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Cross-Cultural Marketing in International Business: Navigating Religious Diversity

International Business

Bachelor's thesis

Turku School of Economics

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Abstract:

Understanding the impact of religion on international marketing communication is becoming continuously more important for businesses seeking to operate successfully across diverse regions in today's global environment. This bachelor's thesis explores the relationship between religious beliefs and marketing strategies. The study analyses how these frameworks shape consumer behaviour and marketing effectiveness in various religious contexts, drawing on Institutional, Cognitive Consumption, and Sacred Consumption theories. This thesis also examines case studies to help illustrate both challenges and optimal practices in adapting marketing messages to different religious environments. Some strategic recommendations are offered in order for marketers to improve cross-cultural communication and avoid common mistakes in international campaigns. The findings reveal that religiously sensitive marketing both enhances brand perception and creates consumer trust and loyalty towards the business.

Key words: international marketing communication, religion, consumer behaviour, intercultural marketing strategy, cultural adaptation

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Tiivistelmä:

Uskonnon vaikutuksen ymmärtäminen kansainvälisessä markkinointiviestinnässä on tärkeää yrityksille, jotka haluavat menestyä monimuotoisilla alueilla nykyajan globaalissa toimintaympäristössä. Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tarkastelee uskonnollisten arvojen ja uskomuksien suhdetta markkinointistrategioihin. Tutkielma analysoi, kuinka nämä viitekehykset muovaavat kuluttajakäyttäytymistä ja markkinoinnin tehokkuutta erilaisissa uskonnollisissa konteksteissa hyödyntäen institutionaalista teoriaa, kognitiivista kuluttamisteoriaa sekä pyhän kuluttamisen teoriaa. Tutkielmassa käydään myös läpi tapaustutkimuksia, jotka käsittelevät sekä haasteita, että parhaita käytäntöjä markkinointiviestien mukauttamisessa eri uskonnollisiin ympäristöihin. Lopuksi tutkielmassa esitellään strategisia suosituksia kulttuurienvälisen viestinnän parantamiseksi uskonnon kontekstissa ja yleisten virheiden välttämiseksi kansainvälisissä kampanjoissa. Tulokset osoittavat, että uskonnollisesti sensitiivinen markkinointi ei ainoastaan vahvista brändimielikuvaa, vaan myös rakentaa kuluttajien luottamusta ja uskollisuutta brändiä kohtaan.

Avainsanat: kansainvälinen markkinointiviestintä, uskonto, kuluttajakäyttäytyminen, monikulttuurinen markkinointistrategia, kulttuurillinen sopeutuminen

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1 Introduction

Most people worldwide follow one of the many religions of today's societies. Thus, on the global scale, religious and other spiritual perspectives can differ from each other significantly, which often makes it challenging for societies to understand one another or to agree on beliefs and values. (Engelland 2014, p. 1). At the same time, the number of firms operating internationally has increased significantly during the last few decades (Rosa et al. 2020, p. 1049).

As businesses expand across borders, they encounter new challenges with religious diversity. This means that companies are operating in markets where people have a continuously wider range of these religious beliefs, all expecting different approaches and values from brands. This can offer businesses a great opportunity for inclusivity and innovation when marketing to these diverse groups, but it can also result in misinterpretations (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 71-72). What one sees as socially responsible might be outrageous for another. However, if international marketing wants to progress, it is important to find new, innovative ideas in order to create a conflict-free marketplace that respects every differing view. (Engelland 2014, p. 1.)

Currently, studies suggest that multinational companies find it easier to deploy competitive advantages within their home region due to factors like 'cultural and institutional similarities', including religion. Thus, while there is a clear increase in the number of firms achieving a global scale, most large corporations still rely heavily on their home region, keeping away from their potential markets (Rosa et al. 2020, p. 1045). This could be the result of insufficient knowledge of the ways of communication and strategies needed to succeed in other areas with different cultural beliefs.

This thesis aims to explore how religion shapes international marketing communication, focusing on the behaviour and expectations of these consumers. Understanding the values, norms, and belief systems of different cultural groups seems to play an essential role as internationally operating businesses try to actively resonate with consumers across diverse markets. Religion, as one of the core components of culture, actively influences how people interpret marketing messages and thus what is consumed. Religious frameworks significantly impact consumer preferences and perceptions, from ethical consumption patterns to the symbolic meaning of colours, language, and images. This study aims to unpack these dynamics and offer insights into how marketers can communicate more effectively and respectfully across religious boundaries.

The main research question of this essay is *How do international businesses adapt their cross-cultural marketing strategies to navigate religious diversity?*

This will be determined by examining two subsidiary questions:

- 1) How does religion affect consumer behaviour?
- 2) How do companies adapt the marketing of their products and services to meet the expectations of religious consumers in different cultures?

2 How Does Religion Affect Consumer Behaviour

Religion, often a highly subjective and debated subject, is one of the largest global phenomena known to the history of human civilization. It has shaped our societies over thousands of years by guiding moral conduct and providing explanations for our existence and can thus be recognized as a central part of humanity. Like any other humane phenomenon, religion consists of certain behaviours that can be compared and analysed. (Jensen 2019, p. 6-7.) This chapter focuses on religion and its effect on consumers, opting to answer subsidiary question 1) How does religion affect consumer behaviour?

2.1 Religion as a Construct

Because of religion's large effect on human societies, many study it to understand its meaning and origins. Religion's role in human life is an important point of study, as the concept only exists because of the societies' will to follow the traditions. Thus, religion cannot be perceived as one single thing, but as a broad category that includes many human actions and beliefs. (Jensen 2019, p. 6.) The idea that religion is a label for a societal phenomenon is justified by institutional theory, which explains how religious norms shape markets and behaviours. The theory suggests that organizations operating in these markets, such as brands, do not function in isolation but rather exist together within larger institutional frameworks that define what is considered acceptable. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 5, 14; Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 60.)

In the context of religion this means that consumer behaviour is shaped not only by brands, but also by religious institutions and social networks that uphold religious norms (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 60). However, they do not just passively respond to market trends, but actively shape consumer perceptions by setting standards for markets and legitimizing brands that attend them. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 5.) Thus, it could be argued that religious institutions, marketers, and consumers continuously interact to create religious frameworks that affect the market. (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 59.) When it comes to religious brand credibility, in some cases, institutional endorsement can even hold more weight in the matter than corporate messaging. So, the institutional theory is rather essential in explaining consumer-brand-relations in this field. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 5.)

However, secularization has led to the continuous decline of institutionalized religions' authority over aspects of public and private life of consumers. Although religions have morally guided society for

thousands of years, its modern aspects have led to other specialized institutions handling aspects of life that were religiously governed before. Many organizations that could be classified as secular institutions, such as museums, government agencies, and corporations, also shape sacred consumption by designating certain objects, places, and experiences as sacred. (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 96-97.) This means that religion could also be perceived as a subjective idea that means different things to different people and institutions. Keeping this in mind, one could argue that 'religion' is also just a word we use to describe this phenomenon, rather than a concrete concept. (Jensen 2019, p. 6.) Understanding religion as this broad, flexible category could help one see how the concept differs across cultures and what different aspects should be considered in international marketing.

In the past, religion was mostly studied from a religious perspective, but in the last few decades it has been recognized as an important part of other areas of studies as well, for example in scientific, historical, and philosophical fields. Many think religion is too complex to study in just one way, which highlights how the effects of this phenomenon reach many parts of daily life of individuals and the societies around them. These different viewpoints make the study of religion an ongoing discussion and leave room for new innovative ways of development. (Jensen 2019, p. 11.) Thus, its effect can also reach and affect the commercial view of religion, which makes it an interesting and important viewpoint for marketing as well.

2.2 The Religious Consumer

There have been, and still are, vast amounts of different religious practices around the world, with more constantly taking place as society evolves. The most widely practiced religions are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The most popular religion in the year of 2025 is Christianity, with more than two billion followers worldwide. However, the second largest religion, Islam, comes close with almost two billion followers. (Vaughan 2020.) These religions are also predicted to grow even more in the future, as is being shown in Figure 1. As religion significantly affects consumer behaviour by shaping values, preferences, and purchasing decisions, it is important for businesses to keep track of these numbers. Religious beliefs influence not only individual consumption patterns but also broader societal and economic trends. (Engelland 2014, p. 1-2.)

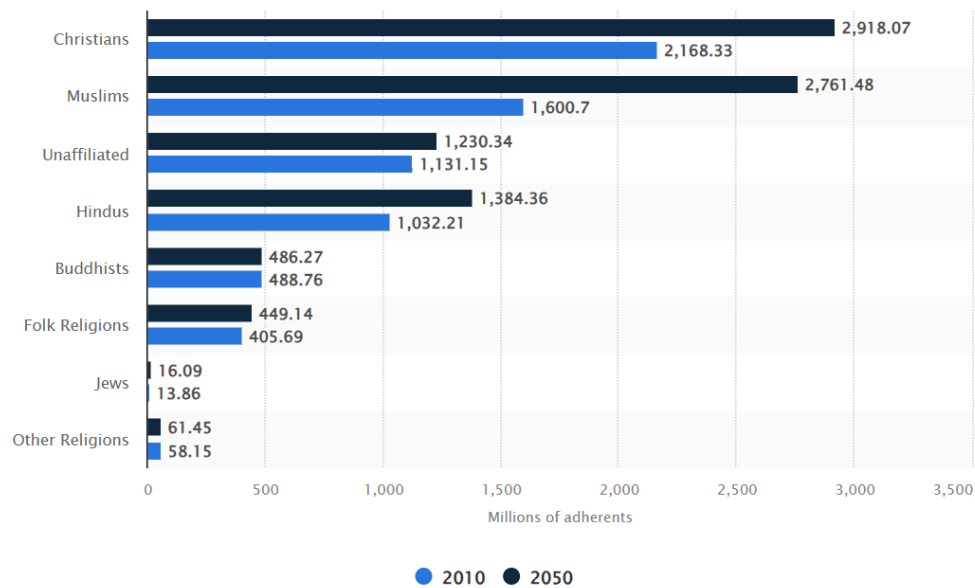


Figure 1 The Amount of People Practicing Religions in 2010 versus 2050 by Statista

Religious individuals develop their beliefs through different individual and collectivistic processes, which they gather from community engagement (Cohen and Hills 2007, p. 713). As these communities are often tight and offer support in all parts of life (Maton and Wells 1995, p. 177), this engagement can be very dominant in one's life. These, in turn, shape their consumer habits, from product selection to ethical considerations in purchasing decisions. (Engelland 2014, p. 1-3.) This means that different societal restrictions create a strong cognitive framework where individuals align their consumption habits with their knowledge and identity (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 71-72), in this case their religion-based ones. Although there are large differences between the practices and traditions of these religions, their followers also share many common values and elements of life. These form the foundation of their practices and provide structure to the religious experience of individuals and societies. (Jensen 2019, p. 11-20.)

One of the most common features of religion is the belief of gods, spirits, ancestors, or other supernatural forces (Jensen 2019, p. 17). It is estimated that four out of five people believe in a form of a supreme, god-like being. These beings are often believed to have control over everything in the universe, thus influencing everything from weather to the destiny of our civilization. (Bentzen 2019, p. 2295.) Christianity and Islam, for example, have a monotheistic belief system, meaning that they only worship one God (Sweetman 2007, p. 64). In contrast, some religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism recognize multiple gods, each of which are responsible for different parts of life (Paper 2005, p. 4, 113). Some religions also recognize a god-like surrounding force, which is responsible for

our reality. The presence of gods could be seen as the basis of a solid belief framework for the followers of these religions, and thus it affects their conception of the other religious framework around them greatly. (Sweetman 2007, p. 77, 78).

When it comes to beliefs, according to the Cognitive Consistency theory, people are constantly influenced by the structure of their thoughts, especially the consistency, or sometimes inconsistency, of their cognitions. According to the theory, when individuals' beliefs and perceptions are aligned, they feel more confident in their behaviour and decisions, also in the context of consumerism. (Prince 2020, p. 459-460.) This theory suggests that core beliefs, such as valuing education or charity, are deeply integrated to cognition and resistant to change. However, secondary beliefs, such as brand preferences, tend to be more flexible. (Engelland 2014, p. 2.) This divide is demonstrated in Figure 2. Religions provide many concepts of morality in the form of ethical guidelines that define how their followers should behave, constantly influencing their personal decisions (Jensen 2019, p. 12). This means that they also set expectations for how individuals should engage with the society around them.

In Christianity, this manifests through the Ten Commandments (Smith 2014, p. 1-233) while in Hinduism and Buddhism they are presented through the concept of karma (Frederiks and Nagy 2021, p. 167). These religious moral frameworks have played a large part in forming our societies' everyday values and morals (Smith 2014, p. 16-17), even though they might not be recognized as religious in modern society. Religious texts such as the Bible in Christianity (Smith 2014, p. 1-233) and the Vedas in Hinduism (Larios 2017, p. 2) provide instructions on social responsibility and personal ethics. They influence everything from day-to-day life to legal systems, such as the Sharia law in Islam (Iswari et al. 2023, p. 40). As religions often encourage the concept of collectivism (Cohen and Hills 2007, p. 713), these instructions are often being placed and watched over by whole communities.

Cognitive Consistency theory can also be used to provide insight into how religion influences consumer behaviour (Engelland 2014, p. 2-3). The theory explains why individuals tend to align their purchasing decisions with their core values and existing beliefs. If a consumer's actions contradict their beliefs, they may experience cognitive dissonance, leading them to either change their purchasing behaviour or rationalize its acceptance in a way that aligns with their view of life. (Prince 2020, p. 459-460.) So, in this case, these cognitive consistencies are placed by the religion, explaining why they are so deeply integrated into societies (Engelland 2014, p. 2).

As the texts and word-of-mouth instructions of religious societies are often quite old, the values they convey can generally be seen as conservative, strong, and thus resistant to change (Peel 2016, p. 115).

This can lead to these types of consumers placing emphasis on the constant, rarely changing values of society, such as their ethical and environmental aspects (Xu and Ma 2022, p. 501, 502). Keeping this in mind, one could assume that they often expect the society around them to follow the same orthodox patterns in order to be deemed appropriate for consumption. In consumer behaviour, this could lead to rejecting modern values, such as strongly individualistic viewpoints.

Many religions also highlight a difference between the physical world and a 'spiritual realm'. This 'other world' is often presented as a paradise or a state of being. (Gleiser 2005, p. 5.) For example, Christianity and Islam describe heaven as a place of eternal peace (Ellens 2013, p. 301-302), meanwhile Buddhism teaches the concept of Nirvana, which they present as a state of liberation from the cycle of rebirth (Sharma et al. 2023, p. 5313). These beliefs encourage individuals to seek purpose beyond material existence, providing incentives to look beyond modern consumerism (Choudhury 2014, p. 683). One could argue that this leads to consumers searching for alternative methods of purchases, putting emphasis on sacred and meaningful consumption. This means that they try to use products and services as a tool to enforce their religion with brands and experiences they deem appropriate. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 14.)

When it comes to achieving the spiritual realm, many religions rely on concepts of heaven and hell, which present themselves based on a religious individual's actions during their life (Sweetman 2007, p. 54). Others, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, lean on the idea of reincarnation, but they also present that one can be liberated from the cycle of rebirth based on karma. This action is, again, based on the individual's actions. (Ellens 2013, p. 181) So, as actions are the variable believed to greatly affect life after death, religious beliefs also offer motivation for continuous ethical behaviour during one's life (Sweetman 2007, p. 54). As a result, religious consumers are motivated to search for ethical brand choices, making ethical consumption one of the average religious consumers' core beliefs.

One of the key elements of religions is that they also often aim to provide explanations for the world around us through 'creation myths'. These shape understanding of the universe and influence attitudes towards the environment around us, often depicting the whole reality as 'holy' (Gleiser 2005, p. 5) and creating a strong value base for the appreciation of the environment. This in itself could also affect brand choices, for example, when a religious individual who prioritizes environmentally ethical consumption due to their faith searches for company responsibility. This is also supported by studies, which directly show that corporate social responsibility is often highly valued in religious

communities (Xu and Ma 2022, p. 501, 502). However, while the consumer may consistently purchase, for example, fair-trade products, their choice of a specific brand within that category may change over time, allowing variability in market choices. This principle is crucial for marketers, as it highlights the challenge of changing deeply held values while also showing how strategic messaging can influence secondary beliefs, such as brand choice or product preference. (Engelland 2014, p. 2.)

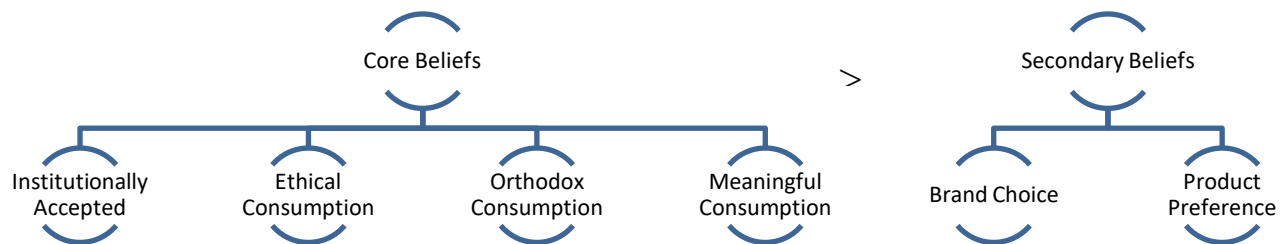


Figure 2 Core Beliefs Versus Secondary Beliefs of a Religious Consumer

2.2.1 The Non-Religious and Non-Traditional World Views

Although religion has been a force that has greatly affected societies, not everyone follows or identifies with the practices implemented by them. Furthermore, as global societies evolve, the number of people identifying as non-religious or non-traditionally religious is steadily rising (Gauthier et al. 2013, p. 24). This can be seen in Figure 1, where the amount of ‘Unaffiliated’ has been predicted to rise.

However, it could also be argued that in some societies, the practices of traditional religions are changing, not the religion itself. In some areas and societies there has been a switch into the direction of extrinsic religiosity, which refers to those who engage in religion for social or personal benefits rather than belief. (Arli et al. 2021, p.526, 528.) There has also been a decline of traditional religious institutions and the rise of alternative spiritualities, suggesting that religion is transforming rather than simply declining. It seems to have evolved to fit into consumer-driven societies, leading to more individualized, experience-based spiritual practices rather than community-driven faith. (Gauthier et

al. 2013, p. 24.) The institutional theory agrees, as it recognizes secularization and the shifting role of religious institutions in modern societies (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 96-97.)

The rise of non-religious identities and extrinsic religiosity (Arli et al. 2021 p. 526, 528) reinforces the claim that religious influence on societal norms and behaviour is evolving. This shift in demographics is reshaping how societies approach different aspects of life. For decades, religious institutions have been seen as the primary source of ethical values (Sweetman 2007, p. 52), but with more people stepping away from religious way of life, it could be assumed that new moral frameworks are emerging (Gauthier et al. 2013, p. 24).

Thus, the behavioural and societal expectations listed above no longer directly affect such great amount of population, creating space for more diverse societal models. With this being said, studies show that although these non-religious or non-traditionally religious consumers are emerging (Gauthier et al. 2013, p. 24), their values do not drastically differ from the religious consumer's ones. They often follow ethical and environmental consumption values too, but they are learned from society rather than directly from religions, although the values in question might originally be religion-based. (Arli et al. 2021, p. 528.) This could indicate that even though some of the important beliefs of the consumers differ, they still respect some of the same traits offered by brands.

3 Adapting Cross-Cultural Marketing Strategies to Navigate Religious Diversity

As gathered during chapter two, religion and consumerism are strongly interconnected in today's societies. Traditionally, faith has been seen as a separate force from the commercial field, rooted in spiritual values rather than material consumption. However, as mentioned in chapter 2.2.1., as consumer culture spreads across borders, religion has adapted, becoming continuously more market driven. As we now have a certain understanding of a religious consumer, this chapter focuses on the subsidiary question 2) How do companies adapt the marketing of their products and services to meet the expectations of religious consumers in different cultures? It considers what international brands must consider in order to adapt their marketing to appeal to cross-culturally diverse religious audience effectively.

3.1 Effective Communication in International Marketing: Key Components

As determined, companies must engage in international marketing communication to expand their market reach. However, successful market entry into religiously differing areas requires an effective communication strategy that resonates with these diverse audiences. Marketing communication is all about making sure the right message reaches the right people in the right way. A successful communication process in international marketing involves a few key components, which are the issuer, the message, the communication channel, the receiver, and feedback mechanisms. By designing culturally adaptive and strategic messages, businesses can maximize their impact in foreign markets while still respecting and appealing to the local consumers. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 67.)



Figure 3 Key Components of International Marketing

3.2 Sending a Message

The issuer is the one running a promotional campaign and is thus responsible of its marketing communication. The issuer needs to clearly define the campaign's objectives and understand the cultural background and consumer behaviour of the target audience. Knowing what appeals to people and how they make decisions is the issuer's key to crafting an effective marketing campaign. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 67.)

Like any other marketing communication, messages sent to religious consumers should reflect ideas and values that truly appeal to that specific consumer group. Sacred Consumption theory explains how consumers engage with brands, products, and experiences that could carry religious significance. Unlike conventional consumption, which is primarily driven by functionality or preference, sacred consumption is deeply intertwined with a consumer's faith and identity. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 2-3.) Furthermore, sacred consumption is not always tied to institutional religions but can also be seen in alternative spiritualities and the commercialization of religious symbols and objects (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 18-19).

One of the key elements of sacred consumption is that different values and ways of living help consumers to separate sacred concepts from secular ones, which means that sacredness is built through specific behaviours and beliefs. When consumers seek products that align with their religious beliefs and practices, businesses should position themselves to meet these needs in order to create a functioning market. The sacred element provides legitimacy and meaning to the consumption process, signalling trustworthiness to the consumer. Thus, consumers do not view these products as regular consumption but as an extension of their religious commitment. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 14.)

Keeping this in mind, it is safe to say that at the core of any marketing communication, especially in the international sector, is the communicated message itself. It needs to highlight what makes the product unique, why it is valuable, and who it is for. To make sure messages connect with the right kind of religious audiences, it is important for businesses to appeal to emotions and shared values of the consumers in their marketing. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 67-68.)

3.3 The Threat of Misinterpretation

The receiver is the person or group that the marketing message is aimed at, and how they perceive and interpret the message determines whether the campaign is successful (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 71). However, several factors can get in the way of clear communication. Marketing

communication is never a one-size-fits-all approach. What works in one religious culture may cause offense in another. This is because cultural nuances shape how people interpret messages, making it essential for businesses to carefully adapt their marketing strategies when entering international markets with culturally different demographics. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 67.)

According to the Sacred Consumption theory, because of this deep religious meaning carried by brands marketing to sacred consumption, they are held to a higher standard than regular brands. A brand operating in the field of sacred consumption may need the acceptance of a religious body in order to build a believable reputation among consumers. So, like the Institutional theory, the Sacred Consumption theory argues that consumers are more likely to trust external religious authorities over the brand itself when it comes to verifying religious legitimacy. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 14.) Brands can also experience desacralization when sacred concepts or products lose their meaning due to routine or commercialization (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 58-59).

Misinterpretation happens when there's a disconnect between the issuer and receiver. Cultural, such as religious, differences are big factors in creating these barriers. Even small encoding and decoding errors can change the meaning of a message, and these can make marketing efforts ineffective (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 67, 71). Additionally, if the company or spokesperson lacks credibility, especially when their role is heightened in sacred consumption (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 5), people may be hesitant to trust or act on the message (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 71).

3.3.1 A Case Study: Halal-Certified Brands and Brand Transgressions

This case study offers an example of a field of products, where a brand suffered misinterpretation of the religious norm. As has been gathered in this text, consumer behaviour is deeply influenced by cultural and religious norms, particularly in markets where religious considerations guide purchasing decisions. A case study, conducted by Kaur et al., investigates how religious brand transgressions impact consumer behaviour in the context of a Halal-certified brand. Religiously labelled products, such as Halal or Kosher -certified goods, transform ordinary commercial products into sacred ones, catering into, for example, special diets of different religions. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 4.)

The study revealed that trust declined harshly when a brand in this field violated a religious norm, and thus did the intentions of consumption as well. It was observed that when a brand, accused of this violation, issued a statement reaffirming its Halal certification without a sacred party's endorsement, consumers remained sceptical. However, trust recovery was significantly more successful when this

third-party institution, Malaysia's Halal certification body, verified the brand's claims. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 5.) This resonates with Institutional theory's viewpoints by demonstrating that consumer responses to religious brand transgressions are shaped by institutional legitimacy. Unlike general brand failures, religious brand transgressions trigger a sharp contrast, based on the religious consumers' cognitive models, where the brand is perceived as entirely Halal or entirely 'non-Halal', and thus legitimate or illegitimate. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 4-5, 14.)

The findings offer several practical suggestions for brands catering to religious consumers. Brands must collaborate with religious certification bodies in order to ensure credibility, and to position themselves strongly into the sacred consumption network. Traditional recovery strategies such as apologies and monetary compensation are insufficient for religious brand transgressions and the recovery must align with religious values and belief systems. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 4-5, 14.)

3.4 Creating a Successful Message for a Religious Consumer

Keeping this in mind, it is safe to say that marketing communication extends far beyond the wordings used in a campaign, which means that it requires deep cultural and religious awareness. Understanding the religious consumer is vital to crafting successful international campaigns that respect religion-based cultural nuances while maintaining brand authenticity. Moreover, religious consumers interpret advertising through the lens of their faith-based values, which can be deeply ingrained and resistant to change, as defined in chapter 2. As also mentioned in chapter 2, according to Cognitive Consistency theory, consumers, which also include religious ones, are more likely to support brands that reflect their ethical or spiritual values and avoid those that contradict their belief systems. (Engelland 2014, p. 1-3; Prince 2020, p. 459-460).

Symbolism plays a powerful role in conveying messages, especially across religiously diverse societies. These symbolic associations are often rooted in religious or spiritual traditions and thus hold considerable weight for religious consumers. For example, the meaning of colours varies significantly across cultures. For issuers, this means a colour palette that resonates positively in one region might trigger discomfort or confusion in another. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 69-70.) Colours can carry spiritual significance to religious consumers, which means that they can reinforce the consumer's perception of whether a brand aligns with their values. For example, white signifies death and mourning in Hinduism, but in Christianity, it is often associated with religious rituals and purity (Kudrya-Marais and Olalere 2022, p. 10). Missteps like these can break trust and paint the brand in an unflattering light. Thus, a brand using a particular colour scheme or symbols in its home

country might need to rethink its choices when expanding to a new market to ensure the symbolism evokes the intended emotions. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 69.)

Issuers should also keep in mind other aspects that religious consumers might find inappropriate. For example, a campaign's tone or structure must be culturally appropriate. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 69.) What might be considered a light-hearted message in a secular market may deeply offend religious consumers. For example, humour involving religious imagery or sacred figures may be accepted in Western secular cultures but considered forbidden in Islamic contexts. (Wagtendonk 1987, p. 113). As was learned in the study mentioned above, religious consumers, especially those operating within tight communities, often rely on institutional validation when forming opinions about brands (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 14). Therefore, a message that doesn't respect or acknowledge religious traditions may fail to gain the approval of not only individual consumers, but whole religious communities, regardless of its originality or other appeal.

Different religious cultures also respond to distinct promotional styles. Some prefer scenarios that depict a product in real-life settings, making it easy for consumers to imagine how they would use it. Others are drawn to lifestyle branding, which links a product to an aspirational way of living. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 69.) As aspirational and emotion-driven advertisements emphasize ethical behaviour and family values, which echo teachings found in religious communities (Maton and Wells 1995, p. 177), one could think that these kinds of advertisements would attract religious consumers. For example, Christian or Buddhist consumers may appreciate ads that showcase environmental values, as these mirror the moral teachings of their faiths. On the other hand, overly materialistic or sexually suggestive content may alienate them because of their conservative values.

Issuers must also carefully select the channels which they use to communicate with religious consumers. Communication channels can be viewed from two perspectives, which are physical and social connections. Physical connection includes tangible media, which ensure that a message reaches a broad audience. On the other hand, they require careful localization to match cultural norms and consumer behaviour. Social connection, on the other hand, revolves around human interaction, usually through word-of-mouth recommendations. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 70-71.) While physical connection reaches broad audiences, personal interaction and word-of-mouth often hold more credibility for religious communities. Religious consumers frequently seek confirmation from within their communities before making purchases. These channels align with the collectivist values promoted by many religions, which again emphasize community engagement and ethical responsibility. (Kaur et al. 2024, p. 4-5; Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 70, 76.) Social endorsements, like a

respected religious figure promoting a product, or a product being sold through a religious event, can legitimize brands in ways that traditional advertising cannot.

Even as secularization increases in some societies (Gauthier et al. 2013, p. 24), it could be assumed that the religious consumer continues to prioritize long-standing traditions and sacred practices. In this sense, religion acts as both a filter and a framework for consumption, actively shaping what is consumed, as well as how and why it is consumed. Religious values continue to shape consumption habits, especially among those who view their purchases as moral acts. Marketers who understand this shift and who acknowledge that spiritual meaning can be co-created between brands, institutions, and individuals (Rinallo et al. 2013, p. 26), are more likely to form steady brand relationships with their audiences (Kaur et al. 2024 p. 14).

However, effective marketing communication should not be a one-way process. Businesses need to establish channels to gather feedback in order to understand how well their messages are being received and whether they are driving the desired outcomes. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, p. 72-73.) Businesses must actively gather and analyse responses from religious consumers to ensure their messages are not only understood but respected. As defined earlier in chapter 3, misalignment between marketing strategies and religious values can lead to consumer backlash. When ethical missteps, such as using culturally inappropriate imagery or partnering with controversial figures, occur, religious consumers may dissociate from the brand (Engelland 2014, p. 2-3; Prince 2020, p. 459-460), unless it offers genuine correction. Thus, if a campaign is not resonating as expected, adjustments need to be made to improve the impact of the message. (Gherasim and Gherasim 2018, 72-73).

3.4.1 A Case Study: Consumption in Nichiren Buddhism

Lastly, this case study offers this thesis a perfect example of market-driven adaptation of a religion and shows the importance of crafting the perfect message for a religious community. In today's society, many religious consumers feel pulled between the materialistic messages of advertising and their deeper spiritual or ethical values. While traditional marketing often pushes the idea that buying things equals happiness, many people are looking for something more meaningful. (Choudhury 2014, p. 683.)

When it comes to Buddhism, one often thinks of materialism and religion as being at odds, as consumerism can be seen as excessive materialism, which the religion advises against. Urging us to seek a simple life, Buddhism obviously affects religious consumer behaviour by urging them to minimize the amount of personal belongings (Choudhury 2014, p. 683.), which again slows down market practices. But is it possible for these two forces to coexist? A study, conducted by Koushiki Choudhury, looks at how certain followers of the religion navigate this conflict, blending material needs and desires with their spiritual journey, and what it means for marketing in today's world.

Nichiren Buddhism, a branch of the religion, is vouching for the ideology in which everyone has the potential to achieve enlightenment, no matter their circumstances. Unlike some religious traditions of Buddhism that advocate for giving up material possessions completely, this branch takes a more balanced approach. Followers strive for both spiritual enlightenment, and for things they want in life, often in the forms of success, health and financial stability. According to Nichiren Buddhism, the key difference is that these desires are not just about personal gain, but rather about using success to help others and create a more positive world. (Choudhury 2014, p. 685-688.)

Studying this belief system could offer some big takeaways for brands and their issuers. Brands that align with ethical, sustainable, or community-focused values appeal to religious consumers who want to balance material success with doing good in the world (Choudhury 2014, p. 692-693). This value-driven marketing could also attract the consumers who otherwise would not be interested in consumption. As Nichiren Buddhism also emphasizes collective well-being (Choudhury 2014, p. 687), brands could manifest this by fostering real connections with their customers. It could be assumed, that brands that create this sense of belonging will have more dedicated and loyal followers. (Choudhury 2014, p. 692-693.)

A growing amount of consumers are also prioritizing meaningful experiences over consuming physical belongings. Companies that offer wellness programs or other purpose-driven experiences can leverage this shift in consumers' mindsets. Furthermore, beyond just selling products, businesses today have an opportunity to make a real difference. Choudhury's study suggests that unchecked consumerism is not sustainable, but neither is completely rejecting material success. Instead, the key is to balance personal ambition with social responsibility. Companies that understand this can help shift marketing from being just about profits to being about purpose, which again will be attractive for the average consumer with this mindset. (Choudhury 2014, p. 692-693.)

This study shows that materialism and religion do not have to exclude each other but can work together to create a consumption style that is meaningful for consumers. For issuers, this means understanding that consumers are not just looking for products, but for purpose. Brands that can adapt into this need, aligning their message with values like sustainability, ethics, and community, will be the ones that truly stand out in the field of marketing. (Choudhury 2014, p. 692-693.)

4 Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to answer the question *How do international businesses adapt their cross-cultural marketing strategies to navigate religious diversity?* This has been done by analysing the consumer behaviour of religious consumers in chapter 2 and linking it to international marketing communication in chapter 3.

This thesis highlights the influence of religion on consumer behaviour and underlines its important role in shaping international marketing communication. Through an analysis of religious values and consumption habits, it becomes clear that religious consumers form a distinct segment whose purchasing decisions are deeply affected by their beliefs and moral frameworks. Thus, issuers must go beyond surface-level cultural cues and engage with the deeper religious values that guide this consumer behaviour.

One of the key insights that emerged during the research process is the extent to which religion is embedded in the everyday lives of consumers. These are not superficial traits that can be addressed with simple translation of marketing campaign to another, but rather how individuals perceive meaning, make decisions, and relate to different brands. Religion influences consumption patterns, and moral judgments, defining the appropriateness of different brands. Their cultural norms govern the consumers' preferences, and values, shaping how a message is received, interpreted, and acted upon.

Throughout the thesis, it became evident that religion not only affects product preferences and brand loyalty, but also dictates acceptable forms of the advertised messages. For instance, attitudes towards symbolism and imagery can vary significantly between religious groups and should be respected in marketing strategies. This means that international marketers must approach religious audiences with cultural sensitivity and ethical awareness, and with a willingness to adapt their content appropriately. While it may be tempting for issuers to focus solely on market penetration and profit, there is also a moral incentive to avoid disrespecting sacred values.

Thus, it was revealed that successful international marketing communication is less about strict strategies and more about adaptability and cultural intelligence. Companies that take the time to observe and learn from the religious contexts of their target markets are more likely to gain long-term consumer trust and loyalty. This requires a shift from a fixed brand identity to creating meaning together with local audiences. Many marketing failures and miscommunications could be avoided if

marketers invested more time and effort into truly understanding the environments in which they operate.

Surprisingly, despite the topic's importance there seems to have been relatively small amount of conclusive research on how religious diversity affects marketing, or how best to navigate these challenges. Thus, more studies are needed to explore how companies can manage this religious diversity in a way that benefits both customers and the business itself. With better research, businesses could develop strategies that adapt to different needs of religious consumers, while also promoting international economic growth. In light of future studies, it could be beneficial to look into the effects of non-religious and non-traditional religious worldviews, mentioned in chapter 2, to markets, and to more thoroughly study the relationship between these worldviews, traditional religions, and marketing. It could also be beneficial to look more into different communication channels of international marketing, mentioned in chapter 3, in context of religion.

In summary, this thesis emphasizes that effect of religions is a big factor in international marketing communication that should absolutely be taken into consideration when building business multinationally. Religion and culture are not separate considerations, but rather central to the way people respond to marketing efforts. International brands and their marketing communication issuers wishing to success in global markets must invest in understanding the culture around them and adapt their messaging to align with the values of their diverse religious audiences. By recognizing this, brands can move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and instead create more meaningful, respectful, and ultimately more successful relationships with religious consumers on the global scale.

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Figure References

- Figure 1: Statista (2025) Total worldwide adherents of largest world religions and faiths in 2010 and projected adherents in 2050. <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1350917/world-religions-adherents-2010-2050/>>, retrieved in March 2025.

Appendices

Appendix 1 The Use of AI

The AI used in this text is ChatGPT Free.

This AI was used to propose ideas, point of views, and possible research questions for my thesis.

Questions were asked in the format of:

What are some potential points of view for a bachelor's thesis addressing religion and international marketing?

What are some potential research questions for this topic?

Can you suggest a potential structure for this thesis: Main research question + sub-questions?

What are some theories that could resonate with religion and marketing?

I also asked the AI to assist me with structure, grammar and vocabulary at certain points of the text, as well as to translate some of the terms.

Questions were asked in the format of:

What should one address in this part of the thesis?

What is this in Finnish/English?

What is a better word/synonym for this?

Can you help me improve the structure of this sentence?

This AI-generated information was verified with other sources, such as literature and vocabularies.