

Consumer Perception about Religion in Advertising

Dr. Soma Nath¹ and Vaidehi Bhagat²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce (Evening), St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India

²Student, Department of Commerce (Evening), St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India

²Corresponding Author: vaidehi3000bhagat@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at throwing some light on consumer behaviour and their perception of the use of religion in marketing and advertisement of products. The author has tried to assess the same using real-time raw data collected from primary sources. The paper revolves around four major issues; customer's current attitude towards religious advertisements, consumer expectation in the context of religiosity in advertisements and its relationship with age, consumer's reaction to the use of religiosity in promoting worship material vs other social causes and if considering the use of religiosity as moral by the customers, affects their purchasing behaviour. Various statistical as well as descriptive analysis tools have been used to critically back as well as support the findings. It was found that consumers were against the idea of the use of religion in advertisements, commercially.

Keywords: advertisements, consumer buying behaviour, religion, religiosity

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a secular nation. It cradles countless different religions in its lap. Religion and culture can be found deep-rooted in the heart of India. Indians are said to be overtly possessive and defensive when it comes to their religion. And so, as and when an opportunity suits them, they are ready with their shields raging war against people who intentionally or even unintentionally dare to speak against their culture and religion.

Call it an increase in the number of leftists in the country or intensification of the quest between the objective and the absolute, which is the root cause of intolerance and violence, religion has become an even hotter topic of debate over the past decade. While some people genuinely aim at taking a stand against the wrong, others are said to be a bunch of pretentious custodians of 'Sanatan Dharma' only coming to the surface to grab eyeballs.

Seeing the enormous potential of popularity as well as commerciality due to its controversial and emotionally triggering nature, companies have seldom shied away from blatantly using Religion as a tool to sell their ideas and products. From time immemorial, organisations have been seen going to lengths to make sure their product catches the attention of the maximum target audience and using culture and religion is like hitting them below the belt to gain some extra points. Much to Indians' dismay, it is considered the easy way out.



Figure 1.1: Parle, Manyavar Mohey and Dabur Fem Advertisements featuring religion in different forms

¹ Figure 1.1 Sources: lh3.googleusercontent.com, i.ytimg.com, i0.wp.com (from left to right)

II. NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Advertisements can adversely affect consumer behaviour. Companies, by choosing to use religion and religiosity in the process of ad making often put themselves in a difficult spot. A lot of companies suffer due to the backlash they receive on the inclusion of religion and culture in the adverts posted or distributed by them. History has been the witness of many such cases where the companies lost out on a percentage of sales and customer base drastically. The major reason why this happens is that most companies are still not unaware of what customers actually want. For companies to have an idea about consumers' opinions on advertisements that display religion or religiosity in any colour whatsoever, there's a need for proper research in this area. When going through the various literature available it was found that sparse research has been done in this area. Companies still do not know how will the customers react if religion will be used in any other form of advertising. The paper aims to cater to this apparent lack of research in this area to help companies to adopt marketing and advertising practices in harmony with the customer's preferences to avoid unwanted clashes and loss-making strategies on companies' part as well as make sure that consumer sentiments are not hurt. The aim is also to make sure anyone who takes up this topic in future can use this research paper for further studies.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Nisha Qureshi (April 2013) in her blog “**Religion in Advertising: A double-edged sword or smart move?**” says that when it comes to religion, people lack logic and a sense of humour. She resented the idea of resorting to Gods and divinities to sell a product. She also suggested that these practices should be avoided.

2. Advertising Standard Authority (March 2015), in their report **Advertising and Religion: Avoiding Offence**, suggested that although there is absolutely nothing in the books of codes and ethics that prevents marketers and advertisement creators to avoid using religion for the promotion and popularity of their product, they must make sure they do not hurt the religious sentiments of consumers and exercise caution while making an advertisement that challenges people's beliefs and faith.

3. Soumitra Karnik in her blog (March 2021) said that religion sells the most. It is a very clever marketing strategy. While we can keep debating that it is a personal choice, especially in a country like India where faith rules over everything, there are some brands and companies that will quickly cash in on it. She did not however despise the idea of using religion. She had the opinion that different sets of customers take ads differently. Completely giving up the use of advertisements might kill creativity.

4. Fam et al.'s (2004) One of the most widely read research papers that explored the relationship between religion and advertising, study found a significant difference in attitudes towards advertisements based on belief intensity, especially when used for controversial products. In her paper, she did a hypothesis test that concluded that when religion is used consumers are afraid to buy the product and they even have second thoughts about going ahead and buying anything with the firm or from that particular brand.

5. In another report by **Michael McCarthy** (April 2013) in The New York Times, it was concluded that using religion in advertising is a "high risk and high reward strategy". It can generate some great feats if done right.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To study customers' current attitudes towards religious advertisements.
- To investigate consumer expectation in the context of religiosity in advertisements and to study its relationship with age
- To study consumers' reaction to the use of religiosity in promoting worship material vs other social causes.
- To determine if considering the use of religiosity as moral by the customers affects their purchasing behaviour

V. ANALYSIS

Descriptive Analysis

Gender Distribution of Respondents:

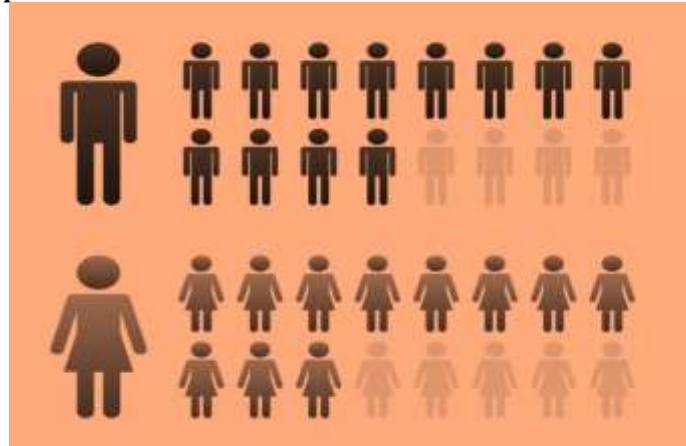


Figure 1: Out of 220 respondents, 58% were male and 42% were females

The Age Group of Respondents:

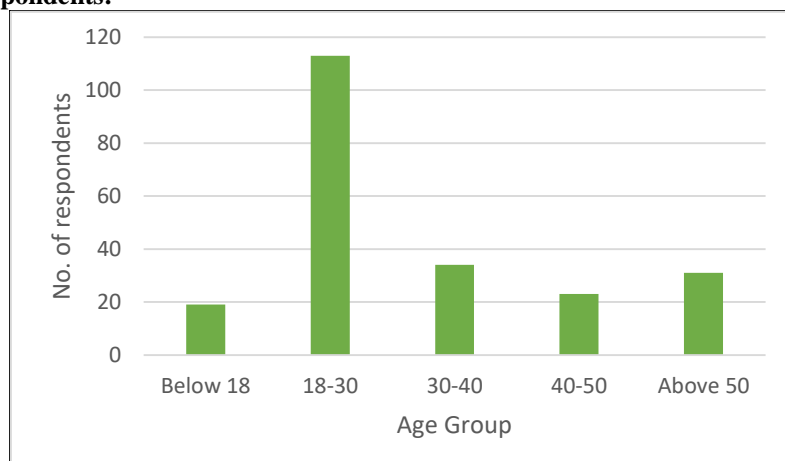


Figure 2: 8% of them belong to the age group below 18. The majority of them, i.e. **51.36% belonged to the age group 18-30 years of age.** 15%, 5% and 14% for 30-40, 40-50 and above 50 respectively.

Occupation of Respondents:

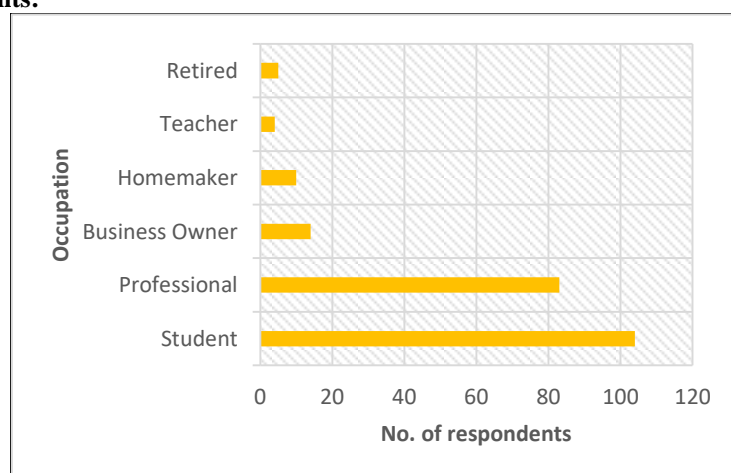


Figure 3: The Majority of respondents were students (47%) and professionals (38%), followed by business owners (6%), homemakers (4.5%), retired and teachers.

Interpretation of Research Questions in Line with Objectives

Objective 1: To study the current attitude towards the use of religion in advertisements

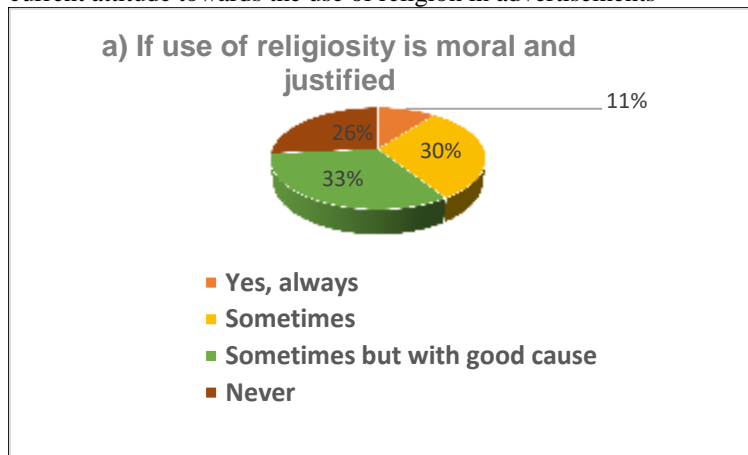


Chart 1: Research question 1 [If respondents find the use of religiosity is moral and justified in advertisements]

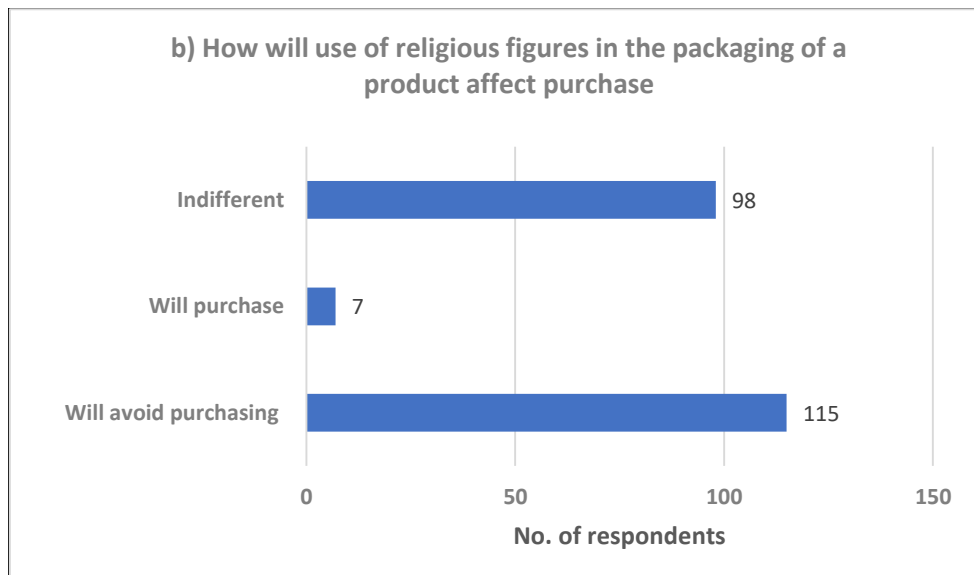


Chart 2: Research question 2 [How will the use of religious figures in the packaging of a product affect purchase]

Chart 1 shows that the majority of respondents (33%) find the use of religion justified and moral only when it is used occasionally and for some good cause. We saw that 26% of respondents still would not want religion to be used in any form whatsoever.

In chart 2 around 52% of people claimed that they would avoid purchasing product that features religious figures or religiosity in general. It is also observed that around 44% of respondents were indifferent about their purchasing behaviour when it comes to the use of religion in advertising.

Objective 2: To investigate consumer expectation in the context of religiosity in advertisements and to study its relationship with age.

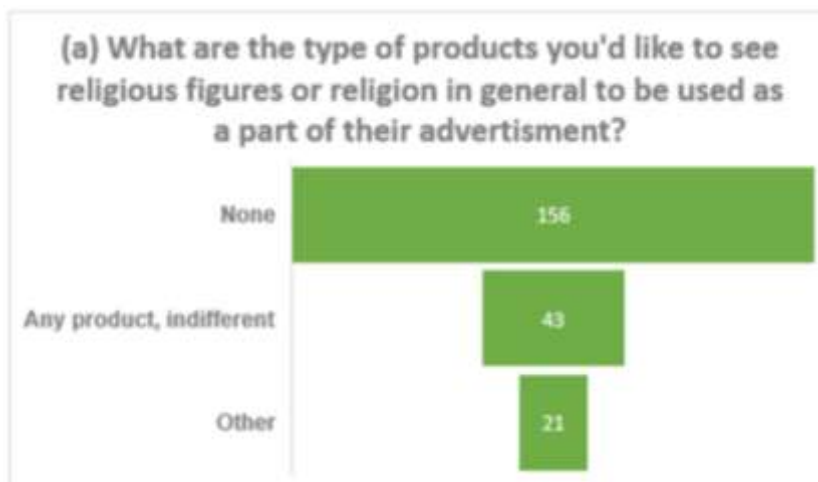


Chart 3: Question 3 [What are the types of products you'd like to see religious figures or religion to be used as a part of their advertisement]

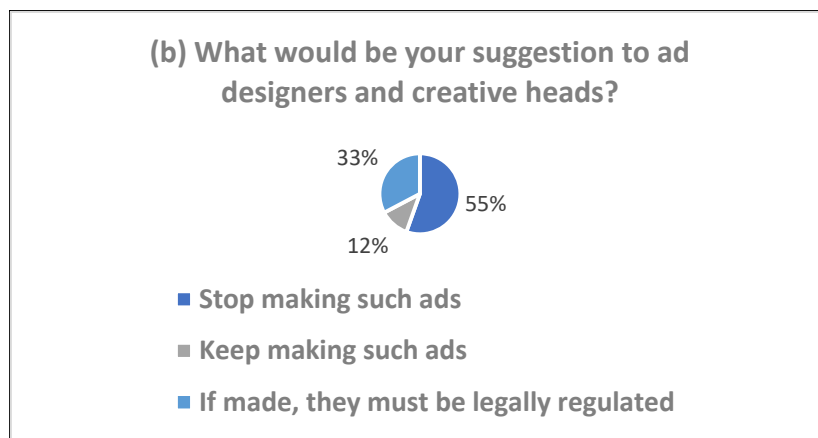


Chart 4: Question 4 [What would be your suggestion to ad designers and creative heads?]

From Chart 3, we find that 156 out of 220 respondents did not want use of religion to be used at all in any type of product. From the survey, we found that 21 respondents mentioned some products like worship material and certain eatable items wherein religious figures can be used for advertisement purposes. Chart 4 further solidifies the observation that maximum people (here, 55%) want the inclusion of religion in advertisements to be completely stopped.

Chi-Square Test to See if Age is a Factor Affecting the Expectations from Advertisers:

Null Hypothesis: Age does not affect consumer expectations from advertisers.

Alternative Hypothesis: Age affects consumer expectations from advertisers.

Contingency Tables

Contingency Tables					
Age group	Expectations from advertisers				Total
	1	2	3	4	
1	7	9	3	0	19
2	57	11	44	1	113
3	22	2	10	0	34
4	13	1	9	0	23
5	23	3	5	0	31
Total	122	26	71	1	220

χ^2 Tests			
	Value	df	p
χ^2	34.2	12	< .001
N	220		

The Chi-square test is a test measuring the level of association between two components. Rather, the chi-square test is best suited for comparing acquired results with theoretically predicted results based on hypothesis. Here, if the p-value is less than 0.05 then we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that since there is less than a 5% of possibility that age does not affect consumer expectations. We can hereby claim that age works as an important factor in determining the type of expectations consumers have with regard to the use of religion in advertisements.

Objective 3: To study consumers' reactions to the use of religiosity in promoting worship material vs for other social causes.

Part-1: Consumer's perception regarding the use of religion in selling worshipping material

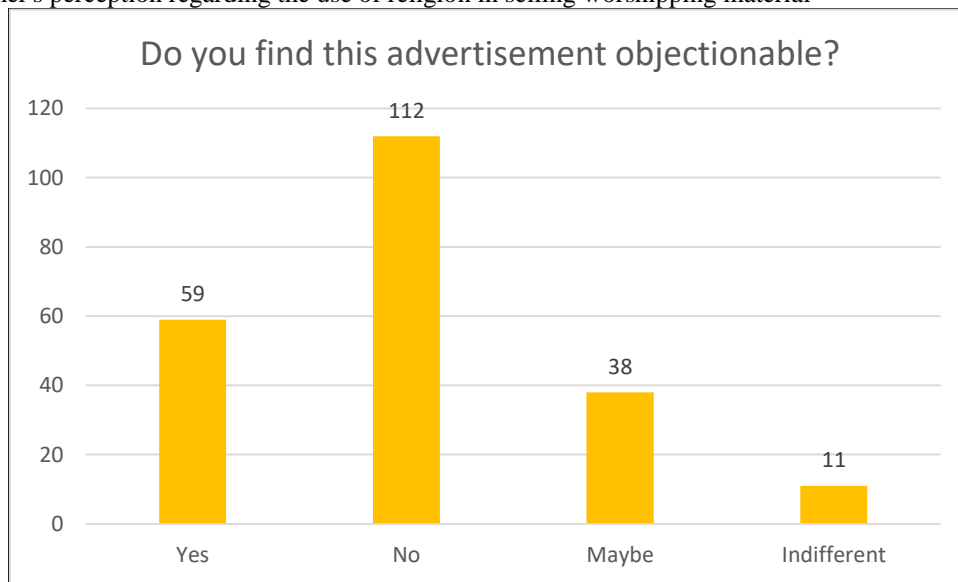


Chart 5: Question 5 [Consumer's perception regarding the use of religion in selling worshipping material I]

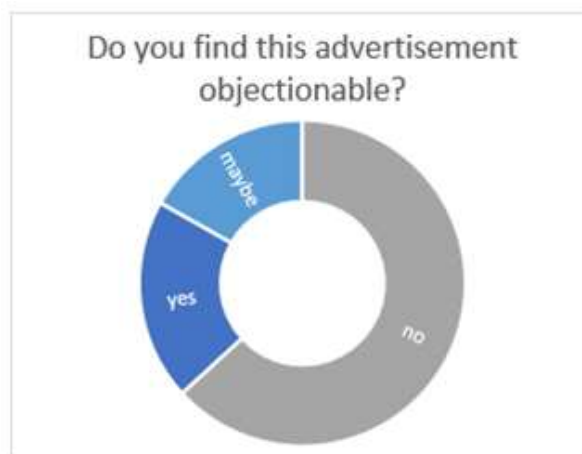


Chart 6: Question 6 [Consumer's perception regarding the use of religion in selling worshipping material II]

Charts 5 and 6 showed advertisements featuring Hindu deities used for selling incense sticks and other worship material. The majority of them did not find the advertisement objectionable. They had a positive response regarding the same. In Q5, approximately 51% of people did not find the advertisement objectionable. In Q.6 around 63% of respondents had no issue with the representation of the religious figure in the advertisement.

Part 2: Consumer's reaction to the use of religion for spreading awareness regarding social issues like communal harmony and domestic violence.

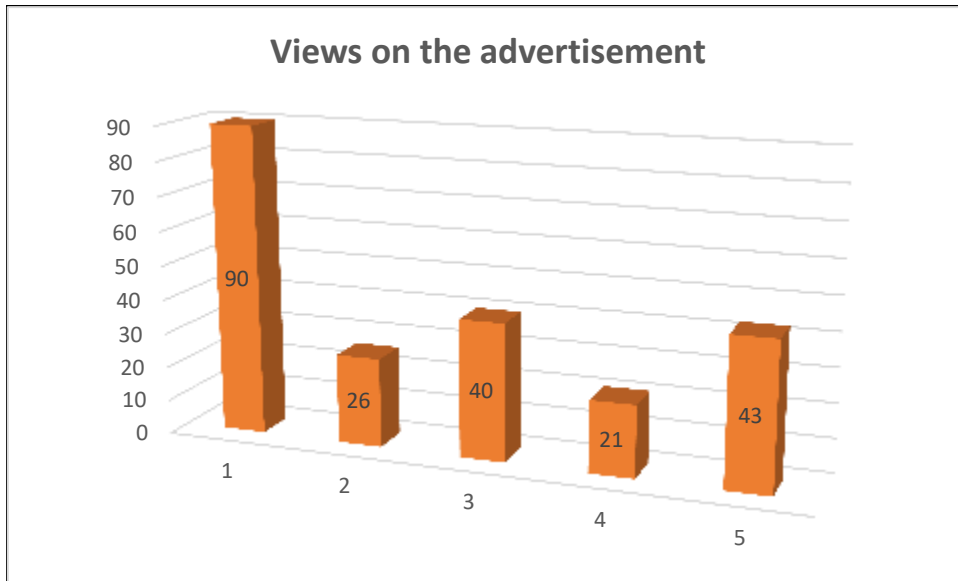


Chart 7: Question 7 [use of religion for ads showing communal harmony]

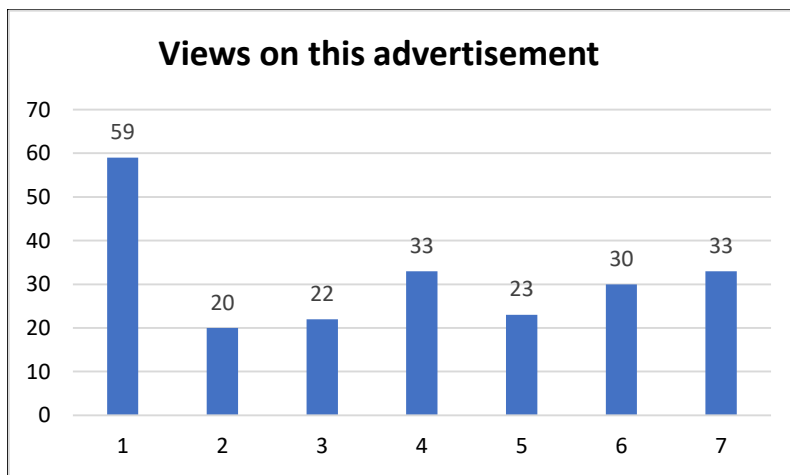


Chart 8: Question 8 [use of religion for spreading awareness regarding domestic violence]

	Particulars	Mean	St. Deviation
Q.7	1 positive perception - 5 very distasteful	2.55	1.562181
Q.8	1 highly objectionable - 7 good representation	3.740909	2.198206

Q.7 showed people of different communities (mostly Hindu-Muslim) bonding together and getting well. The Majority of respondents took these advertisements positively. The mean of the responses also came to 2.5 which means people had a good and positive perception of such ads. Less standard deviation also adds to the conclusion that people were more or less pleased with the advertisements.

Q.8 featured female Hindu deities with bruises to spread awareness regarding domestic violence. This advertisement had median/mixed response respondents. While mean was found to be 3.7 which concludes mixed responses from the consumers. Customers had both positive and negative responses to the advertisement but were observed to be a tad bit inclined towards negative perception.

Objective 4: To determine if considering the use of religiosity as moral by the customers, affects their purchasing behaviour.

Null Hypothesis: Consumer's approval of such ads is independent of his/her buying behaviour.

Alternative Hypothesis: If consumers approve of the use of religion in ads, they will not buy the products featuring the same.

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.054236394
R Square	0.002941586
Adjusted R Square	-0.001632076
Standard Error	0.983962383
Observations	220
P-value	0.423442977
Correlation Coefficient	0.054236394

Conditions for Accepting or Rejecting Hypothesis

If the p-value obtained is less than or equal to the significance value (here, 5%) then we reject the null hypothesis and if the p-value is more than the significance value then the null hypothesis is accepted and the alternative hypothesis is rejected.

In this case, since the p-value is greater than 5%, we will accept the null hypothesis. As a result, we will conclude that consumers' approval of such ads is independent of his/her buying behaviour.

These two variables can be concluded as positively correlated if the value of the correlation coefficient is <1 . Here again, the correlation coefficient is 0.05423 which is a very small value. It can be thus interpreted that both these factors have a very low correlation. Hence, even if the consumers approve of the use of religion in advertisements, it does not confirm that they will buy the product.

VI. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATION

- 1) It is observed that 32.5% of the sample population were of the opinion that religion and religiosity are very frequently featured and used in ads.
- 2) Around 63.67% of the sample population asserted that they wanted the use of religion in ad making and the creative ad industry to stop completely to avoid conflict.
- 3) Around 29.67% of the sample population were of the opinion that religion can be used occasionally for good cause.
- 4) It was found that only 3% of respondents will go ahead and buy products featuring religious figures if given an option.
- 5) It was also found that respondents suggested that the major issue is with the disposal of such packaging as they contained pictures of religious figures. They asserted that they have to think twice before throwing the packaging away. This also makes them avoid purchasing products that have such packaging, altogether.
- 6) It is further observed that considering the use of religion in advertisements moral and justified does not affect the purchasing behaviour of the customers. (The p-value was found more than 5% and the correlation coefficient was also 0.05.
- 7) It was found that in case of such outrageous activity people opt for boycotting the product until an apology is issued. People often use social media to express their opinion or to give a statement regarding the same.

VII. CONCLUSION

With increasing competition, it is obvious that companies and other big players in the market will try to fight tooth and nail to grab as much consumer attention as possible. This often leads them towards different creative paths to get successful.

While creativity is appreciable, this particular research paper has proved that advertisements featuring religion and religiosity do not go well with consumers. They often find themselves expressing their displeasure and even rage on these advertisements as well as questioning the basic need of using religion. If not this, then they become indifferent to the ongoing because they want to avoid becoming a part of the conflict which ultimately defies the main aim of creating advertisements in the first place.

The majority of respondents believed to stop using religion as a pawn to generate popularity, be it from a positive or negative perspective. People had their concerns over the crossing of that thin line of decency and morality by the advertisement creators and media heads. Hence, the study is concluded with the idea that Religion should be kept out of advertisements as a whole. This paper raised a lot of concerns regarding the intention and true rationale behind using religion in advertising on the part of advertisement makers as well. This further proves why this study is important and how it can affect the entire consumer decision making process.

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