

Christian Symbol Sacredness

A Comparison of the Cross and the Ichthus

Art Rainer

H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Nova Southeastern University
email: ar924@nova.edu

Abstract

The Christian consumer population in the United States is large and possesses significant purchasing power. Attempting to appeal to these consumers, it is not uncommon to see a Christian symbol incorporated into a company's marketing efforts. Prior studies demonstrate that such symbol usage influences consumers. However, little is known regarding the perceived sacredness of different symbols which may impact such studies and marketing efforts. This study addresses this research gap by comparing Christians' perceived sacredness of two different Christian symbols: the cross and the Ichthus. Results demonstrate a difference in perceived sacredness between the two symbols.

Introduction

Symbols contain meaning. For adherents to a particular religion, a symbol can represent a worldview that defines human reality and guides their daily thoughts and activities. Often, these religious symbols are viewed as sacred because of the meaning they hold [1]. When something is sacred, it is set apart from ordinary items or places. Normally, an item or place that is designated as sacred requires certain restrictions on human behavior towards the item or place [2]. The influence of religious symbols in marketing efforts has been studied by few researchers. Additionally, there is a lack of study on the perceived sacredness of these symbols. Such an understanding would aid in further explaining prior studies' results and enrich future studies.

The intersection of religion and marketing is not novel. It is unexceptional for businesses and other organizations to overtly associate themselves with a particular religion. This association may be a reflection of the business owner's belief system and values. The association may also be an attempt to reach a niche whose beliefs align with a specific religion. In the United States, a business demonstrating religious affiliation through the use of a religious symbol is not a rare occurrence. In particular, it is commonplace for businesses that associate themselves with Christianity to utilize a Christian symbol in their marketing efforts.

From the perspective of a marketer, it is easy to see why some businesses would overtly associate themselves with Christianity, particularly in the United States. Christians represent a large population in the United States. The Americas and Europe contain 63% of the world's Christian population. There are 246 million Christians in the United States. This segment represents 79.5% of the country's population [3]. Those 30 to 49 years of age represent the largest percentage of Christians in the United States (39%). Next, those who are between the ages of 50 and 64 make up 26% of U. S. Christians, followed by those 65 and older (19%). The

generation known as the Millennials, ages 18 to 29 make up 17% of Christians in the United States [4].

Christian products can produce significant revenue for businesses. Research by Henley, Philhours, Ranaganathan, and Bush [5] noted two specific examples: *Passion of the Christ* and *The Purpose Driven Life*. Mel Gibson's movie, *Passion of the Christ*, launched in 2004. The film portrayed the 12 hours leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Revenue for the film reached over \$370 million in the United States and over \$600 million worldwide [6]. Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, was released by Zondervan, part of HarperCollins Publisher, in 2002. The Christian devotional book has sold over 30 million copies worldwide [7].

Given the large, Christian population in the United States and their purchasing capacity, a surprisingly few researchers have explored how to best engage this audience [5,8,9]. Such exploration is beneficial to researchers and practitioners alike. A sparse amount of studies explore the influence of Christian symbols in advertising [5,8,10]. Studies regarding the perceived level of sacredness of Christian symbols are even sparser.

Prior research on the role of Christian symbols in marketing has utilized either the Christian cross or the Ichthus. The Christian cross, consisting of two perpendicular lines, depicts the Roman crucifixion method used for Jesus' death. For Christians, the Christian cross represents both the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Ichthus consists of two curved lines that form a graphical representation of a fish. This symbol is also known as the "Christian fish" or the "Jesus fish." The Ichthus was employed by early Christians as a way to secretly identify one another during a period of persecution by the Roman Empire.

The purpose of this study is to research whether or not there is a difference in perceived sacredness between two Christian symbols: The Christian cross and the Ichthus.

Review of Literature and Hypotheses for Research

To underscore the importance of understanding religious symbols in the context of marketing, three studies are presented. Researchers, Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes [8], explored the influence of Christian symbols in advertising on Christian consumers. The researchers performed two studies with the second study containing a noticeably younger group of participants than the first study. Participants viewed one of two professional mock-ups of a telephone directory advertisement. One of the advertisements contained an Ichthus while the other did not. The survey included a scale to measure the participants' religiosity. According to the first study's results, the advertisement with the Ichthus produced perceptions of higher quality and purchase intention. These perceptions increased as participants' religiosity increased. Interestingly, this was not the case with the second study. Perceived quality and purchase intention only increased with participants of moderate religiosity when viewing the Ichthus-embedded advertisement. A backlash effect occurred among those considered to have high religiosity. The researchers suggested that the age of participants in the second study was a possible explanation for the backlash effect. According to the researchers, the younger generation in the second study, also known as the Millennials, are more skeptical of associations between business and religion.

Dotson and Hyatt [10] utilized the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to determine what role a Christian cross in advertising had on consumers' attitude toward the advertisement (A_{ad}) and purchase intentions. Two versions of a pet insurance advertisement were produced. One version contained a Christian cross while the other did not. Participants were shown a

series of advertisements with one of the pet insurance advertisements included. Participants need for pet insurance (involvement) and religious dogmatism were measured. Surprisingly, the results indicated that those who had little need for pet insurance (low-involvement) but high religious dogmatism reported less positive responses towards the advertisement with the Christian cross. This reaction could be interpreted as participants taking offense to the use of the symbol. For those who were in need of pet insurance (high-involvement) and high in religious dogmatism, the Christian cross increases favorable reactions towards the advertisement. These results highlight the need for marketers to know their audience. What may be favorable to some may be offensive to others.

Henley et al. [5] demonstrated that the linkage between the advertised product and the perceived religious association is of great importance when incorporating religious, specifically Christian, symbols in advertising. The researchers manipulated counseling service and beer advertisements because of their perceived relevancy and irrelevancy, respectively, to Christianity. The manipulation included either the addition of the word “Christian” or a Christian cross for each advertisement. After viewing the advertisements, a survey measured their attitude toward the advertisement (A_{ad}), attitude toward the brand (A_b), purchase intention (PI), and religiosity. The results indicated that a relevant linkage between product and religion positively influences A_{ad} , A_b , and PI. Conversely, an irrelevant linkage negatively influences A_{ad} , A_b , and PI. Additionally, the interaction between religiosity and relevancy can contribute to the consumers’ A_{ad} , A_b , and PI.

These three studies reveal the influence that Christian symbols in advertising have on consumer perception and behavior intentions, particularly among those who consider themselves Christians. However, while each of these three studies embedded Christian symbols in their advertising, the symbol utilized was not the same. Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes [8] incorporated an Ichthus in their research while Dotson and Hyatt [10] embedded a Christian cross in their advertisements. Henley et al. [5] chose to manipulate advertisements with either the word “Christian” or a Christian cross. It is unknown whether or not the choice of symbol, and its perceived sacredness, influences the outcomes of these studies. Differences between perceived sacredness may play a role in the outcomes of studies like these.

Both the Christian cross and the Ichthus contain a meaning that is reflective of the Christian faith. The similarity of the faith representation should produce an indistinguishable level of perceived sacredness by Christians. This should be true for all Christians, regardless of gender or age. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H1: Christians perceive the Christian cross and the Ichthus to have the same level of sacredness.

Method

Procedure and Sample

The study utilized a well-known, web-based survey company. Participants were obtained by the survey company. The company sent out template invitation emails to individuals who volunteered to receive such requests. The selected group was random and aligns with the researchers’ inclusion/exclusion requirements. For this study, the participant had to be 18 years of age or older and located within the United States. The email informed the individual of a new survey that was available. The email provided an embedded “Start survey now” button in the email. Should the individual elect to participate in the survey, the individual was routed to the

survey. The email and the survey required an internet connection and an electronic device such as a computer or smart phone. Once the participant desired to submit the survey, he or she clicked a “Done” button located at the bottom of the last page. Since this study is particularly interested in the perceptions of Christian, respondents were asked whether or not they considered themselves a Christian.

The survey generated 369 respondents. Of those respondents, 241 considered themselves a Christian. The study was unable to use 7 respondents’ survey, resulting in 234 usable responses. The majority of respondents were female (55.1%). The respondents were both generationally and geographically dispersed. The age ranges and their respective percentages were as follows: 18 to 29 years (17.1%), 30 to 44 years (22.2%), 45 to 60 years (37.2%), and 60+ years (23.5%). Table 1 provides the respondents’ locations.

Table 1. Respondents’ locations

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
New England	13	5.6	5.6	5.6
Middle Atlantic	35	15.0	15.0	20.5
East North Central	41	17.5	17.5	38.0
West North Central	20	8.5	8.5	46.6
South Atlantic	43	18.4	18.4	65.0
East South Central	7	3.0	3.0	67.9
West South Central	32	13.7	13.7	81.6
Mountain	11	4.7	4.7	86.3
Pacific	32	13.7	13.7	100.0
Total	234	100.0	100.0	

Measures

The survey included, on separate pages, the image of a Christian cross and the image of the Ichthus. These pages were randomized so that the order of presentation did not influence the results. A brief statement at the top of the page told the participants what image they were viewing. For example, at the top of the Christian cross page, it read, “The below symbol is a Christian cross.” For the page with the image of the Christian cross, participants were asked to respond to the following statement “The Christian cross is a sacred symbol.” For the page with the image of the Ichthus, participants were asked to respond to the following statement, “The Christian Ichthus is a sacred symbol.” On both pages, a 7-point Likert scale was utilized (1 = Strongly agree to 7 = Strongly disagree).

Data analysis and results

Data was analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software package. A comparison of means was performed for perceived sacredness of the cross and perceived sacredness of the Ichthus.

Perceived sacredness of the cross produced a mean = 1.684 and a standard deviation = 1.147. Perceived sacredness of the Ichthus produced a mean = 2.889 and a standard deviation = 1.518. A repeated measure within-subjects test provided a means square = 169.923, F ratio = 210.51, and $p < .001$ at a .01 significance level. Therefore, H1 is rejected. There appears to be a distinct difference in the perceived sacredness of the cross and the perceived sacredness of the Ichthus. Christian respondents perceived the cross as more sacred than the Ichthus.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to extend the current understanding of religious symbols' influence on Christian consumers. Prior studies have demonstrated that such symbols can influence consumers. However, little is known regarding the perceived sacredness of separate symbols by the symbolized religion's adherents. This study provides evidence that the perceived sacredness of religious symbols can differ. Such a finding is important as it demonstrates that, when studying religious symbols in a marketing context, the researcher's selection of a particular religious symbol may influence the outcomes of a study depending on its perceived sacredness.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provided valuable evidence for future research, it was not without its limitations. First, the word "Christian" encompasses several distinct belief sets. Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, and others all consider themselves Christians. The study did not determine whether or not such belief sets influence the results. Second, the study utilized a single image of a cross and a single image of an Ichthus. Different versions or styles of these symbols may produce different results. Finally, the results are derived from 234 respondents. While the respondents were generationally and geographically dispersed, more study is necessary to generalize the findings.

There is ample room for additional research regarding religious symbols in the context of marketing. It would be of great value to understand the differences in perceived sacredness among different Christian belief sets. The exploration of religious symbols' role on a variety of demographic elements could add to the understanding of these influencers.

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