mediation hypotheses. The first experiment includes a religious icon as the manipulation, whereas in the second experiment, the presence of a religious symbol is manipulated. In both the experiments, the results are compared with a control group.

A third study is conducted as a field experiment, where we collect consumer data, to enhance the external validity of our results. This experiment contains two manipulation conditions (presence of religious icon and religious symbol) and one control group. This study provides evidence for our main, mediation and moderation hypotheses and also compares the results for the two treatment conditions.

Across the three studies, evidence is found in support of the hypotheses. Results show higher brand affect and brand trust (which lead to higher purchase intention) in the presence of a religious sign. These results are found to be stronger for high religiosity respondents. Further, there is evidence that the religious icon leads to higher brand affect and brand trust as compared to the religious symbol. This is in line with existing research, which suggests that inclusion of similar ethnic and cultural cues can enhance advertising effectiveness.

We discuss multiple theoretical and managerial implications of our research. There are theoretical contributions for branding, advertising and consumer psychology. For marketers, there are suggestions for improving advertising efficiency and revelations about the important role that different religious cues can play in building brand appeal.