The influence of religion on attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products

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Abstract *In a constantly changing and increasingly globalized world, religion still plays a significant role in influencing social and consumer behavior. This study will analyze what influence religion and intensity of belief has on attitudes towards the advertising of particular controversial products and services. A questionnaire was distributed to 1,393 people across six different countries and resulting in samples of four main religious groups. The results indicated some statistically significant differences between the groups, which can have important implications for global marketers.*

Introduction

Religious beliefs play a significant part in sculpting social behaviour. Differences in religious affiliations tend to influence the way people live, the choices they make, what they eat and whom they associate with. According to Hirschman (1983), the religious affiliations of Catholics, Protestants and Jews significantly shaped their attitudes towards dancing, magazines, restaurants and political ideas. There is also a strong relationship between religious persons and greater concern for moral standards (Wiebe and Fleck, 1980), being conservative (Barton and Vaughan, 1976), and possessing more traditional attitudes (Wilkes *et al.*, 1986). The impact of religion on consumption patterns usually relates to the restriction of certain foods and beverages, for example, Jews and Muslims do not eat pork, Hindus do not eat beef, and drinking alcohol is frowned upon if not forbidden by Islam and strict Protestants. Religion also influences gender roles in a particular culture. In Islamic countries, both men and women must cover their torso and upper legs at all times and in the case of women only their faces' skin may be exposed (Deng *et al.*, 1994).

The influence of religious beliefs on individual and social behaviour is well documented (see Greeley, 1977; Hirschman, 1983; LaBarbera, 1987; Uppal, 1986; Anand and Kumar, 1982; Luqmani *et al.*, 1987; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; LaBarbera, 1987; McDaniel and Burnett, 1990; Waller and Fam, 2000; Birch *et al.*, 2001). However, a review of the pertinent literature showed only a handful of studies that directly

examined the influence of religion on marketing communications. Moreover, the religious studies which did look at the influence on marketing communications focused only on the influence of Islam on advertising content and regulation in Saudi Arabia (Luqmani *et al.*, 1987) and message contentiousness among Gulf Co-operative Council countries (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999). Both of these studies revealed the importance of understanding the Islamic religion in relation to effective advertising. In particular, Luqmani *et al.* (1987) claim that provocative and unconventional advertising strategies and advertisements must obtain prior approval from religious authorities. Failure to do so will result in alienation of a wide segment of the conservative Saudi public. The findings from Michell and Al-Mossawi's (1999) study of Gulf Co-operative Council countries showed religiously strict Muslims scored lower in terms of recall and were unfavourable towards contentious advertisements relative to lenient Muslims. The findings suggest that there is a difference in perceived controversial elements in advertisements between a devout and a lenient Muslim. These findings also highlight the importance of matching creative execution, message content, and etc. to a society's socio-cultural environment (Peebles and Ryans, 1984). Suffice to say, an alienated public will certainly have a negative attitude towards the advertisement and brand recall (Zinkhan and Martin, 1982; Gardner, 1985). Michell and Al-Mossawi (1999) claim an offensive advertisement will not be effective in capturing an audience's attention or changing his/her attitudes.

The effects of religion on the advertising of controversial products remain largely unstudied to date. The aim of this study is to narrow the current knowledge gap by extending the number of religious beliefs for analysis to include Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and non-religious believers (see discussions on non-religious believers). The primary focus is to examine the impact of these four religious beliefs on the advertising of controversial products, and specifically:

- whether there is a relationship between religious beliefs and offence towards the advertising of certain controversial products; and
- whether intensity of religious belief has an impact on offence towards the advertising of controversial products.

The understanding of how various religious beliefs and their intensity influence offence towards the advertising of controversial products is of great importance to international advertisers and advertising agency managers in their efforts to improve advertising effectiveness without offending or alienating their target audience. Some implications for international marketers will be presented at the end of the paper.

Background and theoretical development

Religion can be described as:

> . . . the habitual expression of an interpretation of life, which deals with ultimate concerns and values. Institutional religion formalises these into a system which can be taught to each generation (Cloud, 2000).

Religion defines the ideals for life, which in turn are reflected in the values and attitudes of societies and individuals. Such values and attitudes shape the behaviour and practices of institutions and members of cultures. For example, several public holidays are often tied to religion. The holy days for each religion differ not only in

number, but also in significance. Buddhists regard the birthday of Buddha as the most important day in their calendar; Christians view Easter Friday and Christmas Day as two important dates; Muslims regard Ramadan their holiest month and they usually fast from dawn to dusk; and Taoist and Confucian followers celebrate a number of festivals within the year.

In an attempt to better understand the relationship between religion and advertising of controversial products it is useful to focus upon the two aspects of religion: spiritual, and laws and regulations (Bryson, 2000). For the spiritual aspect, all religions teach us to obey the same timeless and universal golden rule: to love our fellow "mankind", to develop virtues, to gain control of ourselves and to avoid hate, anger and greed. However, each religion, due to the unique requirements of a specific time and place, has its own particular emphasis. The laws and regulations govern such things as food, its preparation, crime, punishment and establishment of order. These aspects vary greatly for each religion.

In the light of the differences in emphasis by each religion on the spiritual, and laws and regulations, this study will examine whether these differences have any impact on the believers' attitudes towards the offensiveness of the advertising of specific controversial products. To begin, each religion will be examined as well as the type of controversial products. Next, the findings of the responses of 1,393 people across six countries will be presented, and finally, some implications for global marketers will be discussed.

Type of religions

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss what really constitutes a religion, which according to Crystal (1993, p. 900), may constitute any number of values, sacred objects, beliefs, rituals, prayers, norms, requirements and taboos. What we will discuss is the inclusion of non-religious believers as a "religion". Non-religious believers are those who do not adhere to a particular religion, but this does not necessary mean they don't have values and morality. For instance, although one might claim to be an atheist, one is not strictly devoid of any religious influence. This notion holds true in Asia where there is little separation between religion and social conducts. In fact, the religious sphere in Asia has been characterised by a multiplicity of influences. According to Birch *et al.* (2001, p. 105):

> What many in the West understand as "Chinese religions" or "Indian beliefs" are the results of long and complex periods of interactions between a range of beliefs and practices involving other human endeavours and identities. It would be impossible, then, to speak of an "original" Chinese or Indian religious system without also taking into account the interactions between Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in the former case, and the long history of coexistence of Hindus and Muslims within the shared spaces in the latter.

Given this view, for this study, "non-religious believers" are those who are without any specified religious adherence, but nonetheless possess values and morality that are acceptable in a given society. The main religions involved in this study are discussed below.

Buddhism. Buddhism is known as the philosophy of the awakening (www.buddhanet.net). Originating as a monastic movement within the dominant Brahman tradition of the day, Buddhism quickly developed into a distinctive religion. Buddhists believe in karma and reincarnation. They believe in doing good deeds,

having nice words and thoughts. Language must be respectful and expressions of sexuality and anger limited. Buddhism does not encourage materialism, and Buddhists are not ones to self-indulge, be materialistic or exploit others. They believe in peace and their ultimate goal in life is to reach for nirvana, which can be described as paradise, enlightenment, and a state of tranquillity (*Encarta*, 1997). According to Dillon (1998), Buddhism's goal is to eliminate desires through personal discipline. Buddhists also believe in good conduct, honesty, being compassionate, being charitable and selflessness. Morgan and Lawton (1996) claim that the whole ethos for living as a Buddhist is simplicity, self-control, kindliness and generosity. Smart (1993) claims that there are three marks of existence for those who study the teachings of Buddha:

> ... everything is impermanent, therefore everything is without permanent soul or self, and this is characterised by suffering and the fact that no joys last forever.

According to Murgatroyd (2001), it is important that followers of the Buddhist teachings realised that an individual's life is full of dualities: life and death; good and bad; and pleasure and pain. These dualities represent the reason why moderation in life is important to the Buddhists.

There are five precepts that are representative of the Buddhist ethic. They include: one should refrain from taking life (all animals life); one should refrain from wrong expressions of sexuality: fornication, adultery, etc.; one should refrain from taking what is not freely given: do not steal; one should refrain from wrongful use of language: such as lying, talking about frivolous and malicious topics, and gossip; one should refrain from using drugs and alcohol (becoming intoxicant) as these substances lead to delusion, unclear mind, block self-awareness, encourage violence and may hinder one's search for ultimate purification of consciousness. These precepts follow the concept of *ahimsa*, of non-violence and peacefulness (www.stormwind.com/common/buddhism.html, 2000).

Christianity. Christianity bases its ethical system on the Jewish covenant, but focuses on its spirit, not ritual law. As a result, the Ten Commandments and the prophets carry most ethical force. Jesus represents counsel of compassion, meekness, a hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peace, and faith in the face of persecution. It takes Old Testament law such as the prohibition against killing, and applies it deeply and broadly so that a hostile thought almost becomes a sin. The best-known ritual of Christianity is taking part in church service which is a duty and is considered the most basic and helpful action a believer can take in order to draw nearer to God.

Christian services have two dimensions: human responses to God and human acts. They are an opportunity to praise the Lord, share in thanksgiving, to make confessions, and receive absolution from sin. There is a duality in Christian thought in the contemplation of life and death. The belief that with death there comes life is particularly remembered at Easter and Christmas. A metaphor for this duality is the death of old life in the winter and the resurrection of new life in the spring (Lee, 1996). Christianity is a religion of redemption (McManners, 1990) – incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. This is significant because redemption is in relation to sin and evil that defaces the world. The Christian community is brought together physically by the church. These congregations are open to all people because Gold loves all of them. The family unit is very important to Christians and is similar to the unity found in the Holy Trinity (Barth, 1993).

Islam. Islam was founded in Arabia and based on the teachings of Muhammad, who is called the Prophet. The Arabic word "Islam" literally means "to surrender", but as a religious term in the Koran, it means "to surrender to the will or law of God". One who practices Islam is a Muslim. According to the Koran, Islam is the primordial and universal religion, and even nature itself is Muslim, because it automatically obeys the laws God has ingrained in it. For human beings, which possess free will, practising Islam does not involve automatically obeying, but rather freely accepting God's commandments (Von der Mehden, 1986). Islamic social philosophy is based on the belief that all spheres of life: spiritual, social, political, and economic form an indivisible unity that must be thoroughly imbued with Islamic values. This principle informs such concepts as "Islamic law" and the "Islamic state" and accounts for Islam's strong emphasis on social life and social duties. Even the cardinal religious duties prescribed in the five pillars of Islam have clear social implications.

Islamic law, known as *shari'ah* (which is sourced from the Koran) is a code that prescribes and governs the duties, morals and behaviour of all Muslims, collectively and individually, in all aspects of life (Coulson, 1964; Terpstra and Sarathy, 1994; Luqmani *et al.*, 1987). Olayan and Karande (2000) go on to explain that the *shari'ah* describes the values that Muslims should hold, including truth, honesty, social and collective obligations and responsibilities, the role of men and women, and the role of buying and selling. Muslims are not allowed to eat pork, gamble or drink alcohol, and nudity is prohibited. In addition, Muslims must not idol worship (statutes inclusive), must conform to sexual codes and adultery is strictly prohibited. Children should not deceive or disrespect their parents (Newland, 2000; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; Deng *et al.*, 1994; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1997). Islam is more than a religion. It controls the ways of society and factors associated with family, dress, cleanliness and ethics. Muslims are required to live and think in the way that Allah has stated.

Non-religious believers. As discussed earlier, non-religious believers are those who do not adhere to a particular religion, but this does not necessary mean they don't have values and morality. From an Asian context, China is an excellent example of an atheist society. Although without an official religion, the Chinese people's values and morality were derived from two schools of thoughts, namely Taoism and Confucianism. The two schools differ in orientation – Taoism is a philosophical system stressing mystical experience and the individual's harmony with nature and Confucianism emphasising the duty of the individual in society and government – but both have profoundly influenced Chinese and Chinese derived culture (Haddon, 2000). Chen (1998) claims Taoism is, in effect, a synthesis of different current of thoughts going back to the very beginnings of Chinese history. To the followers of Taoism, the person who is arrogant, and shows extreme self-confidence is exhibiting traits that are in opposition to their beliefs. These traits lead to the dissipation of vital life forces. Taoism is more popular in China than any other religion (Chen, 1998).

Confucianism is a pragmatic code of moral ethics, codifying the ties of individual, family and society that defined a person's proper place and position and therefore ensuring harmony in society (Haddon, 2000). The key principles of Confucian teachings are:

> ... the stability of society is based on unequal relations between people; the family is the prototype of all social organisations; virtuous behaviour towards others consists of treating others as one would like to be treated oneself; and promoting virtue with regard to one's task in life (Hofstede and Bond, 1988).

Other important Confucian virtues include righteousness, propriety, integrity, and filial piety. One who possesses all these virtues becomes a *qunzi* (perfect gentleman) (*Encarta*, 1997).

Non-religious believers in countries outside of China might include ordinary people whose belief might be influenced by a particular state sanctioned religion. For instance, non-religious believers in Britain and New Zealand might be influenced by the Christian religion but they do not practise the faith. Some very liberal Muslims are only referred to being Muslims by name, and in reality do not practise their religion. Other non-religious believers could include "Satanists", "Purists", "Universalists", and "Naturalists".

Controversial products

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising. Academic research in this area has described these products as: "unmentionables", "socially sensitive products", "decent products", or "controversial products" (Wilson and West, 1981; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Shao, 1993; Shao and Hill, 1994; Fahy *et al.*, 1995; Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999; Waller and Fam, 2000). Wilson and West (1981, p. 92) described them as:.

> ... products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented.

They presented a number of examples, including: "products" (for personal hygiene, birth control, warfare, and drugs for terminal illness), "services" (for abortion, sterilisation, VD, mental illness, funeral directors, and artificial insemination), and "concepts" (for political ideas, palliative care, unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudice and terrorism). While revisiting this issue, Wilson and West (1995) suggested how the AIDS issue had changed what was previously thought of as "unmentionable".

Feminine hygiene products has been mentioned in several industry articles as having advertisements that are in "poor taste", "irritating" and "most hated" (Alter, 1982; Hume, 1988; Rickard, 1994). Feminine hygiene products was the main focus of Rehman and Brooks (1987), but also included undergarments, alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, medications, and VD services, as examples of controversial products. In a study that focussed on advertising "sensitive products", Fahy *et al.* (1995) asked a sample of over 2,000 respondents their attitudes towards the advertising on certain products on television. The products were grouped into three main categories: "alcoholic beverages", "products directed at children" and "health/sex-related products". Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. The products which were in their list include condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, and male undergarments. Waller (1999), and Waller and Fam (2000) looked further at the issue of advertising offensive products and offensive execution in studies in Australia and Malaysia respectively.

The studies to date regarding controversial products advertising have primarily looked at mainly a few or one large grouping. There has been little research on grouping these controversial products. Essentially, this analysis will determine factor groupings of controversial products and examine to what extent their offensiveness was caused by religious beliefs (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and non-religious Believers) and the intensity of religious belief. Despite the evidence that religion has an effect on social behaviour, there is little literature on the effects of religious beliefs on the advertising of controversial products. This study will, therefore, examine whether there is a relationship between religious beliefs and offence towards the advertising of certain controversial products and whether intensity of religious belief has an impact on offence towards the advertising of controversial products.

Methodology

To obtain some measure of offensiveness towards the advertising of specific controversial products, a questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of university students in six countries (Malaysia, Turkey, Taiwan, China, Britain and New Zealand). The reasons why these countries were chosen is that they have certain elements about them that are both similar and different that make them worthy of such a cross-cultural analysis. Malaysia is a multi-cultural country with Islam as the main religion, while Turkey is a country with a high percentage of Islamic followers; Taiwan is a Buddhist society while China has no officially sanctioned state religion; and Britain and New Zealand have strong historic and cultural ties and both are predominantly Christian societies.

The rationale for using university students as subjects has been a research method practiced worldwide for many years, mainly for their accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder *et al.*, 1981). Student samples have already been used in controversial advertising studies by Rehman and Brooks (1987), Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994) and Waller (1999). Further, the use of students in a potential cross-cultural comparison of attitudes has other advantages as it is accepted that purposive samples, such as with students, are superior than random samples for establishing equivalence, and it controls a source of variation, thus is more likely to isolate any cultural differences if they exist (Dant and Barnes, 1988).

Survey development and data collection

The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered in a classroom environment. The survey instrument included a list of 17 products/services from which respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal "offence" on a five-point scale, where 1 means "Not at all" offensive and 5 means "Extremely" offensive. The list of products/services presented was based on Waller (1999) which was, in turn, based on past literature (Wilson and West, 1981; Shao, 1993; Fahy *et al.*, 1995). The aim of the list is to have a wide range of potentially controversial products/services, from extremely offensive (racially extremist groups; cigarettes) to those that are not considered offensive at all (pharmaceuticals; charities) from which respondents can rate their personal level of offensiveness. A total of 17 products were presented in the final questionnaire: alcohol, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political

parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention), and weight loss programs.

Also included in the questionnaire were questions relating to demographics, religious belief and intensity of religious belief (where 1 means not a devout religious follower, and 5 means a devout religious follower).

Respondent profile

A total of 1,393 respondents were sampled for this study. The demographic profile of the respondents is found in Table I. Overall there were more females than males in the sample of respondents and the average age is 22 years old. China has a higher than average number of males and age group (25 years old) due to the participation of post-graduate students. Islam and Christianity represent 26 percent each of the sample, followed by non-religious believers (24 percent) and Buddhism (22 percent). Hinduism represents 2 percent of the total sample and was excluded from further analysis. For non-religious believers category, respondents from Malaysia, China and Taiwan identified themselves as followers of Taoism and Confucianism, and for Britain and New Zealand, Sikh, Satanist, Purist, Universalist, and to a lesser extent Confucianism, were specified by the respondents. The level of intensity of belief (mean score of 2.54 out of 5) is in the moderate range indicating a liberal sample.

Focussing on each country, the strongest religious belief was from the Turkish respondents, where 99 percent identified themselves as Muslim and reasonably devout followers (mean score of 3.46 out of 5). Malaysia, which is a multicultural country, has an equal cross-section of religions, with around 30 percent identifying themselves as Buddhist, Islamic and Christian. They were also devout religious followers (mean = 3.34). China and New Zealand have 65 percent and 50 percent of non-religious believers respectively, and both countries scored low on the intensity of belief scale. In Taiwan, over 60 percent of respondents identified themselves Buddhists, while in Britain over 73 percent claimed they are Christians. In terms of intensity of religious belief, the Taiwanese edged over Britons in their respective religion, but both are in the moderate scale.

	Malaysia	Turkey	China	Taiwan	Britain	New Zealand	Total
No. of respondents	380	209	238	201	170	195	1,393
Gender (percent)							
Male	36	64	76	20	28	44	43
Female	64	36	33	80	72	56	57
Average age (mean)	21	21	25	22	21	22	22
Religion (percent)							
Buddhism	30.2	–	8.8	60.7	1.2	18.5	22
Islam	30.3	99.0	1.3	3.5	2.4	14.9	26
Christianity	29.5	–	24.4	31.8	73.5	8.7	26
Hinduism	2.1	–	–	–	–	7.2	2
Non-religious believers[a]	7.9	1.0	65.5	4.0	22.9	50.7	24
Intensity of belief[b] (mean)	3.34	3.46	1.74	2.23	2.00	1.80	2.54

Notes: [a]non-religious believers are those who do not adhere to a particular religion, but this does not necessary mean they don't have morality; [b] 1 = not a devout religious follower; 5 = a devout religious follower

Table I.
Respondent profile

Construct validity and reliability of dependent variables
Table II presents the results of the principal components factor analyses using a
varimax orthogonal rotation on the 17 product items. To obtain these results, the
procedures involved dividing the total sample into two sub-groups using "even"
and "odd" numbers. Factor analyses were performed on the two sub-groups
independently until both groups showed comparable factors with eigenvalue over
1.0 and factor loading > 0.40. The two sub-groups were combined into one and
another set of factor analyses was performed. Only one item relating to
pharmaceutical was deleted due to low factor loading. The result was four
different groups:

(1) Gender/sex related products (e.g. condoms, female contraceptives, male/female
underwear, etc.).

(2) Social/political groups (e.g. political parties, religious denominations, funeral
services, etc.).

(3) Addictive products (e.g. alcohol, cigarettes, etc.).

(4) Health and care products (e.g. charities, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD
prevention), etc.).

The final results (Table II) showed reliabilities of between 0.60 and 0.82 for the four
controversial product groups, which are considered sufficient (Nunnally, 1978).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Gender/sex related products				
Female underwear	0.804			
Male underwear	0.797			
Condoms	0.746			
Female contraceptives	0.699			
Female hygiene products	0.632			
Social/political groups				
Racially extreme groups		0.779		
Religious denominations		0.775		
Guns and armaments		0.726		
Funeral services		0.602		
Political parties		0.493		
Addictive products				
Cigarettes			0.835	
Alcohol			0.791	
Gambling			0.699	
Health and care products				
Weight-loss programs				0.768
Charities				0.593
Sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention)				0.493
Eigenvalue	4.61	2.21	1.34	1.23
Cronbach alpha	0.82	0.76	0.77	0.60
Percent of variance	28.7	13.8	8.4	7.7

Table II.
Factor analysis of
offensive
products/services

Results

The data were subjected to a multivariate analysis of variance test (MANOVA) to examine the overall religion effect on all four controversial product groups (dependent variables). First, the significant Box's test (Box's M = 163.382, $p < 0.001$) of the multivariate test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices indicated that the variances among the dependent variables are not the same for all four religions. Second, the overall MANOVA test yielded a statistically significant finding (Wilks' lambda F-value = 12.21, $p < 0.001$). Third, the results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in gender/sex related products (F = 17.030, $p < 0.001$); social/political groups (F = 15.673, $p < 0.001$); health and care products (F = 13.989, $p < 0.001$); and addictive products (F = 26.143, $p < 0.001$) between the followers of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and non-religious believers. Consequently, these findings lead us to accept that the population means on the dependent variables are different for the four religions. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the four controversial product groups and the four religious denominations.

Religious beliefs and advertising of offensive products

The results of mean scores and Bonferroni tests are provided in Table III. Among the four controversial product groups, all four religions found advertising for social/political groups as offensive, and Buddhists and Islamic followers also found addictive products as offensive. Muslims perceived advertisements for social/political groups the most offensive (3.73) followed by addictive products (3.48). Gender/sex related and health and care product advertisements were, in general, not perceived to be offensive, while social/political groups were offensive to all religious groups.

A statistical comparison was made between the four sample religions using a Bonferroni *post hoc t*-test that observes and adjusts for multiple comparisons. In Table III the total mean scores and standard deviations for each of the religions are presented with subscript letters identifying each religion and the religion with which it has a statistically similar response at the 0.05 level. Basically, the Islamic followers found the advertising of gender/sex related products, societal related products, and health and care products most offensive relative to the other three religions. In contrast,

Type of religions	Gender/sex related products	Social/political groups	Health and care products	Addictive products
Buddhism (n = 295)	2.22[a] (0.94)	3.22[a] (0.89)	2.11[a] (0.80)	3.19[a](1.16)
Islam (n = 365)	2.58[b] (1.10)	3.73[b] (1.23)	2.42[b] (0.98)	3.48[a,b] (1.38)
Christianity (n = 376)	2.17[a,c] (0.99)	3.34[a,c] (1.01)	2.01[a,c](0.86)	2.82[c] (1.23)
Non-religious believers (n = 292)	2.06[a,c,d] (1.00)	3.35[a,c,d] (0.98)	2.20[a,c,d] (0.90)	2.72[c,d] (1.25)

Notes: 1 = not at all offensive; 5 = extremely offensive; standard deviation is in parenthesis; superscript letters [a,b,c,d] indicate between religion differences as per Bonferroni *post hoc* test. Each religion has a superscript letter and extra letters indicate religions that have a statistically similar response. For example, with respect to gender/sex related products, there is significant (,$p = 0.05$) difference between the means of Islam and Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, and Islam and non-religious believers (different superscripted letter [a,b,c]), but no significant difference between Buddhism and Christianity or non-religious believers as there is a common superscripted letter[a]

Table III.
Differences in offensiveness based on religious belief

there were similarities in perceived offence among Buddhism, Christianity and
non-religious believers for these three controversial product groups. For addictive
products, there were similarities in perception of offence between Islam and Buddhism,
and between Christianity and non-religious believers, but the two groups showed
different degrees of offensiveness towards the advertising of addictive products, with
Islam and Buddhism being offended by these advertisements, and Christians and
non-religious believers not offended.

Intensity of religious belief and advertising of offensive products
The respondents were then divided into two groups, namely low (below the average
mean of 2.54) and high (above the average mean of 2.54). Non-religious believers were
omitted from this analysis for obvious reason. Overall, our study found the religiously
devout respondents were more likely to find advertising of gender/sex related products
($p < 0.01$), health and care products ($p < 0.05$), and addictive products ($p < 0.01$)
offensive than the less devout followers. There was no statistical difference in
advertising offensiveness between the devout and less devout religious followers for
social/political groups (Table IV).

Among the three religions, it seems the devout followers of Islam found advertising
of gender/sex related products, social/political groups, health and care products, and
addictive products very offensive compared to their more liberal followers. The devout
followers of Buddhism claimed the advertising of gender/sex related products, health
and care products, and addictive products offensive, while only two controversial
product groups, gender/sex related products and addictive products were found
offensive if advertised, by the devout Christians.

Managerial implications
Before we proceed further on the managerial implications, a caveat is appropriate at
this juncture. This study is based on a student sample and their views might not reflect
reality nor can be generalized to the wider population. The discussions and managerial

	Gender/sex related products	Social/political groups	Health and care products	Addictive products
Low intensity of belief (n = 601)				
Buddhism (*n* = 110)	1.95 (0.86)	3.25 (0.83)	2.04 (0.75)	2.89 (1.17)
Islam (*n* = 51)	1.78 (0.88)	3.68 (1.19)	2.11 (1.05)	2.83 (1.49)
Christianity (*n* = 167)	2.08 (0.91)	3.44 (0.93)	2.07 (0.85)	2.79 (1.20)
High intensity of belief (n = 727)				
Buddhism (*n* = 185)	2.38 (0.94)	3.20 (0.92)	2.15 (0.82)	3.37 (1.12)
Islam (*n* = 314)	2.71 (1.08)	3.74 (1.24)	2.47 (0.97)	3.59 (1.33)
Christianity (*n* = 209)	2.24 (1.04)	3.26 (1.07)	1.97 (0.87)	2.85 (1.26)
Non-religious believers (*n* = 292)	2.06 (1.00)	3.35 (0.98)	2.20 (0.90)	2.72 (1.25)
F-value * = 0.05; ** = 0.01	60.498**	0.492	3.920*	56.670**

Table IV.
Differences in
offensiveness based on
intensity of
religious belief

Notes: 1 = not at all offensive; 5 = extremely offensive; standard deviation is in parenthesis; low/high
indicates the degree of religious belief; to obtain this split, we recode scores below the mean (2.54) = low,
and above the mean = high. Non-believers were not split for obvious reasons

implications provided in this paper are based on the survey of 1,393 young adults, whose attitudes towards the environment they lived in might be different to that of a middle aged family man/woman. Furthermore, it is not our intention to be more critical of one particular religion over the others. Our objectives are to report and explain the findings in accordance with the four religious precepts.

There are three major issues which can be derived from this research. First, religion does have an effect on the four controversial product groups. This is a major finding as until now, such a relationship remains largely unstudied by empirical research. The closest was to examine the impact of Islam on advertising content and regulation (Luqmani *et al.*, 1987), and message contentiousness (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999). Furthermore, although the non-religious believers group (mainly Taoism and Confucianism) was not exactly a "religion" as it lacks a common liturgy or organized church (Dillon, 1998), our study shows this group does have values and morality similar to any of the three established religions. Hence, whatever the case, there can be no denying the fact that it has permeated every aspect of its believers' lives (Hollensen, 1998; Yan, 1994). And for the purpose of this study, it is justified in being placed on the same level as other more official religions.

Second, there is a statistical distinction between Islam and the other three religions in relation to advertising of the four product groups. One possible explanation for this is that, although Islam is a great religion, it has not evolved with modernity. Islamic followers still follow their traditional beliefs and values, even though the other religions have reassigned these priorities in line with the modern ways of living, entertainment and lifestyles. This observation is re-enforced by a new report commissioned by the United Nations on Arab societies. The survey, *Arab Human Development Report 2002* found that:

> ... the Arab societies are being crippled by the lack of political freedom, the repression of women and an isolation from the world of ideas that stifles creativity (*New York Times*, 2002).

According to Abou-Saif (cited in *New York Times*, 2002), creativity among Arabs is often hewed to religious themes, and Western books are not being translated because of Islamic pressures. (Note that our sample on Islam is derived from Malaysia and Turkey, countries noted for their liberal views on Islamic principles.) For the later three religions, although there was no statistical difference among them, our findings show Buddhism was more offended by gender/sex related products and addictive products advertisements relative to Christianity and non-religious believers. Likewise, non-religious believers were more offended by social/political groups and health and care products advertisements compared to Buddhism and Christianity. These findings reveal that there is no "one size fits all" promotion strategy.

Third, the more religious one is the more likely one will be offended by the advertising of controversial products (see Table IV). As reported in the findings, the ardent believers of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity found advertising of gender/sex related products and addictive products particularly offensive compared to the more lenient believers. Therefore, the perceived offence could be traced to the ardent religious believers being generally more conservative, having greater concern for moral standards and possessing more traditional attitudes (Barton and Vaughan, 1976; Wiebe and Fleck, 1980; Wilkes *et al.*, 1986) relative to their less religious counterparts.

Below are presented some managerial implications according to the four controversial product groups. Bearing in mind that all religions teach the same timeless and universal spiritual rules (Bryson, 2000), the discussion will focus on the laws and regulations that some societies have imposed to lessen the impact of the advertising of these products on religious sensitivities.

Social/political groups

These refer to advertisements relating to racially extreme groups, religious denominations, guns and armaments, funeral services, and political parties. On the whole, the four religions scored relatively high on the offensiveness scale for these products relative to the other three controversial products groups. The reasons for the offence could be linked to racist images, anti-social behavior and to some extent, reacting to the promotion of other religious denominations and funeral services, which can be culturally offensive. Islam, in particular, perceived this type of advertising as offensive.

A number of practical implications are in store for advertisers and advertising agency managers. Take, for example, racist images and anti-social behavior which could be the by-products of advertising guns and armaments. Advertising this "product" will be in opposition to most religious teachings of avoiding hate and anger. This will become distasteful and possibly ignored. When confronted with this option, an agency manager could either reject the account or turn the negative into positive re-enforcement, such as, contrasting religious teachings with the by-products of anti-social behavior. Obviously the degree of creative variations will depend on where the advertisement will be shown.

It was found that there was a statistically significant difference in advertising offensiveness for social/political groups between Islam and Buddhism, Christianity or non-religious believers, but no significant difference between the latter three religions. In other words, the creative strategy used in an Islamic society cannot be reused in say a Buddhist society, but the opposite can be said for creative strategy used in a Buddhist society and later reused in a Christian or non-religious believers' society.

Advertising of funeral services, for example, is seen as distasteful in Asia. This can amount to great disrespect to the elders and is in opposition to any known religious teachings (Waller and Fam, 2000). However, in some western societies, the buying of a funeral plan for a living parent is considered a good deed from a son to his parents. So, when there is a need for such an advertisement, the choice of words and media will be of outmost importance. For instance, in New Zealand, advertising of funeral services is primarily via radio, letterbox drops and in local community newspapers. All these are mass media, and the broadcasting of these funeral service advertisements is usually at prime time, between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. Such choice of media and time will not go down well in, say, China (majority of them Taoism and Confucian followers) and Taiwan (Buddhism followers) where death is a bad omen. These followers will also dislike being bombarded with a funeral service advertisement early in the morning, as they believe this would bring misfortune for the remainder of the day. In societies like Taiwan and Malaysia (mainly among the Chinese), where the deceased is often bestowed with elaborate funeral rites, the use of mass media to advertise such a service will not bode well, as potential buyers will want to keep such a purchase discreet.

Addictive products

These include cigarettes, alcohol and gambling. This products group scored the second highest on the offensiveness scale (Table III). However, the results can be divided into two groups, namely Buddhism and Islam versus Christianity and non-religious believers. The non-statistical difference between Buddhism and Islam with regards to the level of offensiveness could be linked to their respective principles. Specifically Islam prohibits gambling and consumption of alcohol. Smoking is also prohibited amongst the stricter Muslims. One of Buddhism's precepts is "one should refrain from using drugs and alcohol" as this would lead to delusion and encourage violence. Non-violence and peacefulness are extolled by the Buddhist religion. Nevertheless, unlike Islam, alcohol is allowed if taken in moderation by followers of Buddhism, Christianity and non-religious believers. Likewise, gambling is not totally prohibited, although frowned upon in societies where Christians, Buddhism and non-religious believers are the majority and these include New Zealand, Taiwan, China and Britain.

The promotion implications include avoiding the mass display of such products in public. In societies where Islam is the main faith, advertising of alcoholic products is totally banned or heavily restricted. However, one can circumvent the rule by advertising in specialist media, such as direct mails and/or Internet, to reach the small pocket of visitors and expatriate populations. This is evident in Turkey, where the majority of the population are Muslims and yet it hosts a large number of Western expatriates and visitors. In Muslim-dominated Malaysia, advertising of alcoholic products is permitted only in English, Chinese and Indian language newspapers and also in cinemas. However, during the "Spring Festival" – a celebration marking the beginning of new life in the Chinese calendar, where drinking, gambling and smoking become part of the celebrations, most authorities tend to relax the promotion rules. To capitalise on this occasion, advertisers of alcoholic products in Malaysia tend to favour the revenue-generating, sales-promotion techniques, like free samples, bonus packs and in-store promotions over consumer franchise building techniques like advertising in cinemas and Chinese language print media. In China and Taiwan, there was little restriction on cigarette companies like Marlboro and Dunhill using their corporate name to wish the audience a happy spring festival.

Gender/sex related products

Thse include female and male underwear, condoms, female contraceptives and female hygiene products. Taylor and Raymond (2000) stated that religion and social values concerning modesty and the offensive nature of the products make it difficult to promote socially sensitive products. This is reinforced by these results. Muslims in general and the more devout Muslims in particular, found the advertising of gender/sex-related products more offensive than Buddhists or Christians (see Tables III and IV). One could trace this offence to the tenets of Islam. For instance, both Muslim men and women must cover their torso and upper legs at all times and women must dress conservatively in public. Sex before marriage is strictly prohibited and all Muslims are obliged to conform to sexual codes (Deng *et al.*, 1994). Therefore, the advertising of male and female underwear would mean some parts of the body were exposed to the public. These advertisements could also conjure up images linking to nudity, subjects too personal and/or sexist images which are against the Islamic teachings and for that matter the spiritual teachings of other religions. For instance, it

will be too personal to talk about and discuss in public which brand and design of underwear one wears, and also which brand and make of female hygiene products one uses. In the Islamic faith, the rule of "khalwat" (close proximity) dictates that unmarried lovers are not allowed any physical contact especially after sunset (Tentera Di-Raja Mosque, 2000). With this rule in mind, surely the advertising of condoms and female contraceptives will be seen as propagating sex before marriage, a strategy best avoided in an Islamic society.

Of course, this perceived offensiveness was not limited to the Islamic faith. The precepts of the other three religions clearly prohibit the public display of female and male bodies, as this could attract undesirable needs, and the forbidding of sex before marriage. Even in atheist China, where the majority were non-religious believers, the public displays of kissing and hugging are frowned upon, let alone sex before marriage. The difference here is to what degree are these precepts enforced. From our findings, Muslims were the least likely believers to compromise their spiritual beliefs.

The implications for international advertisers and advertising agency managers are that they need to know their target market very well. Going back to the Muslim religion, one of the Five Pillars of Islam is to remain "pure" during the holy month of Ramadan. Hence, during this ninth month of the Muslim calendar, the best strategy is to avoid antagonizing the Muslim viewers by not showing any advertisements that involved gender/sex related products. If that is not possible, perhaps the use of more discreet media like the Internet, direct mails, and/or specialist magazines could alleviate the problem. For instance, in Malaysia, the advertising of male/female underwear, condoms and female contraceptives is prohibited in mass media. However, this prohibition does not apply to specialist magazines or newspapers, where the target readers were non-Muslims. Even a change of media schedule could avoid offending certain religious groups. According to Waller and Fam (2000), the advertising of female hygiene products on broadcast media in Malaysia is allowed only after 10 in the evening. There are no such restriction in Christian New Zealand and Britain. Furthermore, one should also refrain from offending the Buddhists and Christians, as they have their holy days too. To the non-religious believers, in particular those in China, both the Taoist and Confucian followers observed the "Spring Festival". This festival marks the beginning of new life and the first three of 15 days are considered an auspicious and joyful day. Hence, advertisers and agency managers should avoid advertising of female hygiene products or male/female underwear during this period, as these products will be seen as "unclean" and/or distasteful.

Health and care products
These consist of weight-loss programs, charities and sexual diseases drugs. This products group has the lowest score in terms of advertising offensiveness. The low score could be attributed to people getting used to such advertisements. For instance, Wilson and West (1995) suggested how the AIDS issue had changed what was previously thought of as "unmentionable". Similarly, the giving of alms to the poor is the religious duty of every Muslim, Christian or Buddhist. Together with weight-loss programs, what one does or suffers is a subject too personal to discuss in public. Advertising of these products will be seen as challenging the obvious. Islamic believers, in particular, think that a true Muslim believes in the *shari'ah*, a code that governs the duties, morals and behavior of all Muslims. Hence, one deserves to be

punished (infected with sexual disease) if a believer adopts a sexual lifestyle contrary to the *shari'ah*. Similarly, it is the religious duty of every Muslim to give alms to the poor and needy. To a religious Muslim such a plea, via an advertisement, is tantamount to him/her being an uncaring and irresponsible Muslim, a charge offensive to most Muslims.

Summary
Taboos and religious containment are breaking down slowly as people are beginning to accept the reality of modern society. However, as the findings show, not all religions accept the change with the same speed. A major implication for the advertisers and agency managers is the choice of media. In countries like New Zealand and Britain where advertising of weight-loss programs, charities and drugs for sexual diseases are for public consumption, hence these advertisements not only can be found in broadcast and print media, they are often repeated during primetime or prominently displayed. In contrast, advertising of these products is restricted to personalized media like direct mails and specialist magazines in Malaysia and Turkey, where Islam is the predominant religion and the subject is contentious.

Conclusion
The main objective of this research was to examine whether religion and intensity of religious belief has an effect on the attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products. From the responses of 1,393 people across six countries, four religious groups (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and non-religious believers) and four controversial product groups (gender/sex related products, social/political groups, health and care products, and addictive products) were created. Among the results it was found that there is a significant difference between the four controversial product groups and the four religious denominations. Evidently, the Islamic followers found the advertising of gender/sex related products, social/political groups, and health and care products most offensive relative to the other three religions. In addition, the religiously devout respondents were more likely to find advertising of gender/sex related products, health and care products, and addictive products more offensive than the less devout followers.

Religion is an element of culture that pervades every aspect of a society. Therefore, its effect on behavior cannot be underestimated by marketers. Cultural dimensions are very dynamic in a society, but religious tenets form a stable and static pillar in the society. Once the fundamentals of a religion have been grasped, the global marketer can be assured they will not be changing all too frequently. Religion is not a fad that can be dismissed by the marketer as a short-term change, but rather it is a long-term phenomenon, and should be an area of further research for marketers. For global marketers it is advisable to devote considerable time and resources on understanding religious beliefs upon entering a new market, particularly where Islam is the faith of the majority. Understanding the impact of religion on the value systems of a society and the effect of value systems on marketing must not be underestimated.

The first limitation of this study is that the type of religion was examined on a broad basis. That is, it was not possible to identify whether the Sunni Muslims or the Shiite Muslims were more offended by the advertising of the four controversial products groups. Similarly, we were not able to pinpoint whether Catholic or Protestant Christians were more offended by the advertisements. A future study may try to identify specific

groups within the broad religious denominations. The second limitation of our study is the use of student samples. Although students are often being used as a proxy to what the "real" consumers think, for example in experiments or cross-cultural studies, they may be less fitting when the study involves religious beliefs. Being young there may be some question as to the strength of their religious belief, and how it influences their perceptions. The third limitation is that this study was conducted before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and there may be a feeling that some attitudes relating to certain products and religion present pre-September 11 may not hold had the study been conducted post September 11. This may be an area of future research.

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