COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Samuel Gil Soldevilla
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4711-6268
ssoldevi@uji.es
Universitat Jaume I de Castellón

José Antonio Palao Errando
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9943-9819
errando@uji.es
Universitat Jaume I de Castellón

Javier Marzal-Felici
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2462-1122
marzal@uji.es
Universitat Jaume I de Castellón

Advertising communication and spirituality: a critical approach of academics and professionals

Abstract

This article explores advertising as a space where spiritual discourses are reproduced from the critical approach of academics in communication and sociology, along with professionals in the advertising sector. Therefore, a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews with a panel of fifteen experts was used. This research aims to develop a discourse derived from the interviewee's experience of the meaning provided by advertising as a transcendent dimension. The interviews were analysed by applying a *spiral model* by simple induction. The study identifies a compensatory character between brands and religions based on a functional definition of the latter, where brands have acquired the ability to construct social meaning, offer an existential programme to the individual, and arouse identity and awareness through their own narration. Without disregarding the economic objective of corporations or the different levels of transcendence expressed by brands and religious forms, there is consensus on advertising's attempt to follow the same scheme of adhesion, claims, symbology, and evocations offered by religions, assuming a post-materialist turn of the advertising discourse towards transcendental values, even superficially or banally. The list of interviewees and the use of this technique, which has not previously been applied to the interactions between advertising discourse and spirituality, provide an original perspective on this emerging study field.

Keywords
Advertising, expert panel, brand, spiritual contents, semi-structured interview, transcendent industry.

1. Introduction and state of the question

Commercial brands are the social fabric that shapes our life experience and responds to the culture's need to retrofit symbolic sense through new meaning paths. Following the loss of the centrality and relevance of traditional religious discourse, different meaning sources emerge, performing their functions and supplying the market of cosmovisions (Díaz–Salazar, 1994; Lenoir, 2003; Taylor, 2014). Particularly noteworthy among them are the *media*, whose influential logicians assume cultural positions from "mediatisation" (Hjarvard, 2008) as new "host structures" (Duch, 2012), in some cases modulating and redistributing religious content through advertising. Such content circulates almost unnoticed because of its implicit

qualities, as it has no specific connection with organised forms of religion (Hjarvard, 2011, 2016; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012).

Branding thus acts as a potential meaning provider to individuals who build their identity from a consumer perspective (Luckmann, 1973) in which the advertising perception replaces the product's sensitive materiality. The image, as a characteristic expression of media culture and a vehicle of popular consciousness, has become a new meaning source for postmodern culture (Maffesoli, 2001). In his 1867 work *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx considered merchandise as "a devilish object, abundant in metaphysical subtleties and theological reticence;" he referred to it as "admirable dedication," possessing a "'mystical character,' 'enigmatic,' 'phantasmagoria,' 'sorcery' or 'enchantment'" (Baccega, 2012, p. 30). Naomi Klein applies this idea by affirming that

> brands are sellers of meaning, not consumer goods [...]. In the new model, the product is always secondary to the real product, which is the brand, and selling the brand integrates a new component that can only be called spiritual (Klein, 2007, p. 55).

Commercial exchange is mediated by a discourse of an immaterial nature, which no longer responds to a "production system" but to a "relationship system" based on a symbolic economy that creates and proposes imaginative congratulating worlds. Advertising is then understood as an axis of power, a social agent of ideological action, and a means of reproducing lifestyles, attitudes, values, mentalities and ideas (Bourne, 1981; Eguizábal, 2009; Gabriel & Lang, 1995).

According to international marketing guru Martin Lindstrom, "These clever brands are not selling food, perfume or makeup; they are selling purity, spirituality, faith, virtue and, in some cases, expiation" (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 246). Therefore, when referring to the purpose of brands (not all purposes, of course), "it is no longer about seducing or convincing, but about producing an effect of belief" (Salmon, 2007, p. 63). In this sense, the trend increases because "currently, regarding the set of alternative religions, brands have become serious competitors of those who provide beliefs, meanings, feelings of community and identity" (Atkin, 2008, p. 224).

The introduction of the "cult brand" concept allows us to understand this dynamic, which exceeds the commercial dimension as a term that defines the belief and devotion that are felt and shared by some consumers regarding their brands, thus expressing their religious character as sources of belonging, meaning, and significance (Atkin, 2008; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, Jr. 1989; Kunde, 2000; Ragas & Bueno, 2002).

This is not a strictly ontological or substantive symmetry (what they are) between religions and brands but a functional symmetry (what they do), in which brands and their discourse operate as equivalents while convincingly embodying hopes, vital guides, and a sense of belonging that was once placed in religious systems.

> Advertising replaces the rites and beliefs that prevailed so far to create a representation of the world to its image and likeness, none other than absolute beauty *per se*. We face fireworks shaping the consciences, 'whose discourse provides coherence and unity to society. Its agents become the universal ideology that tends to control everything, leading towards the objectives and interests of the productive system (Pérez Tornero, 1992, p. 103) (Fernández, 2003, p 179).

The capitalist economy shows its capacity to overwhelmingly produce not only cultural goods but also intangible needs, new secular myths, and messages nesting in the human consciousness.

Some advertising displays find their place within the new religious context –convergent with the dynamics and intangible tendencies of hyperconsumption– because they convey elements, attributes, and ideas that cannot be regarded as merely profane but that respond

Gil Soldevilla, S., Palao Herrando, J. A. & Marzal Felici, J.

Advertising communication and spirituality: a critical approach of academics and professionals

to the human being's "ultimate questions" and their fundamental meanings and are therefore considered spiritual or religious. In this sense, the latter term may be defined from a communicative perspective as "a social conversation on transcendent meanings" (Besecke, 2010, p. 92, 105). In addition, this approach allows us to understand religion in secular environments and advertising discourse as a component of a conversation, focusing especially on those dimensions involving self-realisation, the creation of meaning within an immanent horizon, and the overcoming of human limitations.

With respect to the background in the scientific literature, from a study field closer to consumer sociology and the manifest values in advertising (Pollay, 1986), the relationship between religiosity and various aspects of purchasing behaviour has already been examined (Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Rindfleisch, Wong & Burroughs, 2010; Sood & Nasu, 1995; Tang & Li, 2015). Thus, there is strong empirical evidence that, to a certain degree, branding and religiosity can act as substitutes for one another by allowing individuals to define themselves socially and express their self-esteem (Shachar, Erdem, Cutright & Fitzsimons, 2011). Further studies have attempted to understand consumers' responses to the use of religious symbols in advertising (Taylor, Halstead & Haynes, 2010) and their behaviour and purchase intention in relation to the advertisement, the brand, and the product (Dotson & Hyatt, 2000).

In turn, several theoretical studies have addressed the functional interrelation between religious and commercial advertising (Caro, 1994, p. 130; Grad, 2014; Huici Módenes, 2007; Jhally, 1989; León, 1998; Rinallo, Scoot & Maclaran, 2012; Sheffield, 2006; Usunier & Stolz, 2014), highlighting the approaches of Marmor-Lavie and Stout (2016; 2009). The characteristics shared by branding and religions have also been noted (Douglas, 2015; Haig, 2006, p.12-13; León, 2001; Lindstrom, 2009, p. 123-134; Rey, 2006; Rushkoff, 2001, p. 238-249).

Thus far, specific empirical research on advertising and spirituality has focused on content analysis, textual analysis, description, or closed questionnaires on print or television ads (Cernat, 2014; Gil-Soldevilla, 2016; Gil-Soldevilla, Palao Errando & Marzal Felici, 2014; Knauss, 2016; Maguire, 1998; Mallia, 2009; Marmor-Lavie *et al.*, 2009; Nardella, 2012; Weatherby & Pugh, 2008); however, there is no transversal approach using the *expertise* of professionals and academics in the field.

Although increased attention is being paid to the connections between (apparently distant) advertising analysis and the study of spirituality or religion, this investigation is of an exploratory nature insofar as it concerns a research problem that has not yet been the subject of a broad theoretical or analytical approach by communication scholars. Unlike previous empirical works, and to contribute to the scientific development of this emerging study field, a novel contribution is offered, comprising interviews with a panel of fifteen academics and professionals, to serve as a basis for further research on the connections between media advertising discourse and spirituality.

2. Material and methods

2.1. *Characteristics and basis of the methodology*

The fieldwork consists of semi-structured interviews with a panel of fifteen experts. The aim of this research is to compare the experience of experts with the hypothesis evoked in our introduction, that advertising has become a space where spiritual discourse is reproduced, and thus to demonstrate the value system of new advertising. This article aims to understand the meaning that experts observe in advertising discourse as a transcendent dimension. Using this methodology, we seek to develop a discourse derived from the interviewees' experience,

favouring with its design the expert's free expression and generating results not previously contemplated by the scientific community.

We consider the technique applied in the interviews as the most appropriate for the study of ideology –in this case of spirituality in advertising discourse– linked to academics' and professionals' individual experiences. The use of this dialogical technique in which information is extracted comprises "a communicative construct within the framework of qualitative social research" (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998, p. 85).

Given the various interview options (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998), we have opted for a semi-structured interview, which is especially useful in covering multiple perspectives on a given topic and "offers an optimal application in the surveying of experts" (León, 1988, p. 30). The elaborated script served as a thematic structure to achieve a coherent storyline without removing scientific value from the technique (Berganza Conde & Ruiz San Román, 2005, p. 255). Therefore, this is a focused interview guided by a specific study object and directive that is course-controlled but elastic enough to obtain greater information.

The data were interpreted through the simple induction of the researcher (Berganza Conde & Ruiz San Román, 2005). Therefore, content analysis has not been used to encode transcription into categorical units or models derived from sociolinguistics.

2.2. *Sample selection: panel of experts*

The sample comprises people from "the group of informed subjects, namely, those who have knowledge on the researched referent" (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998, p. 89), so the information provided by the interviewees comes from their biography and professional specialisation. The sample does not meet probabilistic criteria but follows a qualitative rationale that rests on three sets of experts on the research topic and their academic-professional approaches. The interview with this panel "provides first-order information by those individuals highlighted by their expertise in the research field" (León, 1988, p. 27).

We opted for three sets of five interviewees from each of the following groups: a) academics in the field of advertising communication, b) outstanding advertising professionals, and c) academics in the fields of sociology, theology, and ethics.

The selection of this sample of informed subjects was carried out based on their demonstrated capacity, throughout their scientific career, to detect an association between persuasive communication and the social meaning of the advertisement enacted, as well as, for advertising professionals, their recognised record in the Spanish advertising field. Below is a list of the experts from each group along with a summary of their extensive curriculum vitae:

a) Academics in advertising communication:

Juan Rey: PhD in Communication and Philology, Full Professor at the University of Seville *[Universidad de Sevilla]*. / *Juan Benavides*: PhD in Philosophy and Letters, Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the Complutense University of Madrid *[Universidad Complutense de Madrid]*. / *Pedro A. Hellín*: Doctor in Communication and Cultural Studies, Full Professor at the University of Murcia *[Universidad de Murcia]*. / *Antonio Caro*: former Full Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid *[Universidad Complutense de Madrid]* and a visiting professor at several Spanish and Latin American universities. / *José Luis León*: Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the University of the Basque Country *[Universidad del País Vasco]*.

b) Outstanding advertising professionals:

Ángel Alloza: PhD in Communications from Jaume I University *[Universidad Jaume I]*, CEO and General Secretary of Corporate Excellence. / *Félix Muñoz*: Independent consultant, former director of communication of major brands, and recipient of important awards throughout his professional career. / *Daniel Solana*: former creative director in several agencies and winner of numerous awards; founder of DoubleYou, an interactive advertising agency. / *Carlos Rubio*: member of the Board of Directors of the Self-Regulation Association of Commercial Communication *[Asociación de la Autorregulación de la Comunicación Comercial]* and the Advertising Academy *[Academia de la Publicidad]*; manager of the Ibero-American Festival of Advertising Communication [Festival Iberoamericano de la Comunicación Publicitaria El Sol]. / *Mónica Moro*: Creative General Director of McCann Spain; she has garnered numerous awards for her talent and leadership.

c) Academics in sociology, theology, and ethics:

Domingo García Marzá: PhD in Philosophy, Professor of Ethics at Jaume I University *[Universitat Jaume I]*, where he has been Director of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology and Vice-rector of Communication. / *Lluís Duch*: PhD in Anthropology and Theology from the University of Tubingen *[Universidad de Tubinga]*, former professor at the Faculty of Science and Communication of the Autonomous University of Barcelona *[Universidad Autónoma of Barcelona]*. / *Miriam Díez*: Director of the Blanquerna Observatory of Communication of Ramon Llull University *[Universitat Ramon Llull]*; she has a PhD in Social Sciences, a Bachelor's degree in Ecclesiastical Studies, and a Bachelor's degree in Journalism. / *Gil-Manuel Hernàndez i Martí*: PhD in Geography and History, former Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Valencia *[Universidad de Valencia]*. / *Lluís Oviedo*: PhD in Theology, Professor of Theological Anthropology at Pontifical University Antonianum *[Pontificia Universidad Antonianum]* and the Gregorian University of Rome *[Universidad gregoriana de Roma]*; he is an expert in the sociology of religion and secularism.

2.3. *Interview design*

Data collection was carried out via recording by technical means along with notes regarding the questionnaire. In most cases, meetings were under thirty minutes (with two exceptions). As a meeting lasting over thirty minutes may be counterproductive, we tried to generate a small number of precise items (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel, 1998).

Items are arranged from general to concise. The items' content addresses the functions of brands and advertising in the consumer context, the intangible and ideological capacity of a brand, the direct relationship among brands, their discourse and religiosity or spirituality, and the appropriation or use by brands of major concepts and moral values.

Following the original premise contextualising the investigation and introducing the interviewee to the dynamics of the interview (acknowledgements, presentation, recording permission, and clarifications), individual interviews were conducted between February and September 2017.

3. Analysis and results

After listening to the recordings on several occasions and avoiding "aberrant effects" (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998, p. 103), and after a careful reading of the notes generated, the information was organised into comprehensive categories to deepen the interviewees' responses. Dividing the interviewees into sets allowed for a vertical or intensive approach

"that considers each interview as a differentiated whole and thus allows its analysis and subsequent comparison one by one," along with a horizontal or extensive approach "that at the same time considers all interviews as a single corpus which, as a whole, is susceptible to a joint and undifferentiated analysis" (Gaitán Moya & Piñuel Raigada, 1998, p. 109). The analytical model applied was extracted from the qualitative analysis in research interviews by Mejía Navarrete (2011) and Ortiz Molina (2011), who use the *spiral model* proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984), which entails differentiating the work in three stages that are not sequential but interactive and cyclical, as follows: 1) reduction and disposition of the data, 2) structuring and descriptive analysis, and 3) verification and interpretation.

Parallel to these stages, first, a thematic reading of each individual interview and set of interviewees was made to determine the most relevant responses (the vertical approach), and second, a relational reading of the set of interviews was developed to compare similarities and differences between their conclusions (the horizontal approach).

The answers to each item are presented in groups in order to obtain data that are as accurate and complete as possible for subsequent research. The initials of each interviewee were added after their textual citations.

3.1. *What are the functions of brands, beyond strictly economic ones?*

According to the first group, composed of communication academics, we are overwhelmed by products that can barely be differentiated functionally if not by brand; thus, there is less and less focus on the materiality of the product and more on its immateriality. For some time now, brands have lost functionality versus the diffusion of consciousness modes/systems. Brands are thus understood as "territories of significance" (Semprini, 1993) because they serve to "build social identities in the same way that religious icons or heraldic shields did, by acting as guides or referents" (PH). Advertising has introduced non-rational values into product/service discourse; thus, according to one expert, "spirituality in brands used to appear as a rhetorical resource, resorting to hyperbole; however, nowadays, some non-rhetorical or emotional experiential aspects pretend to be associated with the brand" (JB).

The group of advertising professionals also emphasises that brand differentiation is based on "offering one's life viewpoint" when "they stop highlighting the brand and start highlighting you" (MM). At that moment, brands "become referents and relevant by focusing on your life" (MM). Another participant suggests that brands "do not emphasise rational or functional attributes but of being, of values, of I believe in, I am in the world for... my place is...," and the concept of differentiation is introduced through the "creation of spaces or ecosystems of shared beliefs" (AA). That is, standing out in such a competitive environment is only possible if the brand proposes and activates that shared ecosystem: "the client identifies with those beliefs and stresses what he believes. The future of communication is to have clients committed to that belief system," says another expert. However, experts refer to brands as a social element, "our identity signs that personalise us" or identify us "publicly with the group we belong to" (DS). This is possible when a brand is built up from "the intangible or emotional component of connections and value links with individuals" (FM).

The third group of academics in sociology-related fields warns that, although "there are no strictly economic relationships," such relationships always "imply values;" advertising is indeed the most important socialisation factor: "it sells a lifestyle, a belief, and defines the meaning of a happy life" (DG). One of the experts notes that this "perversion and intoxication of desire or desiring capacity of humans" by neoliberalism is based on "fashion, provisionality, dissatisfaction, homogenisation without distinction of peoples" (LD). In this critical line,

experts show their concern for some aspects of capitalism "taken to the extreme leading to individualism," establishing the market economy "as the only global system" or "as a substitute for the numerous values that previously provided great institutions" (MD).

3.2. *As advertising tends to place the product in the background, what does advertising really sell?*

Academics in the field of communication argue that the product is placed in the background or omitted altogether to avoid creating an anti-advertising rejection on the part of the viewer; however, viewers ultimately respond to the sale of the product and its economic outcome. Nonetheless, "what advertising really sells is a means of situating oneself before the world" (JL). In other words, advertising, beyond the commercial framework, sells "a philosophy of life" and "representations of ideal ethnic universes" (PH). In this process, "brands appropriate social meanings, attributed as their own, incorporated into their corporate discourse and situated at the level of meaning" (PH). Thus, "*consumption* becomes an end in itself, and consumption turned into religion or ideology is *consumerism*" (AC).

The second group of advertising professionals takes a functional advertising perspective by understanding advertising as a discourse that "contributes to knowing the services of companies, making people feel good about their purchase decision and describing in an attractive way what the product consists of" (MM). One of the participants underscores this functional vision by saying that advertising sells "what the product represents, not what it really is but what it symbolises. This makes up the brand, the set of values associated with a product or service" (DS). Although the essence is the product, advertising makes the essence of the brand something else.

The third group perceives a sale of "happiness models or collective imaginaries" in the form of *role models* that come to be "life models, a kind of meaning of life or existential programme" (LO). In closing this discussion, one of the experts directly mentions that we enter "the field of the mythological function, because it has elements of profane sacralisation, generating, however, a kind of re-enchantment" that gives one "a feeling of life-accomplishment, of creation, meaning, and significance. In this sense, a religious dimension is reached, by relinking with elements of worldly transcendence. Brands are not only symbols of status or business, but in a broad sense, they possess a prescriptive, religious nature" (GM).

3.3. *As the brand is an intangible asset, do you think it can also be an ideological asset as a vehicle for consumer awareness?*

Communication experts understand that if brands sell a lifestyle in the world, this implies an ideological position. In addition, brands "can be ideologised" (JB) by ascribing or supporting certain beliefs or visions of the world; we are immersed in a Marxist universe where "brands become the ideology of our time" in a social context "devoid of ideologies" (AC). In this sense, "we live in a strongly ideological society but through cold or functional ideologies (lacking a declared system of belief, a dogma, clear principles), which are a sort of centreless atmosphere flooding our society and rising as our referent: a football club or a brand" (AC).

The second group believes that a brand can act as an ideological asset by creating an ecosystem of shared beliefs highlighted in the previous question. This system "is impossible to copy" (AA) and therefore powerful and beneficial for the company. Even one of the experts describes a client meeting where he asks about the ideology to be transmitted: "we discussed the meaning of life, how it matches the consumer..." (MM). This ability of brands to seize upon ideology derives from another league that overcomes feelings, inspiration or labels: "some

brands want to take a step further and assume a role in society, have an opinion;" but because of the risk there are few of them, and "normally their positions are positive" (FM).

The third group considers that brands generate awareness, understood as "a set of ideas and beliefs that provides meaning to what we do" (DG). The brands "have played well with the ideological rhetoric that provides meaning; they build part of our collective imagination but do not solve life's big questions" (MD). From the standpoint of offering models to imitate, dreams and projects, brands and advertising "compete with other traditional providers of meaning or life, although without moral content or vital requirements" (LO) but in conjunction with consumerist forms. Capitalism "sells the idea of having it all, and a philosophy that wishes can come true" (GM). One of the participants goes further by proposing that brands have "ideological and mythological" components, "symbolically charged nodes that evoke freely in the subjectivities of individuals" (GM).

3.4. *Some researchers and advertising professionals have compared brands with religions; do they share common elements or can they provide equivalent content?*

Several communication scholars agree that brands "will never reach the value of a religion" (PH, JB) and define their transcendental content as "empty, ephemeral, superfluous, or banal. While advertising and religion share a discourse that articulates social relations and aspirations" (JR) and offers "the possibility of imagining a future," in any case they can be seen as "pseudo-religions that provide values that are pseudo-transcendent" (JR, AC). For another expert, the fundamentals of religions and brands are the same: "in short, it is the desire for transcendence of the human being, to give meaning to what we are living" (AC). However, they highlight as a fundamental difference that "no one is going to die for a brand, but for a religion" (JR), which is possibly the attractive element of brands: "brands do not demand the ascription and compliance with the precepts that religion demands" (PH). While brands promote materialism, even if this means "not simply accumulating goods, but reaching ideals with them," religions promote "an individual material negation; its ascetic content seeks detachment" (JL).

In turn, advertising professionals understand that both brands and religions work in the same way, since "the desire to adhere to a belief system in secularised societies does not prevent people from having a need to transcend. Brands provide a response to that need," although it is not done from a religious perspective as such but "in terms of universal and accepted values" because it is their way of "achieving identification" (AA). In this same sense, another participant notes that "humans have an evocative nature; they need to encourage and nourish that spirit," and in some ways, brands "are motivating; they encourage you to offer the best version of yourself" (MM). It has been suggested that we see the same pattern operating in all major brands "when we see how an adherence to an ideology is created: building a promise, having symbols, discourse, territories, and topics of conversation anchored in values..." (FM). Another expert sees "weak connections between brands and religions, at least for now; perhaps this may change in the future" (DS).

Experts in religion claim that "in our societies, there is one type or another of diffuse religion because religiosity is ineradicable," so for many people brands can become a religion, especially in this "therapeutic society:" "brands act as functional equivalents of this world that somehow tries to reach beyond" (LD). Another interviewee believes that brands do not reach "deep religiosity" because religion is about "leaving material elements aside" (GM). However, they can be compensatory in the sense that "brands have a prescriptive, religious nature in a broad sense" (GM). Brands and religions allow us "to construct meaning," even though

religions do so in a transcendent sense different from that of brands; the latter "are creating meaning today, more than religion" (DG). There is a certain concurrence of similar functions in providing vital meanings, but discarding the possibility that they can be fully equated. At most, some brands "may generate a sort of cult, but not a sense of transcendence;" "advertising is a trivialisation of the transcendent dimension, not an expression of or a substitute for it" (LO). Certain (non–trivial) publicity may "act as a 'functional substitute' for religion, but not as a religious or spiritual form, since it assumes another code of communication" (LO).

3.5. *Do some advertising discourses fulfil a spiritual function, even implicitly?*

The academics in the field of communication argue that brands "copy from religion those superficial aspects," "aspiring to become a religion, but cannot stop being a consumer industry" (JR). One of the interviewees criticises this aspect by considering that "brands are in no position to build a moral rhetoric associated with their product, although they are trying. Their discourse is fully loaded with variables associated with the spiritual life of people, with beliefs... Some brands seek categories of this spiritual nature" (JB). Considering the process of advertising enacted through social research and trend reports, "rather than shaping philosophy, they evoke some philosophical postulates" (PH). Another expert clearly sees this equivalence of brands: "they substitute for religions that have been left out of reality and have a dogmatic version that only impacts certain people" (AC). Perhaps this power or the grandiloquent rhetoric of advertising stems from this idea: "as the brand becomes the social icon of our time, centralising expectations, one feels the right and obligation to play in the league of transcendent values" (AC).

In turn, one of the advertising experts does not believe that advertisements fulfil that function, although "they can simulate it, [...] sometimes they seem to play it, but as a creative resource" (DS). They also argue that "commercial brands lack credibility and the language of advertising conditions them;" "everything the brand does is tactical: we locate *insights* of people who can pick up levers of identification, we reach them with or without modesty, and then we change them" (DS).

For one of the sociologists, "advertising builds morality in the conventional sense of the word (creates lifestyles, beliefs, cultures, character...)" (DG), and discourse comes from what people do, enhancing or ignoring it. They agree that "this may be evoked not in a profound way, but the spiritual sense" (GM, MD, LO), as if echoing Oriental philosophies to make a sale. They also agree that it is necessary to educate people about the interpretation of advertising images.

3.6. *Why do you think brands take or use concepts such as Love (Orange's "Love" Campaign), Happiness (Coca-Cola's "Uncover the happiness" Campaign), Greatness (Nike's "Find Your Greatness" Campaign), and so on?*

The first group of academics in the field of communication notes that "in various senses, advertising fills a void" that becomes "placebos for a better life" (JL). Along that same line, there is a disturbing "lack of moral references" (JB) that brands respond to by establishing themselves as those absent guides. Critically, it has been noted that what brands achieve with it is "fragmenting reference concepts" (JB), because in its short advertising time, a brand cannot explain these concepts in the manner in which they should be treated. One of the experts remembers that this is what brands do, because "the only way to keep a faithful consumer is to forge an emotional bond, and that is achieved by adhering to shared social values" (PH). Another academic noted that "we are in the critical process of brands, occupying

the spirituality of humans," although this academic visualises "symptoms such as the anti-brand movement not only in minorities but also in white brands, where the product is sought below the brand." In this possible exhaustion of the system, brands can return "to their corresponding place as the sign of a product" (AC).

Advertising professionals believe that "those great concepts belong to the people, and if a brand wants to use them, they have absolute legitimacy." The fact that consumers "do not believe in institutions" provides a valuable opportunity for brands to "use that discourse" (MM). Brands "come to the main universal values" "as the means of generating a message; however, brands do not appropriate those topics: they only use them" (AA). According to another expert, "people must believe in something. There is a loss of credibility (in religion, politicians, and institutions); then a brand comes up with a discourse that people believe in and feel at ease with. The brand takes advantage of that opportunity" (FM). This conceptual use is a "creative resource," critically emphasised by another professional, one that changes from one day to the next because "brands are not guided by an ideology but by a board of directors that seeks to make a profit from shareholders' money. There is no love, happiness, or greatness if it does not generate sales" (DS).

For the last group of experts, this use is "legitimate; you cannot invent values, either. They use language (also that of images, splendid nature...) as they see fit and in accordance with their interests" (LD). These major issues "are part of human psychophysical nature and they know through market studies that there is a growing awareness." However, they also point out that "it is a bastard use" (LD). "Ethics should limit its use" (DG) to meet minimum values (civic ethics). These limits should be in the hands of the "structures of citizenship" (DG). For another expert, advertisements have become "modern moral parables" because "they take from the cultural environment, they influence it and they obtain feedback from it" (LO). "There is a shift in values towards post-materialism, to new cultural imaginaries that include spiritual values, transcendent aspects that are not specific and individualised. Therefore, that kind of nebulous spirituality is a breeding ground for commercial use, and they evoke it" (GM).

4. Discussion and conclusions

There is a consensus among the interviewees regarding the premise that the functions exercised by brands are inseparable from supra-economic values, which they jump from the market to the conscience of consumers. As new referents and icons, brands are capable of building social identities just as other traditional institutions once did: using non-rational values and emotional connections. In this sense, they achieve a proper mythological function by investing the products or services offered with a kind of profane sacredness. Brands create belief systems that sustain them, which ensures that, on the one hand, corporations reach consumers and, on the other hand, consumers commit to them by sharing their value propositions.

Without disregarding its functional nature and the ultimate goal of discourse linked to an economic interest that must be profitable, the advertising discourse sells what it symbolises: a set of images, experiences, and influences that functions as a philosophy of life. Both the brand and advertising contribute to situate individuals in the world; they offer an "existential programme" and place us (consciously or unconsciously) within ethnic universes and social meanings shared by those who are included in the communities of these goods–signs. However, the advertising discourse also participates in an unlimited (and perverse) stimulation of desire, walking the consumerism pathway along with provisionality and

dissatisfaction, both of them crucial travelling companions if the market is to survive as a global and total system.

Faced with a loss of solid icons or with a lack of strong ideologies –a context influenced by the flowing sense of our actual times– brands, from a positive viewpoint, fulfil a social role as symbolic nodes that evoke in individuals, freely and subjectively, the most accepted values. Through rhetoric, brands generate awareness, evoke the meaning of life, and grant meaning to what we do or buy. However, brands cannot answer major vital questions in a deep and constant way.

In turn, academics in the fields of sociology, theology, and ethics argue that religiosity and spirituality are fundamental to humans and that we are witnessing an institutional and hierarchical decrease in religions, which are moving away from the centre of society. Thus, we eagerly embrace spiritualities, which either purge traditional institutions or form part of them as new guides or sources of meaning. Brands take advantage of this need, detecting these trends through market studies and incorporating them into their strategies. It is therefore not surprising that we encounter in advertising Oriental philosophical ideas or references to a diffuse spirituality without a centre and in continuous movement. Moreover, this spiritual nature of brands is temporary and does not respond to a belief or to a sales tactic that demands a complete lack of morality.

As for the provision of equivalent content between brands and religions, another finding of our study is that most researchers or professionals seek to record differences before similarities. Something they all seem to agree upon, however, is that brands do not reach the deep value or level of religion. This does not mean that they do not fulfil an equivalent function, as some scholars have asserted, but they do create a sense of self-improvement, a love of life and other secular values of transcendence different from those expressed by religious or spiritual forms.

In short, there is a clear attempt by brands to follow the same scheme of adhesion, claims, symbology, articulation of relationships, aspirations, evocations, and the future offered by religions; however, the adjective "pseudo" highlights its banality, superficiality, and relativism. One of the differentiating features noted by the interviewees is their positioning: the fact that consumerism promotes material accumulation, while spirituality and religiosity propose emptying oneself or leaving materialism behind. In one way or another, brands generate meaning, and therefore, we can say that there is a certain compensatory nature between brands and religions based on a broader definition of the latter.

The advertising discourse addresses a moral rhetoric that only manages to imitate the superficial elements of religion, although it also seeks spiritual categories to position itself. Although it does not shape philosophy, it evokes accepted postulates to place itself in the mind of individuals using a tactical strategy of its own: to enhance a business that seeks profitability. Therefore, some researchers have agreed on the need to educate consumers to discern and interpret between what they see and what they are being sold through different communicative expressions.

Lastly, communication professionals agree on the absolute legitimacy of using big concepts such as "happiness" or "love" in their campaigns because these are human values that do not belong to specific spheres or institutional traditions of any kind. The academics from the third set agree with this approach, but they contribute a critical perspective as a result of the interested use made by brands. In this sense, communication academics also suggest that such a use fragments reference concepts such as those cited in this study,

because advertising, given its communication limitations, cannot develop the profound meaning of these states.

We conclude that the discourse of brands can indeed occupy a space at the spiritual level, filling the gap left by the secularisation process, so that for these brands, the loss in credibility of institutions or traditional metanarratives is a welcome opportunity. The post-materialist turn towards transcendent and non-specific values in these discourses becomes evident, emphasising that their use responds to a changing creative resource based on corporate tendencies and interests.

References

Atkin, D. (2008). *El secreto de las marcas*. [The secret of brands]. Barcelona: Robinbook.

Baccega, M. A. (2012). *Comunicación y culturas del consumo*. [Communication and consumer cultures]. Sevilla: Comunicación social.

Belk, R. W. & Tumbat, G. (2005). The Cult of Macintosh. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, *8*(3), 205-217. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/10253860500160403

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M. & Sherry, Jr., J. F. (1989). The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *16*(1), 1. https://www.doi.org/10.1086/209191

Berganza Conde, M. R. & Ruiz San Román, J. A. (2005). *Investigar en Comunicación. Guía práctica de métodos y técnicas de investigación social en Comunicación*. [Research in communication. Practical guide to methods and social research techniques in Communication]. Madrid: McGraw-Hill.

Besecke, K. (2010). Seeing Invisible Religion: Religion as societal conversation about transcendent meaning. In S. Aupers & D. Houtman (Eds.), *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (pp. 89-114). Leiden: Brill.

Bourne, G. (1981). Meaning, image and ideology. *Form and Meaning*, *1*(4), Milton Keynes: Open University.

Caro, A. (1994). *La publicidad que vivimos*. [The advertising we experience]. Madrid: Eresma.

Cernat, M. (2014). The Role of Religion in Advertising: Case-study on the "Batman" TV Commercial. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, *13*(39), 140-163.

Díaz-Salazar, R. (1994). *Formas modernas de religión*. [Modern forms of religion]. (R. Díaz-Salazar, S. Giner & F. Velasco, Eds.). Madrid: Alianza.

Dotson, M. J. & Hyatt, E. M. (2000). Religious symbols as peripheral cues in advertising: A replication of the elaboration likelihood model. *Journal of Business Research*, *48*(1), 63-68.

Douglas, G. (2015). I believe in a brand-new religion. In N. Kendall (Ed.), *What is a 21st Century Brand?* (pp. 83-97). London: Kogan Page.

Duch, L. (2012). *Religión y Comunicación*. [Religion and Communication]. Barcelona: Fragmenta.

Eguizábal, R. (2009). *Industrias de la conciencia: una historia social de la publicidad en España (1975-2009)*. [Industries of awareness: a social history of advertising in Spain (1975-2009)]. Barcelona: Península.

Essoo, N. & Dibb, S. (2004). Religious influences on shopping behaviour: An exploratory study. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *20*(7), 683-712.

Fernández, J. D. (2003). La publicidad o los nombres del diablo. [Advertising or the names of the devil]. *Comunicar. Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, *20*, 178-183.

Gabriel, Y. & Lang, T. (1995). *The Unmanageable Consumer*. London: Sage.

Gaitán Moya, J. A. & Piñuel Raigada, J. L. (1998). *Técnicas de investigación en comunicación social: elaboración y registro de datos*. [Research techniques in social communication: design and recording of data]. Madrid: Síntesis.

Gil-Soldevilla, S. (2016). Estudio de caso publicitario: el empoderamiento de las divinidades femeninas y "La Diosa que hay en Ti." [Advertising case study: The Empowerment of Feminine Deities and "The Goddess in You"]. *SIGNA. Revista de La Asociación Española de Semiótica*, *25*, 609-630.

Gil-Soldevilla, S., Palao Errando, J. A. & Marzal Felici, J. J. (2014). Brands as New Forms of Religiosity: The Case of the World of Red Bull. *Trípodos, 35*, 57-74.

Grad, J. (2014). Religion, Advertising and Production of Meaning. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, *13*(38), 137-154.

Haig, M. (2006). *El Reinado de las marcas: cómo sobreviven y prosperan las 100 primeras marcas del mundo*. [The Kingdom of brands: how the top 100 brands in the world survive and prosper]. Barcelona: Management 2000.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatisation of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. *Nordicom Review*, *29*(2), 105-134.

Hjarvard, S. (2011). The mediatisation of religion: Theorising religion, media and social change. *Culture and Religion*, *12*(2), 119-135. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2011.579719

Hjarvard, S. (2016). Mediatisation and the changing authority of religion. *Media, Culture & Society*, *38*(1), 8-17. https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0163443715615412

Hjarvard, S. & Lövheim, M. (2012). *Mediatisation and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Huici Módenes, A. (2007). En busca del sentido perdido. De la religión y la utopía al paraíso del consumo. [In search of lost meaning. From religion and utopia to consumer paradise]. *Questiones publicitarias: international magazine of communication and publicity*, *1*(12), 63-75.

Jhally, S. (1989). Advertising as religion: The dialectic of technology and magic. In I. Angus & S. Jhally (Eds.), *Cultural politics in contemporary America* (pp. 217-229). London: Routledge.

Klein, N. (2007). *No Logo.* Barcelona: Paidós.

Knauss, S. (2016). "Get to Know the Unknown": Understanding Religion and Advertising. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *15*(2), 100-112. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2016.1177349

Kunde, J. (2000). *Corporate Religion.* London: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Lenoir, F. (2003). *Las Metamorfosis de Dios: la nueva espiritualidad occidental*. [The metamorphosis of God: the new Western religion]. Madrid: Alianza.

León, J. L. (1988). *La investigación en publicidad. Metodologías y Crítica*. [Research on advertising. Methods and Critique]. Bilbao: Servicio editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco.

León, J. L. (1998). Mitoanálisis e ideología de la publicidad. [Mythoanalysis and ideology of advertising]. *Comunicación y Cultura*, *2*(1), 65-78. https://www.doi.org/10.1174/113839598322011879

León, J. L. (2001). *Mitoanálisis de la publicidad*. [Mythoanalysis of advertising]. Barcelona: Ariel.

Lindstrom, M. (2009). *Compradicción: verdades y mentiras de por qué las personas compran*. [Shopping addiction: truth and lies about why people buy]. Bogotá: Norma.

Lindstrom, M. (2011). *Así se manipula al consumidor*. [This is how consumers are manipulated]. Barcelona: Management 2000.

Luckmann, T. (1973). *La religión invisible: el problema de la religión en la sociedad moderna*. [The invisible religion: the problem of religion in modern society]. Salamanca: Sígueme.

Maffesoli, M. (2001). *El instante eterno. El retorno de lo trágico en las sociedades posmodernas*. [The eternal instant. The return of tragedy in postmodern societies]. Barcelona: Paidós.

Maguire, B. (1998). The Secularisation of Religion and Television Commercials. *Sociology of Religion*, *59*(2), 171-178.

Mallia, K. L. (2009). From the Sacred to the Profane: A Critical Analysis of the Changing Nature of Religious Imagery in Advertising. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *8*(3), 172-190. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/15348420903091162

Marmor-Lavie, G. & Stout, P. A. (2016). Consumers' Insights About Spirituality in Advertising. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *15*(4), 169-185.

Marmor-Lavie, G., Stout, P. A. & Lee, W.-N. (2009). Spirituality in Advertising: A New Theoretical Approach. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *8*(1), 1-23. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/15348420802670868

Mejía Navarrete, J. (2011). Problemas centrales del análisis de datos cualitativos. [Central problems of qualitative data analysis]. *Revista Latinoamericana de Metodología de la Investigación Social*, *1*(1), 47-60.

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: a source book of new methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Nardella, C. (2012). Religious Symbols in Italian Advertising: Symbolic Appropriation and the Management of Consent. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *27*(2), 217-240. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2012.675689

Ortiz Molina, M. A. (2011). Estamentos educativos y diferencias culturales. Estudio cualitativo de las opiniones de los diferentes sectores. [Educational estates and cultural differences. Qualitative study of opinions from different sectors]. *Exedra: Revista Científica, 2*, 147-206.

Pérez Tornero, J. M. (1992). *La Seducción de la opulencia: publicidad, moda y consumo*. [The seduction of opulence: advertising, fashion and consumption]. Barcelona: Paidós.

Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. *The Journal of Marketing*, *4*(1), 18-36.

Ragas, M. W. & Bueno, B. J. (2002). *The Power of Cult Branding: How 9 Magnetic Brands Turned Customers into Loyal Followers (and Yours Can, Too)*. New York: Crown Business.

Rey, J. (2006). Publicidad y Religión. Semejanzas y diferencias entre el discurso publicitario y el discurso católico. [Advertising and Religion. Similarities and differences between advertising discourse and catholic discourse]. *Trípodos*, *18*, 65-94.

Rinallo, D., Scoot, L. & Maclaran, P. (2012). *Consumption and Spirituality*. London: Routledge.

Rindfleisch, A., Wong, N. & Burroughs, J. E. (2010). God & Mammon: The influence of religiosity on brand connections. In S. H. K. Wuyts, M. G. Dekimpe, E. Gijsbrechts & R. Pieters (Eds.), *The Connected Customer: The Changing Nature of Consumer and Business Markets* (pp. 163-202). New York: Routledge.

Rushkoff, D. (2001). *Coerción: por qué hacemos caso a lo que nos dicen*. [Coercion: Why we listen to what we're told]. Barcelona: La Liebre de Marzo.

Salmon, C. (2007). *Storytelling: la máquina de fabricar historias y formatear las mentes*. Barcelona: Península.

Semprini, A. (1993). *Marche e mondi possibili. Un approccio semiotico al marketing della marca*. Milano: Tipomonza.

Shachar, R., Erdem, T., Cutright, K. M. & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2011). Brands: The Opiate of the Nonreligious Masses? *Marketing Science*, *30*(1), 92-110. https://www.doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1100.0591

Sheffield, T. (2006). *The Religious Dimensions of Advertising*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sood, J. & Nasu, Y. (1995). Religiosity and nationality: An exploratory study of their effect on consumer behavior in Japan and the United States. *Journal of Business Research*, *34*(1), 1-9.

Tang, G. & Li, D. (2015). Is there a relation between religiosity and customer loyalty in the Chinese context? *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *39*(6), 639-647.

Taylor, C. (2014). *La Era Secular. Tomo I.* [The Secular Era. Tome 1]. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Taylor, V. A., Halstead, D. & Haynes, P. J. (2010). Consumer Responses to Christian Religious Symbols in Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, *39*(2), 79-92. Https://www.doi.org/10.2753/JOA0091-3367390206

Usunier, J. C. & Stolz, J. (2014). *Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketisation of Religion and Spirituality*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Weatherby, G. A. & Pugh, J. (2008). The Secularisation of Religion and Television Commercials in the US: An Update, *Journal of Sociology, Social Work and Social Welfare, 2*(1).