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Religious figures in controversial advertisements

Shock advertising, which is also called shockvertising, is a type of advertising that ‘deliberately, rather than inadvertently, startles and offends its audience by violating norms for social values and personal ideals’ (Dahl, Frankenberger, Manchanda 2002: 268). It is a rather short-term strategy designed and implemented to draw particular attention to a given product and increase sales, rather than to build a brand image. It draws on a message which makes use of motifs that are usually perceived as risky, shocking, or arousing mixed feelings, such as sex, eroticism, violence, fear, or abomination. The visual, which frequently borders on the verge of good taste, is calculated to arouse controversy and stun its audience. The properties of shock advertising make it a good method to be used in social campaigns, where there is a need to provoke, to force to think, to touch deeper. Well-employed shockvertising by, for example, charitable institutions and organisations, may help promote anti-smoking, anti-racism, or anti-fur campaigns. Likewise, this strategy may work perfectly for public service advertisements helping ‘to magnify the problem and intensify fear for the message to work’ (Upreti 2013: 46).

The benefits of a shock advertising strategy are diverse. One of the main advantages is its ability to evoke strong feelings, and thus make the advertisement better remembered. The controversial content of the marketing message is believed to significantly increase attention, and hence improve the process of memorizing (Dahl et al. 2002). This fact has been confirmed by various research, among others, by Mariusz Grębowiec (2010), where the results revealed that over 71% of the research participants declared that shocking content in advertisements helped them to remember the message.

Because shockvertising operates using a high emotional load, it needs to be employed carefully. Indeed, when used effectively, ‘it can send a message that elevates a business entity’s profile and positions its brand as forward-thinking’ (Upreti 2013: 46). Nevertheless, ill-considered, it can backfire and lead to long-term brand damage.

Excessively offensive or insulting images may undermine brand image and discourage potential customers. Another point is that the future of shockvertising is fragile 'as an element of «shock» today may become just another common promotional tactic tomorrow because the shelf life of such advertisements is short' (ibid.).

In the implementation of the strategy of shockvertising, it is essential to identify the target group in terms of cultural aspects. Marcin Gembarowski (2007: 10) warns that standard descriptions with categories such as gender, age, or social group may turn out to be insufficient. In messages with controversial contents, it is especially important to pay particular attention to such features as ethnic origin, cultural background, or religious orientation, as individuals will respond to shocking messages in a different way depending on the country they live in or the god they believe in (ibid., p. 54). It is said that, for instance, the Polish audience is sensitive to religious references, while being very much indifferent toward sexist behaviour towards women, whereas in the Netherlands the reaction would be the opposite. A mismatch between the strategy and the audience may not only cause a lack of interest but also create a negative attitude towards the advertisement itself, the product, or the brand. Research conducted on advertisements in 2010 in Poland by Grębowiec (2010) aimed at verifying which topics aroused the most controversy. The results showed that the majority of respondents indicated violence and aggression (56.6%), then eroticism and sex (25.8), and finally religious elements (11.6%).

The last two decades have indeed shown that the juxtaposition of eroticism and religion causes a reaction in the audience. In advertising, controversies can be created by alluding to religious motifs in combination with profane, taboo topics. Broadly speaking, a taboo is a fundamental cultural ban. When ignored, it frequently causes abrupt reactions from the participants of a given culture. In a narrow sense, a taboo may refer to issues or actions which are not to be discussed in public (Koszembar-Wiklik 2015: 69). An advertisement created by Oliviero Toscani back in 1991 for the Benetton brand can be regarded as a modern classic shock advertisement (Ulrich 2019). It was made for the autumn campaign for the Italian fashion label and depicted a priest and a nun kissing. The advertisement, which was mainly distributed outdoors, got public attention immediately. It quickly arouse a worldwide controversy as it broke a moral standard and breached a taboo.

There are several reasons why the implementation of iconoclastic images in advertising is becoming a popular marketing strategy. First of all, religion as such is a source of easily recognisable symbolic concepts. Second, it strongly appeals to the culture of a given country. In Poland, which may be regarded as a country of Roman Catholic Christians, the vast majority of Poles claim to be believers. This fact makes the Polish audience sensitive to religious allusions. Furthermore, religion may serve as a source of new characters which can be employed in advertisements, even though they not only fail to suit a consumerist approach but also oftentimes contradict it and literature suggests that religiosity is generally negatively related to the attitudes towards brands (Hirschman 1982; Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry 1989). Finally, the juxtaposition of the

profane, especially taboo topics, such as sexuality, or homosexuality, with religious concepts may easily shock and offend, resulting in the specific audience's response, which is desired by ad makers. Having seen an iconoclastic image, the audience starts to spread dark PR, and thus the company attracts a lot of publicity, and an increased interest in the advertisement is generated. From the marketing point of view, the larger the scale of the reaction, the better for the company and the promoted product, as the scandal evoked by the strategy is thought to boost the efficiency of the persuasive message and increase brand awareness.

There has been a body of research on religious motifs in advertising (i.a. Hirschman 1982; Belk et al. 1989; Dotson, Hyatt 2000; Henley, Philhours, Ranganathan, Bush 2009; Taylor, Halstead, Haynes 2010, Kowalewska 2017; Ulrich 2019). It was revealed, for example, that the presence of the Christian cross in advertisements generated a lower purchase intention and a less favourable attitude towards the brand among low-involvement and highly dogmatic consumers (Dotson, Hyatt 2000). On the other hand, when consumers found the presence of the Christian Cross relevant, the attitude towards the advertisement was positive, whereas irrelevant use of the religious symbol generated a negative attitude (Henley et al. 2009). However, a few studies have been conducted on the application of religious cues in a controversial way (Gineikienė, Zimaitis, Urbonavičius 2015). It is claimed that '[s]uch advertising may evoke positive emotions among non-religious and materialistic consumers, but at the same time generate negative public resonance and offend feelings of religious consumers' (ibid., p. 47).

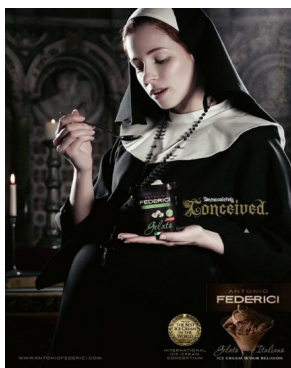
The main aim of the research was to establish what kinds of feelings and emotions are evoked among Polish consumers of iconoclastic images in advertisements for different products. The intended shock was to be provoked by the juxtaposition of figures known from the Bible, such as Jesus or the Virgin Mary, or people closely related to the Christian Church, such as nuns or priests, mostly with a motif of seduction and sexual innuendo. Moreover, the survey aimed to check how the use of religious motifs in advertising is perceived, whether advertisements with iconoclastic images encourage purchasing the advertised goods, and are viewed as credible and convincing.

The research was based on a survey consisting of 10 questions. The questionnaire was constructed by the author of the research and comprised 5 semi-open questions and 5 closed questions. The data was collected in person from 119 respondents, who are city dwellers. They were all informed about the academic purposes of the research and were granted anonymity. The age range was from 23 to over 50 years old (below 26 there were 73 respondents, between 26–30 – 20, and over 30 26 respondents). All the participants belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. The denomination was important because the images they were confronted with referred among others to Virgin Mary or Pope John Paul II, characters who are treated with special reverence in this Church. The respondents were asked to choose among such feelings and emotions as anger, amusement, outrage, admiration, disgust, interest, distaste, or astonishment. Additionally, they could provide their answers which were not included in the survey,

and they were informed that it is allowed to choose more than one answer. The average number of answers given to a single semi-open question was two, therefore the total does not add up to 100%.

In the first part of the research, the respondents were shown a set of 4 pictures from existing advertisements which are based on the idea of shockvertising, and were asked the following question: *What do you feel when looking at this advertisement?*

At the very beginning, they were shown an advertisement for ice cream, presenting a picture of a nun wearing a monastic habit, with rosary beads around her neck, in a sacred place, presumably a church, trying to eat ice cream (see Picture 1). The striking element was that the nun was visibly pregnant. The body copy of the advertisement says *Immaculately conceived*.



Picture 1. The advertisement for ice cream with a pregnant nun¹

As far as the image is concerned, the advertisement refers to breaking the vows of chastity which are taken by nuns. At a deeper layer, the text alludes to the Immaculate Conception, a concept that is deeply rooted in Roman Catholicism. According to the teaching of the Church, it was the conception of the Virgin Mary, who was free from original sin, in the womb of her mother. The most popular answers chosen by the respondents were: distaste (52%), amusement (28%), astonishment (28%), outrage (28%), and interest (19%). A few respondents wrote in the 'other' category: *surprise* (2x), *confusion*, *nothing-I take it neutrally*, *indifference*.

Next, the research participants were shown an advertisement for a TV channel presenting a character who resembles a traditional image of Jesus Christ (see Picture 2). The person has long hair and a long beard and is looking toward heaven with his hands raised. There is some light coming down from above directly to the person. In the foreground, there is a huge wicker basket with a multitude of different sports balls. The body copy says: *Miracles happen only on Sky Sport*.

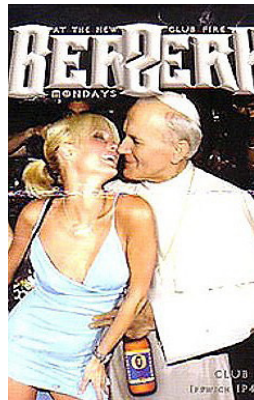
¹ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/banned-pregnant-nun-ice-cream-ad-campaign-28567115.html>.



Picture 2. The advertisement for a TV channel alluding to the miracle of feeding the five thousand²

This advertisement alludes to the Biblical scene of feeding the five thousand with only 5 loaves and 2 fishes. The feelings which were the most frequently indicated by the respondents comprised: outrage (40%), distaste (40%), and amusement (23%). The open category of 'other' included: *annoyance, indifference, neutrality, and idiotic.*

The next picture presented the late Pope John Paul II, of Polish origin, who was, and still is, exceptionally revered and adored by Poles (see Picture 3). The photograph was edited to show the Pope flirting with a young woman wearing a skimpy dress. They are shown dancing, flirting, and almost kissing each other. The Pope, wearing the official white habit, is holding a bottle of beer and his hands are on the woman's hips. It looks like a picture taken during a party.



Picture 3. The advertisement for a nightclub with the flirting Pope³

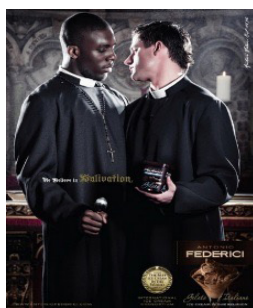
The central motif of the visual is seduction, which is one of the most popular motifs used in advertising. The shocking element in this context is the use of a real clergyman who was a spiritual leader for millions. John Paul II used to be the head of

² https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/sky_miracles_castrogiovanni.

³ <http://clericalwhispers.blogspot.com/2009/04/dancing-pope-advert-banned.html>.

the Roman Catholic Church, and is regarded as an example to follow; an example of modesty, chastity, and godliness. Here, he is presented as drinking alcohol and having fun with a person of the opposite sex. The most popular answers chosen by the respondents included: outrage (72%), distaste (71%), anger (42%), and disgust (34%). In the category of 'other', the respondents wrote: *irresponsible, scandalous*.

In the last advertisement which the respondents were confronted with, there are two priests (see Picture 4). One of them is white and the other one is black, both wearing habits. One of them has rosary beads around his neck and is holding a spoon in his hand. The other one is holding some ice cream. They are about to start eating. The striking element is the fact that they are standing very close to each other, touching their entire bodies, and their faces are very close as if they are about to start kissing. Their posture suggests that they are in a kind of close, sexual relationship. The text says: *We believe in salivation*. There is a play on words between *salvation* - the saving of the soul from sin and its consequences, and *salivation* - the act of producing saliva in one's mouth.



Picture 4. The advertisement for ice cream with kissing priests⁴

The visual touches on several controversial topics. One of them is racism or possibly miscegenation. Another one refers to breaking the vows of chastity among clergymen. Finally, the issue of homosexuality is addressed. The controversies aroused by the picture led to the generation of the following prevailing answers: distaste (62%), disgust (57%), and outrage (44%).

Finally, the respondents were asked to provide adjectives describing the above-mentioned advertisements altogether. The general perception of the advertisements presenting a combination of the sacred and the profane provocatively can be narrowed down to the following adjectives: distasteful (71%), offensive (69%), outrageous (55%), shocking (53%), and annoying (29%). Generally, the respondents did not find the advertisements interesting or amusing.

Summing up the results of the first part of the study, it needs to be noticed that such feelings as outrage and distaste dominated in all four discussed instances. The

⁴ https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/antonio_federici_we_believe_in_salivation.

advertisements with the pregnant nun and a multitude of balls were additionally described as funny, whereas the one with the kissing homosexual priests as disgusting. Interestingly, the advertisement presenting the Pope flirting with a young woman evoked anger (indicated by 42% of research participants), which was not the case in previous examples. The reason may be twofold. First, Poles may identify more strongly with the Pope of Polish origin. Second, the fact of presenting a real person, and not a Biblical character, in a highly inappropriate context may make a greater impact on the audience.

In the remaining 5 closed-ended questions, the respondents were asked to choose one from the three available answers, such as *yes*, *hard to say*, and *no*.

When it comes to the persuasive appeal, almost 90% of the participants did not feel encouraged to buy the products advertised using the shockvertising strategies employed in the discussed advertisements. Only 4% of the respondents said they felt convinced to buy an advertised product or service, whereas 8% chose the answer *hard to say*. When asked if they think that people portrayed in these advertisements are connected to the product itself, only 1% of the respondents said *yes*, while 10% said *hard to say*, and 89% *no*. The respondents could see the lack of connection between the people portrayed in the advertisements and the advertised products. Then 82% of the respondents assumed that the advertisements in question were designed by someone who does not belong to the Catholic Church, whereas 4% expressed the opposite opinion, and 14% said it was *hard to say*. The results concerning sensitivity to other religions were not clear, since as much as 31% of the respondents were undecided when asked if references to other religions (e.g. Buddhism, Islam) in advertisements available in Poland would be perceived as less controversial. Still, although 19% said *yes*, 50% gave the answer in the negative, which may imply the assumed sensitivity among the Polish audience towards religious issues as such. Finally, the vast majority of the respondents (77%) said that advertisements should generally refrain from drawing on religious motifs. Of the opposite opinion was 3%, and for 20% it was *hard to say*.

The results of research conducted on the perception of iconoclastic images in advertising by the Polish audience led to the formulation of the following conclusions:

1. The Polish audience demonstrates sensitivity to religious issues, also different than Christianity.
2. Disrespectful, mocking, or provocative references to the Roman Catholic religion in advertisements in Poland failed to make the audience interested in the promoted product or encouraged to purchase it.
3. Advertisement makers should prevent from drawing on religious motifs.
4. It may be assumed, however, that in the short run, the exposition of the audience to iconoclastic images which evoke strong emotions may reinforce the process of memorizing the contents of the marketing message and thus strengthen the recognition of the brand.

5. In the long run, shockvertising may prove to be a more useful strategy in social campaigns rather than in classic advertising in Poland.

The research results may be of special importance to not only foreign marketing agencies which would like to introduce their campaigns into the Polish market but also Polish ad makers who will be thus equipped with more knowledge on the impact iconoclastic images have on the public in Poland. Moreover, the results could be interesting to sociologists and anthropologists as they clearly present the difference in the perception and reaction to shocking images presenting existing and Biblical characters. Further research on sensitivity to iconoclastic images concerning other religions which are used in advertising would be recommended.

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Abstract: In the contemporary world, traditional forms of advertising seem to be losing impact. In the advertising clutter, ad makers try to make their advertisements stand out by the implementation of new and attractive strategies. Shockvertising is one of them. This unconventional approach to advertising aims at astonishing its audience by presenting shocking and controversial content. It is based on the assumption that arousing strong emotions will enhance the process of memorising. Additionally, the provocative nature of the message is intended to shock, and thus generate publicity, which in turn increases brand awareness, and consequently influences sales.

The main aim of this questionnaire-based research was to verify what kind of feelings and emotions are evoked among recipients of iconoclastic images in advertisements for different products and to check if the audience feels encouraged and convinced by such an appeal. Moreover, in the cultural dimension, the study aimed at assessing the sensitivity to controversial topics including religious concepts. The audience was exposed to images of religious characters combined with profane or taboo topics and asked for opinions. Based on the results, it can be concluded that, from a cultural point of view, the Polish audience demonstrates sensitivity to religious issues. Besides, from a marketing perspective, although shockvertising proves effective in distinguishing the brand, on a conscious level, it fails to influence the actual purchase behaviour.

Keywords: shock advertising, shockvertising, advertising, iconoclastic images, religion

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