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RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO
“SELLING HAPPINESS”:
NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ATTITUDE
TOWARD THE AD AND ATTITUDE
TOWARD THE BRAND*

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Religious responses to “selling happiness”: Negative consequences for attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand

Abstract

Intuitively, appealing to people’s desire to be happy should be universally well received by consumers, or at least not harmful to consumer’s perceptions of a brand; almost everyone wants to be happy and can relate to the desire to be happy. This article show that this is not necessarily true. Promising happiness in advertisement can cause negative attitude toward the ad and toward the advertised brand for religious people. We further demonstrate via a moderated mediation analysis conducted on a sample of 273 American adults that religious response to “selling happiness” is bounded by whether individuals’ religiosity is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.

Keywords

Attitude toward the ad, brand, religion, religiosity, moderated mediation

1. Theoretical framework:

The scientific study of happiness has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, specifically in the context of consumption (Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar 2012). This interest in studying happiness is timely, as many brands have recently taken to marketing their products as promising people happiness. Nesquik claims, “You can’t buy happiness, but you can drink it.” Hugo Boss sells its cologne as the “fragrance of happiness.” Perhaps most famously, in 2009 Coca-Cola started its “Open Happiness” campaign. Intuitively, appealing to people’s desire to be happy should be universally well received by consumers, or at least not harmful to consumer’s perceptions of a brand; almost everyone wants to be happy and can relate to the desire to be happy.

However, advertising that suggests attaining happiness via material means may be unpalatable for some individuals; specifically, people who strongly adhere to their religious values, beliefs and practices, and use them in daily living (as Worthington et al. [2003] defined religiosity). While seemingly unrelated, we propose that religiosity will play an important role in how people respond to advertisements and marketing materials that frame a product as offering people happiness, and in turn, their perceptions of the brand. Previous research shows that attending religious service is associated with increased subjective well-being, while materialism tends to be negatively related to subjective well-being (e.g., La Barbera and Gürhan 1997). Burrough and Rindfleish (2002) suggest that the extent to which material values undermine subjective well-being depends on collective-oriented values such as religious ones. They appear indeed as antithetical to a materialistic lifestyle. More precisely, these authors theorize that motives underlying materialism (e.g., possession, self-centeredness) conflict with motives underlying religious values (e.g., moderation, humility). Related conflicts produce psychological tension, and thus lower subjective well-being.

The major world religions seem to have intuited this, as all warn against materialism, worshiping false idols, or being envious of other people’s wealth and possessions. Instead, attaining happiness through spiritual means is presented as a more rewarding and fulfilling ways of living a happy life. Therefore, those individuals that most internalize their religion’s teachings (i.e., “intrinsic religiosity”; Gorsuch and McPherson [1989]) should find advertising framed around offering happiness to be less appealing, insofar as it undermines their values and beliefs in spiritual attainment of happiness. Conversely, those whose

religiosity is extrinsically motivated (e.g., attending social functions) and whose religion rarely impacts their daily life, should find such advertising less aversive.

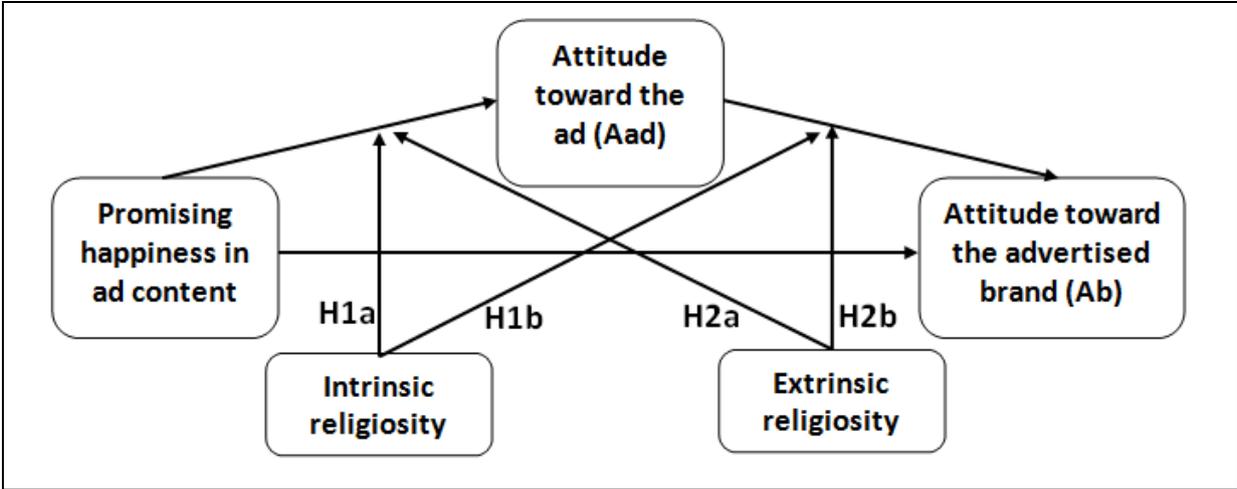


Figure 1: Conceptual model

As shown in Figure 1, we hypothesize that individuals whose religiosity is intrinsically motivated should have a negative attitude toward advertisements promising happiness (H1a) and thus have a negative attitude toward the advertised brand (H1b). In contrast, individuals whose religiosity is extrinsically motivated should have a positive attitude toward advertisements promising happiness (H2a) and thus have a positive attitude toward the advertised brand (H2b).

2. Method:

Participants. Two hundred and seventy-three individuals were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete an online task in exchange for a \$0.50 payment (female: 32.6%, median age: 27). The majority of participants identified themselves as Christian (37.7%) followed by nonreligious (35.2%), Atheist (21.2%), Buddhist (3.3%), Jewish (1.1%), Hindu (.4%), Muslim (.4%), and other (.7%).

Experimental design. This study used a 3 (promising happiness: happiness vs. positive mood vs. neutral) x two Continuous (intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivational orientation) between-subjects design (controlling for gender, age and general religiosity). The experimental design included both an ad making an explicit promise of happiness (happiness

condition) and the same ad without such a message (positive mood condition), and a neutral ad. This allowed us to differentiate the effect of happiness in the ad from mere positivity, how it interacts with intrinsic religious motivation, but depicting positive mood associated with a promise of happiness.

Procedure and measures. Participants were first asked to complete the Religious Motivational Orientation (RMO) scale revised by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989). This 14-item scale is designed to assess the two distinct reasons why for one practices their particular religion: by devotion towards the sacred (intrinsic religious motivational orientation, 8-item measure, noted thereafter RMO_I, $\alpha = .76$) or by personal and/or social interests (extrinsic religious motivational orientation, 6-item measure, noted thereafter RMO_E, $\alpha = .87$).

Because the revised RMO scale does not assess religiosity defined by how much one views him/herself as religious and how much one practices a religious activity, we measured general religiosity using three items ($\alpha = .88$): self-reported degree of religiosity, church attendance, and prayer frequency.

Afterwards, participants were asked to direct their attention toward the print ad on their screen. In the happiness condition, participants were exposed to a print ad depicting a Citroën car (a French car manufacturer that only six participants admitted knowing) with the following message “Have a taste of happiness with Citroën” and a happy-looking passenger. In the positive mood condition, participants viewed the same ad except that the happiness message was removed (the brand remained). In the neutral condition, the print ad displayed the message “Have a taste of quality with Citroën” and excluded the happy-looking passenger. Following MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), participants were then asked to provide their cognitive responses to the ad. Attitude toward the ad (thereafter noted Aad) and attitude toward the advertised brand (thereafter noted Ab) were both measured by three semantic differential scales (good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, favorable/unfavorable). For both measures, the three items were averaged to form composite scores (respectively, $\alpha = .95$ and $\alpha = .97$). Finally, after answering demographic questions, participants were debriefed, thanked, and redirected for payment.

3. Results:

Test of simple mediation. To conduct a statistical mediation analysis with the three-category independent variable (happiness ad *vs.* positive mood ad *vs.* neutral ad), we created two dummy variables. As such, DVA compares the happiness ad condition to the neutral ad condition, and DVB compares the positive mood condition to the neutral ad condition.

The OLS regression results for testing simple mediation are reported in Model 1 of Table 1 (see appendix). First, analysis of the total effect of selling happiness on Ab (Model 1A) indicated that after taking the control variables into account, neither the happiness ad or the positive mood ad produced a significantly different attitude toward the brand (Ab) than the neutral ad, even though their effects were positive in both cases (resp. $\text{Estimate}_{DVA} = .20, p = .44$, and $\text{Estimate}_{DVB} = .18, p = .53$). Second, analysis of Model 1B indicated that after taking the controlling variables into account, the positive mood ad yielded a marginally significant positive effect on Aad in comparison to the neutral ad ($\text{Estimate}_{DVB} = .49, p = .09$), while the happiness ad did not ($\text{Estimate}_{DVA} = .25, p = .38$). Finally, analysis of Model 1C indicated that Aad significantly predicted Ab ($\text{Estimate}_{Aad} = .65, p = .001$) while the direct effect of both DVA and DVB on Ab were not significant.

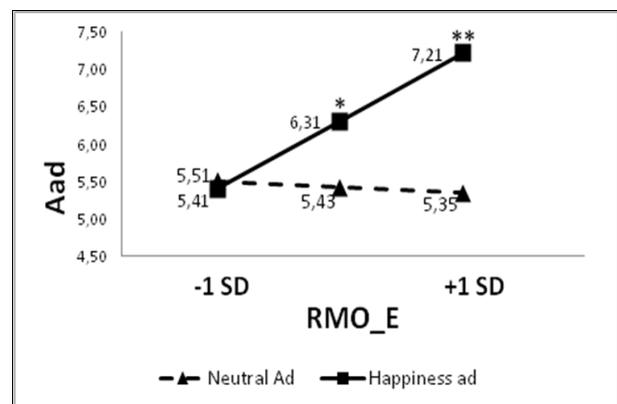
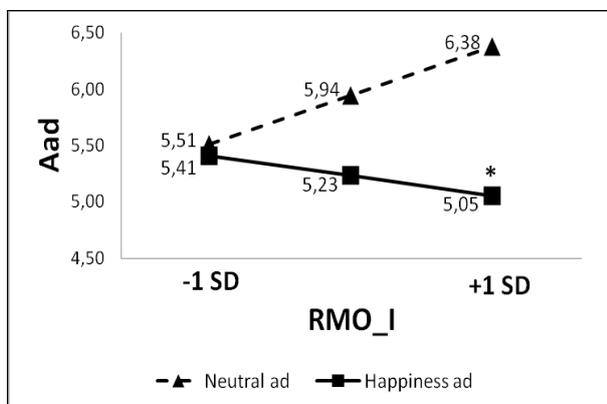
Following Hayes and Preacher (2013), we further tested the indirect effects on the basis of the bootstrapped confidence intervals. The bootstrap analysis indicated that while the indirect effect of DVA on Ab through Aad was not significant (effect = .16 [95% C.I. = -0.22 to .54]), it was significant for DVB (effect = .32 [95% C.I. = 0.00 to 0.69])¹. We then conclude that in comparison to the neutral ad, the positive mood ad significantly and positively affected attitude toward the brand while the happiness ad did not. However, given that we hypothesized that religious motivational orientation moderated the mediating role of Aad on Ab when promising happiness in advertisements, we next investigate the possibility of moderated mediation.

Tests of moderated mediation. The results of the tests for the moderated mediation we hypothesized are shown in Model 2 of Table 1 (see appendix). This model tests: (a) whether religious motivational orientation (intrinsic *vs.* extrinsic) amplifies the strength of the first stage of mediation (the effects of promising happiness on Aad), and (b) whether it moderates the second stage of mediation (the effects of Aad on Ab).

¹ 95% confidence intervals correspond to one-tailed tests (our hypotheses being directional) with application of a Bonferroni correction for multiple tests, which according to Hayes and Preacher (2013) is required in mediation analysis with a multicategorical independent variable.

First, as indicated by Model 2B, the impact of the happiness ad in comparison to the neutral ad was significantly moderated by both RMO_I and RMO_E (respectively, $\text{Estimate}_{\text{DVA}_x\text{RMO}_I} = -1.03, p = .02$ and $\text{Estimate}_{\text{DVA}_x\text{RMO}_E} = 1.16, p = .002$). As expected, the moderation of the impact of the positive mood ad in comparison to the neutral ad by religious motivational orientation was not significant by neither its intrinsic or extrinsic dimension. We used simple slopes to represent graphically the relationship between DVA and Aad at high and low level of RMO_I, for low RMO_E, average RMO_E, and high RMO_E² (resp., Figures 2A, 2B, and 2C). As shown by all three graphs, and consistent with Hypothesis H1a, while the slope of the happiness ad on Aad was negative, it was positive for the neutral ad. We provide as well a visual representation of the significant interaction between DVA and Aad at high and low level of RMO_E for low RMO_I, average RMO_I, and high RMO_I (resp. Figures 3A, 3B, and 3C). Consistent with Hypothesis H2a, all three graphs show that while the slope of the neutral ad on Aad was negative, it was positive for the happiness ad. The conditional effect of DVA on Aad was significant when:

- RMO_I was low and RMO_E was high: $\theta_{(\text{DVA} \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\text{RMO}_E=3.05|\text{RMO}_I=1.77} = 1.87, p = .006$ (Figures 2C and 3A);
- RMO_I was high and RMO_E was low: $\theta_{(\text{DVA} \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\text{RMO}_I=3.46|\text{RMO}_E=1.14} = -1.32, p = .04$ (Figures 2A and 3C);
- RMO_I was low and RMO_E was average: $\theta_{(\text{DVA} \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\text{RMO}_I=1.77|\text{RMO}_E=2.09} = .88, p = .05$ (Figures 2B and 3A);
- RMO_I was average and RMO_E was high: $\theta_{(\text{DVA} \rightarrow \text{Aad})|\text{RMO}_I=2.61|\text{RMO}_E=3.05} = 1.25, p = .006$ (Figures 2C and 3B).



² We conducted spotlight analyses at one standard deviation above and below the mean level of RMO_I/RMO_E, corresponding respectively at high and low levels of intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity.

Figure 2A: Low RMO_E

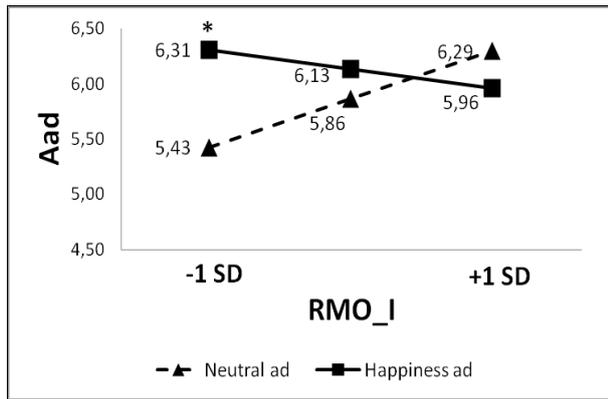


Figure 3A: Low RMO_I

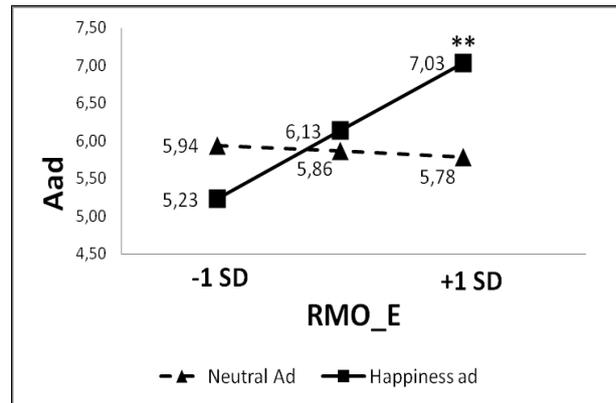


Figure 2B: Average RMO_E

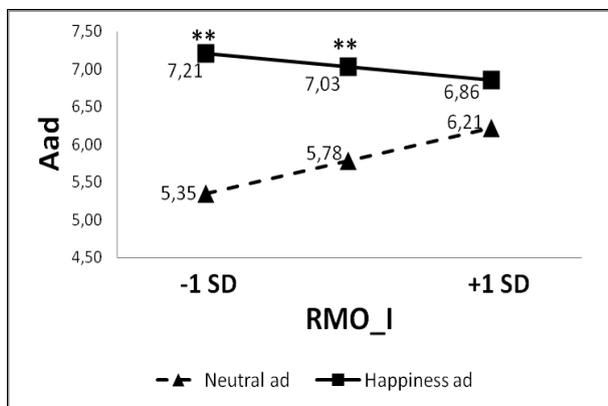


Figure 3B: Average RMO_I

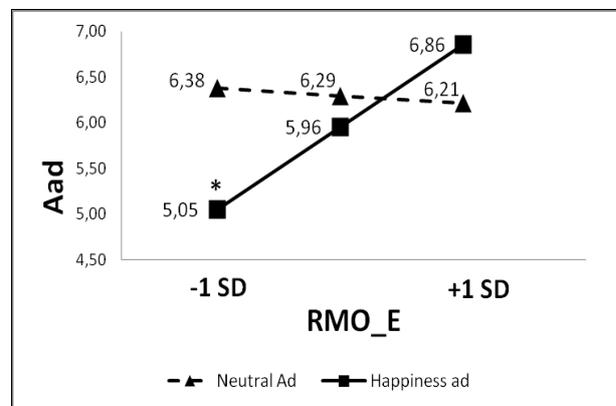


Figure 2C: High RMO_E

Figure 3C: High RMO_I

* sig. different from the neutral ad at $p < .05$; ** sig. different from the neutral ad at $p < .01$

Second, as indicated by Model 2C Table 1 (see appendix), full support for the moderated mediation was found with respect to the second stage of mediation (i.e., the relationship between Aad and Ab). Consistent with Hypothesis H1b, the result indicates that the effect of the interaction of Aad and RMO_I is significant and negatively affects Ab (Estimate_{Aad_x_RMO_I} = -.14, $p = .04$). Thus, the higher intrinsic religiosity, the worst attitude toward the advertised brand for the ad promising happiness in comparison to the neutral ad. Consistent with Hypothesis H2b, the result shows that the effect of the interaction of Aad and RMO_E is also significant and positively affects Ab (Estimate_{Aad_x_RMO_E} = .12, $p = .01$). Thus, the higher extrinsic religiosity, the more positive one's attitude is toward the advertised brand for the ad promising happiness in comparison to the neutral ad.

To further assess the degree to which the effect of Aad on Ab are moderated by the type of religious motivational orientation, we tested the significance of the indirect effects using a

bootstrapping procedure. interval. The bootstrap analysis indicated that while the indirect effects of DVB on Ab through Aad were not significant in any case, the indirect effects of DVA on Ab through Aad were significant when:

- RMO_I was low and RMO_E was high: effect = 1.70 (95% CI = 0.54 to 2.97);
- RMO_I was high and RMO_E was low: effect = -.57 (95% CI = -1.45 to 0.00);
- RMO_I was average and RMO_E was high: effect = .99 (95% CI = 0.36 to 1.67).

4. Conclusion:

The potential influence of religiosity on perceptions of brands offering people happiness is not trivial, given that much of the world's population holds some kind of belief in God. Only a minority of the world population claims to be atheists – 13 % mostly concentrated in Western Europe and China (Win-Gallup International 2012). Therefore, understanding how religiosity influences ad and brand perception, particularly in the context of brands increasingly attempting to appeal to people's desire for happiness, is an important avenue for research. This research serves this purpose. It provides evidence that promising happiness in ad content causes for individuals whose intrinsic religiosity is high to have a negative attitude toward the ad and subsequently toward the advertised brand.

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Appendix

Table 1: Results of moderated mediation analysis (n=273)

Results based on 5000 bootstrapped samples	Simple mediation model (Model 1)						Moderated mediation model (Model 2)					
	X → Y (Model 1A)		X → Med (Model 1B)		X + Med → Y (Model 1C)		X + Mod → Y (Model 2A)		X + Mod → Med (Model 2B)		X + Med + Mod → Y (Model 2C)	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept	4.88	.40	4.04	.44	2.23	.38	5.19	.81	3.11	.69	1.66	1.01
Gender (0=M, 1=F)	-.11	.25	-.67	.27	.32	.18	-.15	.27	-.68	.28	.37	.18
Age	.02	.01	.05	.01	-.01	.01	.02	.01	.05	.01	-.006	.01
General religiosity	.16	.10	.21	.11	.02	.08	.07	.18	-.09	.19	.09	.12
DVA	.20	.26	.44	.28	.04	.21	-.37	.94	.51	.98	-.03	.20
DVB	.18	.28	.53	.29	-.14	.19	-.60	1.07	1.44	1.08	-.18	.19
RMO_I							-.04	.33	.82	.33	.64	.46
RMO_E							-.06	.22	-.23	.27	-.69	.32
DVA_x_RMO_I							-.27	.43	-1.03	.45		
DVB_x_RMO_I							.29	.44	-.60	.49		
DVA_x_RMO_E							.64	.34	1.16	.38		
DVB_x_RMO_E							.01	.37	.27	.39		
Aad					.65	.05					.78	.15
Aad_x_RMO_I											-.14	.07
Aad_x_RMO_E											.12	.05
R ²	.03		.10		.54 (p < .001)		.02 (p = .47)		.03 (p = .07)		.51 (p < .001)	
Δ R ²	-		-		(rel. to Model 1A)		(rel. to Model 1A)		(rel. to Model 1B)		(rel. to Model 2A)	

Notes:

X = Three-category independent variable recoded with: DVA = neutral ad vs. happiness ad, and DVB = neutral ad vs. positive mood ad

Y = Ab

Med = Aad

Mod = RMO_I and RMO_E