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THREE ESSAYS ON THE EFFECTS OF DIVINE REFERENCES IN CONSUMPTION CONTEXTS

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FACULTÉ DES HAUTES ÉTUDES COMMERCIALES

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REFERENCES IN CONSUMPTION CONTEXTS**

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par

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Sans se prononcer sur les opinions de l'autrice, la Faculté des Hautes Etudes Commerciales de l'Université de Lausanne autorise l'impression de la thèse de Madame Valentina CLERGUE, titulaire d'un Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Social Sciences de Jacobs University Bremen, et d'un Master of Science in Marketing de l'Université de Stockholm – School of Business, en vue de l'obtention du grade de docteure ès Sciences économiques, mention management.

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Summary Note

The present dissertation investigates the effect of religious and spiritual references used in commercial contexts on personality traits and on consumption-related behaviors. This work is motivated by the question of whether religion and spirituality evoke the same values and principles when used in commercial domains and whether brands associated with transcendental concepts affect consumers in the same ways as religion and spirituality do.

1. Key concepts in the dissertation

More specifically, this dissertation aims at studying the reactions of consumers towards brands which associate themselves with one specific type of religious concepts – transcendental ones – and the effect of these concepts on consumer personality traits and behaviors. In addition, I am interested in how reminders of the religious origins of one of the most commercialized holidays – Christmas – affect holiday-related consumer behaviors during this specific time of the year. The three key concepts of this dissertation, which are also defined below, are *brands, transcendental religious concepts,* and *divine*.

Kotler (1991, p.442) defined a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Each of these elements makes up the brand identity and their totality is the brand. A brand is said to have positive customer-based brand equity if consumers react more favorably to any of the brand elements than they do to the same element attributed to an unnamed version of the product or service (Keller, 1993).

Extant research has shown that religious terms are not conceptually interchangeable and they activate different associations in people's minds (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). Overall, people easily distinguish between three groups of religious terms − religious

agents, institutional religious concepts, and transcendental or spiritual concepts (Ritter &
Preston, 2013). Religious agent concepts are likely to be associated with feelings of being
watched (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), while institutional ones are more likely to make
people more concerned for their religious practice and their in-group (Ritter & Preston, 2013).
Lastly, spiritual terms activate a mindset related to one's own relationship to the divine,
personal purity or spiritual well-being (Ritter & Preston, 2013). In this dissertation, my focus
is on this last group of concepts. Thus, when I talk about transcendental references, I refer to
religious concepts, symbols or images which evoke people's personal connection to the divine
− to what is beyond our universe and what is beyond material substance. The rationale behind
this decision is that transcendental concepts are broad enough to be recognized by religious
and spiritual people alike. In addition, because they are more abstract in nature, they should
activate more associations related to one's own perception of the sacred than to the sacred
according to a specific religious tradition (Ritter & Preston, 2013). Finally, according to
statistics (The Pew Research Center, 2015), there is a decline in religiosity among younger
adults and a decline in the power of institutionalized religion among religiously affiliated
individuals, which means that it is more relevant to study religious concepts connected to
one's own relationship with the sacred rather than to the sacred according to a specific
religious tradition.

One of the specific terms that people place under the transcendental religious concept
category is *divine* (Ritter & Preston, 2013). The Oxford English Dictionary Online (2016)
defines divine as "of or pertaining to God or a god; given by or proceeding from God". A
more detailed definition is provided by The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology
(Brower et al., 2009) where *divine* is defined by its attributes. Taken from works in theology,
philosophy and anthropology, there seem to be six attributes that are agreed upon to
characterize the concept. These are self-sufficiency, omniscience, eternity, omnipresence,

omnipotence, and moral perfection. In addition to these definitions, in current language, *divine* has been used to designate something of surpassing excellence, beauty, and perfection (The Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2016).

2. Summary of the essays

2.1. Essay 1 (collaboration with Prof. Sandor Czellar)

Essay 1 is a conceptual piece in collaboration with Prof. Czellar. The goal of this essay is to provide a better understanding of the effects of transcendental religious references used in brand communication on consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Religion plays an important role in understanding human nature as it affects numerous behaviors, including consumption behaviors (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Despite the increasing academic interest in the role religion plays in the field of marketing, many questions have remained unanswered. More specifically, we lack knowledge on the way consumers react to the presence of religious references in brand communication and on the effect of such references on consumer behavior. Therefore, scholars have called for more theory development and quantitative work to enhance our understanding of religion on consumer psychology and behavior (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

In this paper, we applied a well-established psychological framework in order to investigate the way in which one type of religious references used in brand names, and namely transcendental ones, affects consumer attitudes and behaviors. Considering that traditional religious institutions can no longer fully satisfy transcendental needs due to the loss of their authority and the change of traditional values, there is a potential market for new players (Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Swatos, 1983). In the past years, brands have been increasing in power in terms of financial value but also in terms of benefits they claim to provide for consumers (Holt, 2004; Interbrand, 2018), becoming potential players in the market for transcendence. Keeping in mind that people have such needs which they increasingly satisfy

with consumption (Atkin, 2004; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Einstein, 2008; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010), we wanted to know whether explicit transcendental religious concepts in brand names affect certain consumer behaviors and consumer personality characteristics and if this is the case, how they affect them.

Employing the association network memory model (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Keller, 1993), we hypothesized that the associations consumers have with the sacred would be transferred to brands having a transcendental concept in the name which in turn would affect behaviors such as brand attitude, brand forgiveness, product perceptions, consumption, self-esteem and prosocial behavior. From the existing research on religion and priming, we know that religion and spirituality affect forgiveness, temptation resistance and the feelings of self-worth (Barnes & Brown, 2010; Grouzet et al., 2005; Hayman et al., 2007; Hyodo & Bolton, 2015; Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016; Rounding, Lee, Jacobson, & Ji, 2012; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010; Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). Therefore, according to our model under certain conditions consumers may be more forgiving towards brands having a transcendental reference in the name, may evaluate such brands better but at the same time may be willing to consume less of their products. In addition, using brands with an explicit transcendental reference may result in a more prosocial behavior and higher self-esteem. Possible moderators of the above-mentioned relationships are consumer religiosity, spiritual transcendence, the expertise with the product category, the fit between the brand image and the transcendental concept, and the type of information processing.

2.2. Essay 2 (single author)

With this research project, I aim at contributing to branding and consumer behavior literature by showing that transcendental religious concepts in brand names activate

transcendental associations even in consumption contexts and further that these associations

have an effect on consumer attitudes towards the brand and the product. More specifically, I

focused on one term that falls in the transcendental religious concept category and that is

divine.

The four studies which I conducted provide initial evidence that transcendental

concepts in brand elements have the potential to affect certain consumer metrics. More

specifically, the first two studies illustrated that even in consumption contexts the *divine*

concept activated transcendental associations over and above equally positive non-religious

ones. Importantly, these transcendental associations were mostly positive and overlapped to

some extent with the six divine attributes which define the *divine* concept according to The

Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology (Brower et al., 2009). Study 3 showed that the

activation of transcendental associations led to more favorable consumer attitudes towards

brands having *divine* in the name. Contrary to what I expected, highly religious participants

showed more favorable attitudes towards brands having *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-

religious term) in the name than participants low in religiosity, possibly due to the fact that

people nowadays follow less the strict prescriptions of institutionalized religion (Pew

Research Center, 2015). At the same time, in line with what I hypothesized, participants high

in spirituality showed more favorable attitudes towards brand using *divine* (vs. equally

positive non-religious) term in the name. Finally, the results of Study 4 showed that attitudes

towards both brand and the product were more favorable for brands using *divine* (vs. an

equally positive non-religious term). In addition, I found that consumers were willing to pay

more for brands having *divine* in the name, which provides initial evidence that consumer

behaviors can also be affected by transcendental references in the brand elements. As in this

last study I did not find support for the hypotheses that trait religiosity and spirituality affect

attitudes towards brands having *divine* in the name, further research is needed in order to

expand knowledge on the factors affecting consumer attitudes towards such brands. Overall, I believe that the reported findings provide valuable input for marketing academics and practitioners.

2.3. Essay 3 (collaboration with Prof. Sandor Czellar and Prof. David E. Sprott)

Despite the considerable social and economic impact of Christmas, there is surprisingly little empirical research about the holiday season. The goal of this essay is to advance knowledge by investigating whether reminding consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas affects their holiday behaviors related to gift giving and gift receiving. Although one might expect that reminding consumers of the religious origins of Christmas engages consumers in activities such as family gatherings and charity donations rather than spending money for consumer goods, we hypothesized that under certain conditions they would engage in more buying. The underlying mechanism is the activation of a communal mindset. Communion is known to arise from strivings to integrate the self in a larger social unit through caring for others and involves qualities such as generosity, focusing on others and their well-being, cooperativeness, trustworthiness, nurturance, and interdependence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Because of this, we argued that the activation of associations linked to communion would engage consumers into more buying as they would seek to offer more and more expensive gifts to others as a sign of their care for them. At the same time, because religion promotes certain values and standards such as resisting material possessions and temptations by exercising self-control, individuals may need to abandon certain pleasures (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016; Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). Thus, we argued that consumers primed with the sacred character of Christmas would expect to receive fewer gifts from others. In addition, we investigated whether more (vs. less) religious segments are more (vs. less) sensitive to the religious character of Christmas.

The results of three studies partially support our first hypothesis in which we argued that reminding consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas would make them more giving in terms of number and value of the gifts they intend to offer. This is in line with extant research which shows a link between religion and generosity (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). We further argued that the reason behind this effect is the activation of a communal mindset, where communion is related to consideration of others rather than the self. As we failed to obtain support for the mediating role of communion, further research is needed in order to shed light on the mechanisms underlying the effect.

In addition, we did not find a difference in terms of gift receiving expectations between participants who were primed with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas. Only in one of the studies, we obtained significantly different results for two of the dependent variables related to gift receiving – number of gifts to receive and number of people to offer gifts. Further research is required to understand the effect of religious primes on gift receiving expectations, as well as on the mechanism underlying this effect, as in this project we did not find support for the hypothesis that reminders of the religious origins of Christmas led to heightened self-control.

Lastly, we failed to obtain consistent support for the hypothesis that trait religiosity moderates the effect of seeing Christmas as a religious (vs. non-religious) holiday on gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations. The only support we obtained was in Study 2, in which results showed that participants low in religiosity expected to receive more gifts after having seen a religious (vs. non-religious) Christmas-related image. For participants high in religiosity there was no difference between the two conditions.

Further research is needed to test the alternative explanations we provided in the discussion section of the paper. This would allow for a better understanding of the factors affecting Christmas gift-related intentions and behaviors.

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Essay 1

Branding the divine: Consumer response to transcendental references in brand names

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Abstract

The present research aims at investigating consumer reactions to brands that use religious references in their branding strategy. Findings from extant research indicate that people have transcendental needs which they increasingly satisfy in popular culture and consumption institutions as a result of the loss of authority of institutionalized religion. Against this background, brand managers have started to actively use religious references in brand communication. The current research studies the conditions under which one specific type of religious references, that is transcendental religious references, activate transcendental associations with brands using such references as part of their names. Our goal is to examine the effect of transcendental references on consumer behaviors and consumer personality traits. The research findings present important implications as they aim to point out whether brands and consumers can benefit from the association of brands with the divine or on the contrary, such associations have negative consequence on consumers, brands or on both.

*Keywords***:** brand communication**,** religion, transcendence, consumer behavior, personality

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, brands have played many different roles for consumers such as communication agents, relationship partners, and cultural myth performers (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2004) and seem to take on an almost spiritual role in current consumer societies (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In recent years, brands have started to actively use transcendental meaning in their positioning and communication. Examples which show that the divine can be branded are Nespresso's slogans *Simply divine* and *Coffee, body, and soul,* Citroën's car concept *Divine DS*, L'Occitane's *Crème Divine*, Gap's *Heaven* and Victoria's secret *Angel* perfumes, *True Religion* jeans and Diesel's jeans collection *Divine*. Surprisingly, it is not only symbolic and hedonic products that use such references. One can also buy a kitchen from *Divine Kitchens* and patio from *Patio Heaven*, pillows from *Holy Lamb Organic*, toilet paper from *Angel Soft*, and request a service from *God's Eye Security and Control* and *Divine Plumbing* (WIPO, 2017).

The main proposition of this paper is that, after the loss of power of institutionalized religion (Pargament, 1999), the global transcendence market has opened to new players. One example of these new players is brands. Despite existing evidence that priming people with concepts such as *God, spirit, divine,* and *holy* has an effect on a variety of behaviors and personality characteristics such as prosociality, honesty, self-esteem and stress levels (Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014), we lack knowledge about how associating brands with religious concepts influences consumers and their product and brand perceptions. The present research aims to shed light on these questions by investigating consumer reactions to brands that use explicit religious references in their brand communication and in particular as part of their brand name. We are also interested in whether and how using or consuming such brands

influences consumer self-esteem and prosocial behavior. For the purpose of this research project, we limit ourselves to a Western, predominantly Christian context.

Based on Keller's (1993) associative network memory model, we investigate the types of brand associations that explicit religious concepts trigger in consumers' minds and their consequences on various consumer metrics such as brand attitude, product perception, consumption, brand forgiveness, self-esteem and prosocial behavior. We expect the religious concept in the name of the brand to act as a prime and to activate religious values and associations with the sacred that will in turn affect the above mentioned consumer metrics. This should be especially true for religious and spiritual consumers who integrate the sacred in many aspects of their lives and for whom these concepts should be more chronically activated.

These effects will occur provided that consumers are acquainted with the religious concept used in the brand name and that the associations with it are positive. In cases in which consumers have no knowledge about religion and religious values and principles, we do not expect to see any differential effect of the brand name on consumer behaviors. When consumers are acquainted with the religious concept but have negative associations with it, we still expect the brand name to prime certain behaviors, however the direction of the effects will not be necessarily similar to the one discussed above.

2. Global research assumption

2.1. Religious landscape

In 2012, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2012) published a global religious landscape study based on a country-by-country analysis of self-identification responses from more than 2500 national censuses, large-scale surveys and official population registers. According to this study, in 2010 there were 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the world population of

6.9 billion. In all, 2.2 billion were Christians (32% of the world's population), 1.6 billion Muslims (23%), 1 billion Hindus (15%), nearly 500 million Buddhists (7%) and 14 million Jews (0.2%). These numbers are constantly evolving as the religious composition around the world is changing (Pew Research Forum, 2012). For example in the US, older cohorts of adults (comprised mainly of self-identified Christians) are being replaced by a new cohort of young adults who display far lower levels of attachment to organized religion (Pew Research Center, 2015). The same dynamic could also explain the decline in traditional measures of religious belief and practice. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), only 27% of Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) say they attend religious services on a weekly basis, compared with 51% of adults in the Silent generation (those born between 1928 and 1945). Four-in-ten of the youngest Millennials say they pray every day, compared with six-in-ten Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and two-thirds of members of the Silent generation (Pew Research Center, 2015).

In addition to the changing patterns among religiously affiliated adults, one could also observe changes among the rest of the population – the unaffiliated individuals. In 2010, 16% of the world population did not identify themselves as belonging to any organized faith, making the unaffiliated the third-largest religious group worldwide behind Christians and Muslims, and about equal in size to the world's Catholic population (Pew Research Center, 2015). Today's religiously unaffiliated population is heavily concentrated in places with low fertility and aging populations, such as Europe, North America, China and Japan. The Pew Research Center (2015) projects that the number of unaffiliated individuals will increase from 1.13 billion in 2010 to 1.23 billion in 2050, mostly driven by the declining beliefs of younger adults (Cohn, 2015). Surveys indicate that many of the unaffiliated hold some religious or spiritual belief (such as belief in God or a universal spirit) even though they do not identify with a particular faith (Cohn, 2015). For example, various surveys have found that belief in

God or a higher power is shared by 7% of unaffiliated Chinese adults, 30% of unaffiliated French adults and 68% of unaffiliated U.S. adults (Pew Research Center, 2015).

The above figures illustrate that there has been a change in the religious landscape around the world related to the decline in religiosity among younger adults and the declining power of institutionalized religion among religiously affiliated individuals. Interestingly, religion has not always been viewed as a purely institutional phenomenon (Eliade, 1959), nor as a phenomenon necessarily connected to a God. James (1902) viewed religion as a phenomenon concerned with the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men. Religion provided a source of meaning and explanations of the outside world - it bounded people into a common view of the universe (Eliade, 1959; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). In Western cultures, however, this started changing with the emergence of alternative explanations of the universe (Bibby, 1987; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Over the years, the institutional separation of religion from the state, science, medicine, education, art and economy attenuated its ability to reach people and provide them with meaning (Berger, 1967). Because religion lost touch with its origin, it was taken by people who were not concerned with the role of providing transcendental experiences but rather with gaining power and authority, which made it bureaucratic (Maslow, 1954). Individuals dissatisfied with their churches did not simply leave, however. Failing to find meaning in traditional religious institutions, people have started creating their own religion by choosing what they like from various religious offerings and in addition they have started looking for signals of transcendence outside of religion (Carrette & King, 2005; Einstein, 2008; Miller, 2004).

These socio-cultural changes have also been accompanied by a change in values. In recent years, traditional values have collapsed and have been replaced by new ones. There is no longer a reliance on tradition, on consensus, on cultural habit, and on unanimity of belief (Maslow, 1964). Values of the past such as family, tradition, authenticity, peace and

simplicity have been replaced with modern values such as distorted family ties, scientific advances, constant pressure, and unnecessary complexity of everyday life (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). While industrial societies of the 20th century were characterized by relative culture homogeneity, post-industrial Western societies are moving toward fragmented and pluralistic cultures (Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Swatos, 1983; Weber, 1968). In such fragmented and pluralized societies, the need for orientation and the sacred is even more acute (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). The need for meaning in our lives has not waned, and that it is only the traditional institution providing meaning in our lives which has gradually lost the meaning-mediating function (Sheffield, 2006).

Considering that humans have started looking for transcendence outside of traditional religious institutions, there is potentially a very important global market for brands wishing to provide transcendental benefits for consumers.

2.2. The power of brands

According to Interbrand's (2018) *Best Global Brands* report for 2016, the average brand value of the top three brands in the world was 128.16 billion USD and in 2018, it is 156.92 billion USD where brand value is defined as the present worth of the benefits of future ownership. These values become even more impressive when one considers that in 2009 the average value of the top three global brands was "only" 61.86 billion USD (Forbes, 2016). This means that the value of brands has been on the increase in the past years and will probably continue to increase in the future.

In addition to their economic value, brands have also gained power in terms of the functions they provide for consumers (Holt, 2004). In the 1970s, the benefit of brands was to simplify consumer decision making by showing the attributes of the product (Holt, 2004). Then, in addition to the functional benefits, brands started providing emotional benefits as they took the role of relationship partners forming deep connections with their consumers

(Holt, 2004). Anthropomorphizing objects has been identified as a universal human activity in all societies (Brown, 1991). Evidence from research illustrates that consumers show no difficulty in consistently assigning personality qualities to brand objects (Aaker, 1997), in thinking about brands as if they were human characters (Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985), or in assuming the perspective of the brand in order to articulate their own relationships (Fournier, 1998).

In addition to taking the role of relationship partners, in the new millennium, with the spread of new technologies, brands started giving consumers the chance to become cool and fashionable by sharing opinions and tastes with other consumers online (Einstein, 2008). Creative marketing strategies such as buzz and guerilla marketing started emerging during this period. Finally, brands added yet another layer to the functions they provided to consumers – they have started performing cultural myths which address acute contradictions in society with the goal to reinforce consumer identity (Holt, 2004). Brands have begun to reflect societal dreams, hopes and wishes. Marketers have become contemporary commercial storytellers who revisit the traditional mythology to give a grand sense of purpose to their otherwise mundane and commoditized products (Holt, 2004; Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). The most powerful and successful brands are the ones that have managed to become cultural icons.

As illustrated by the examples above, brands are currently powerful agents that have been taking more and more space in consumers' lives, especially in Western societies. This makes them (brands) potential candidates for satisfying consumer transcendental needs after the loss of authority and market share of institutionalized religion. In fact, examples such as *Divine Chocolate* and *Angel Soft* indicate that brands have already taken the role of transcendence providers. In the next section an overview of the existing literature on religious topics in psychology, marketing and consumer research will be provided, in order to illustrate

some of the possible effects that brands associated with religion can have on consumer attitudes and behaviors.

3. Literature overview

Allusions to God or the supernatural occur frequently in contemporary media, art and literature (Einstein, 2008; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Sheffield, 2006). According to word frequency lists, *God* is one of the most common words in the English language (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Religious and spiritual books (*The Purpose Driven Life*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*), movies (*The Passion of the Christ*), TV shows ("churchpacks" DVDs by Walmart), TV programs (The Church Channel, God TV), merchandise (from T-shirts to jewelry), music (gospel or contemporary Christian music) and music festivals (*Night of Joy* or *Rock the Universe*) have greatly increased in numbers in the past 20 years (Einstein, 2008). In 2003, Wal-Mart sold an estimated $1 billion of Christian-themed items (Einstein, 2008). Wal-Mart has been selling Christian-themed books and music for years, but in the past years consumer demand increased and led to additional product lines.

In addition to popular culture, religion has also become important in the decision-making positions in companies, a movement that started in the1980s but became prominent in the mid-1990s with books such as *Jesus CEO* (Einstein, 2008). An increasing number of companies were providing exposure to spiritual practices for their employees – such as the World Bank and Boeing (Galen & West, 1995). From a business perspective, it was believed that spirituality improved productivity, which has been reflected in the growing sales of spiritual business literature (Galen & West, 1995).

In brand communication, evidence from current practice confirms the usage of religious references. Certain brands are imbued with very explicit religious references such as "Jesus is my Homeboy" T-shirts, Mecca Cola, "True religion" jeans, etc. (Rindfleisch, Wong, & Burroughs, 2010) and others claim that their products are made for the soul and/or are

heavenly created (e.g. brands such as L'Occitane, Haagen Dazs, Nespresso, Philadelphia, etc.). Having, consuming or wearing such products is a way for consumers, especially the younger generation, to belong to a specific culture or clan and at the same time be part of something much bigger than the material world (Sheffield, 2006).

3.1. Transcendental topics in consumer behavior

The topic of religion in the field of social sciences has gained momentum in recent years. In marketing, for example, an average of five articles mentioning religion was published in the top five marketing journals between 1992 and 2006 and since 2007 this number has increased to 13 articles per year (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

In consumer research, the study of religion has been mostly qualitative and within the paradigm of Consumer Culture Theory - CCT (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Academics have looked at the religious-like aspects of consumer culture and consumption and also at the role religion plays for consumer identity. The work by Belk and colleagues (1989) was the first to describe consumption as a vehicle for experiencing the sacred. The sacred has since become a frequently invoked conceptual category to refer to those aspects of consumer behavior that go beyond the satisfaction of functional needs, including those that do not necessarily involve transcendent or ecstatic experiences. Evidence shows that consumers tend to sacralize objects, people, places, experience, times and even brands (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). One reason for doing so is the sensational experience that brands provide. Just as skydiving, river rafting, or mountain climbing (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi, Randall, & Leigh, 1993), brands also allow consumers to experience transcendence (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). A second reason for sacralizing brands is their ability to fulfil the need for community belonging. For example, the Macintosh community led by Steve Jobs resembled to a large extent a religious community (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

In addition to CCT, one stream of literature has focused on the effect of varying levels of consumer religiosity and on the differences in religious traditions on subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Findings from research illustrated that religious affiliation and levels of religiosity influenced decision making and purchasing and thus could serve as a basis for marketing segmentation (Bailey & Sood, 1993; Delener, 1990; Essoo & Dibb, 2004; LaBarbera & Gürhan, 1997; McKee, 2003; Taylor, Halstead, & Haynes, 2010). For example, less religious consumers were more likely to prefer trendy offerings and to try new products (Essoo & Dibb, 2004), whereas highly religious consumers were generally more conservative, traditional, and disciplined when it comes to consumption (Kurt, Inman, & Gino, 2018; Malka, Soto, Cohen, & Miller, 2011; Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016; McDaniel & Burnett, 1990). In general, income and material wealth were valued more by non- or less religious consumers than by highly religious consumers (LaBarbera & Gürhan, 1997). According to McDaniel and Burnett (1990), those high in religious commitment value shopping efficiency, salesperson assistance, and quality. Highly religious consumers were also found to prefer established, national brands versus generic, store brands (Khan, Misra, & Singh, 2013). In addition to levels of religiosity, a few studies focused on the effect of different religious affiliation on consumer behavior. Hirschman (1981) showed that Jewish consumers were more innovative, less store- and brand-loyal than Catholic or Protestant consumers, while LaBarbera (1987) found that Evangelicals held more favorable attitudes toward advertising than other consumers.

Despite these important findings, until now there is scant research on the mechanisms behind the relationship between brands and religion. One of the few examples is the research by Shachar et al. (2010), who showed that brands and religion could act as substitutes, as they both allowed individuals to express their self-worth. People with stronger religious belief exhibited less brand reliance than those with weaker or no religious beliefs (Shachar, Erdem,

Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010). In addition, exposure to brands was found to reduce one's commitment to religion (Cutright, Erdem, Fitzsimons, & Shachar, 2014). These findings imply that brands and religion implicitly compete over consumers and believers.

3.2. Transcendental topics in psychology

In psychology, religion has been studied because of its crucial importance to understanding human nature (Durkheim, 1951; James, 1902). Perception of the divine is argued to be a human universal and a common aspect between different religions. Most religions have sacred places, times and activities and place a central importance on the contact with something otherworldly and pure (Eliade, 1959). In the same way, regardless of whether affiliated with a faith or not, all humans have sacred places, times and activities (such as birthdays, birth places, etc.) which are given a special status. The reason is that the human mind perceives divinity and sacredness regardless of whether or not God exists (Haidt, 2006). Haidt (2006) called this perception of divinity the third dimension and described it as the overwhelming lifting up experience of humans. Maslow (1964) also claimed that everyone has the craving to believe and that religion must be not only intellectually credible and morally worthy of respect, but it must also be emotionally satisfying. Experiences such as humility, gratitude, awe, the sense of the divine, or even the experience of heaven and hell could be felt in the same way by both religious and non-religious people (Maslow, 1964). These types of sensations are referred to as peak experiences or flow experiences (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990; Maslow, 1964). Flow produces a state of transcendence, a suspension of temporal reality, a sense of separation from the mundane, and a sense of unity with some higher force (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). Common triggers to peak or flow experiences can be personal crises, role transitions, romance and exceptional beauty but also religious and sacred texts, rituals and symbols (Maslow, 1964; Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). A person experiencing transcendence may develop strong

emotional ties to the individuals, products, or institutions that facilitate this experience (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007).

In addition to satisfying the need for spiritual transcendence, humans embrace religion for a number of other reasons such as coping with uncertainty, randomness, guilt, reduced personal control, mortality, and stressful events (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008; Newton & McIntosh, 2010; Reiss, 2004; Vail et al., 2010). Religion defines the ideals for life which in turn are reflected in the values and attitudes of societies and individuals (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2002). More specifically, on an individual level, religion affects personality because it promotes a unique set of beliefs, rituals, values, and community structures that shape patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Religiosity is connected to personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, lower impulsivity, conservatism, and self-direction (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Some religious practices are also associated with greater well-being (Myers, 2000; Whittington & Scher, 2010) and with better mental and physical health (Hill & Pargament, 2003). On a societal level, religion helps satisfy an individual's needs for group identification, collective self-esteem affiliation and belongingness (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

Individuals do not necessarily need to be affiliated with a specific religious institution for experiencing the effects of religion on their personality or behaviors as it is shown by extant literature on priming (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Priming is the incidental activation of knowledge structures by a situational context cue (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Findings from research showed that attitudes and social behaviors could be triggered automatically by the mere presence of relevant objects and events in the environment (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Although it is not mandatory that

priming stimuli are perceived outside of awareness, it is important that people are unaware of the influence of the prime on their response, or that this influence is unintended (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996).

Researchers in the field of psychology of religion have turned to priming techniques to address limitations inherent in existing quasi-experimental designs. By directly manipulating the salience of religious thinking in the moment, religious priming provides a tool to test the causal effects of religious thinking on theoretically relevant psychological outcomes, and disentangle them from other characteristics such as personality dimensions or demographic background (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Religious-priming studies have examined a wide range of psychological topics such as prejudice, temptation resistance, generosity, and cooperation (Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014). Before going into detail into the results of these studies, it is important to mention that they were done in a Western Christian context and thus their findings are specific to this context.

Research showed that merely priming participants with religious words had an effect on prosociality (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), honesty (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007), ethical behavior (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008) attachment-related processes (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 1999), self-esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Buri & Mueller, 1993), stress responses (Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010; Weisbuch-Remington, Mendes, Seery, & Blascovitch, 2005), humor (Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001) and even prejudice and aggression (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2015). For example, exposure to religious topics resulted in the endurance of unpleasant or impossible tasks for longer period on time (Rounding, Lee, Jacobson, & Ji, 2012). Others found that priming participants with concepts such as prayer or an omnipotent god decreased the accessibility of sinful behaviors such as consuming drugs or junk food (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Laurin,

Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Religious primes also curbed selfish impulses and led to a more honest behavior (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007) and to more charitable giving behaviors (Ahmed & Salas, 2011, Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). In other contexts, however, religious primes decreased the likelihood of prosociality and led to aggressive behaviors (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). A summary of the findings of the religious priming literature can be found in the Appendix.

One explanation for the contradictory findings in the literature is that religion is comprised of different concepts and aspects related to the sacred which may in turn carry different psychological associations (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). Researchers (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Ritter & Preston, 2013) warned that it was a mistake to assume that religious concepts could be used interchangeably. Evidence showed for example that perceptions of a loving God had a positive impact on self-esteem whereas perceptions of a controlling God had a negative impact (Wiegand & Weiss, 2006).

Literature is also not consistent when it comes to the moderating role of trait religiosity. Several studies found a moderating effect (Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008; Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010; Weisbuch-Remington, Mendes, Seery, & Blascovitch, 2005), but others did not (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009) or have mixed findings (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

To conclude, despite the fact that research on religion in psychology has increased in recent years, there are still questions to be answered and inconsistencies to be resolved. One explanation for these inconsistencies is the interchangeable use of different religious primes. Research showed that people easily distinguished between three groups of religious words − religious agents, institutional religion-related, and transcendental or spiritual (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Ritter & Preston, 2013). Religious agent concepts are likely to be driving

effects related to feelings of being watched (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), while institutional ones are more likely to make people more concerned for their religious practice and their in-group (Ritter & Preston, 2013). Lastly, transcendental concepts activate a mindset related to one's own relationship to the divine, personal purity or spiritual well-being (Ritter & Preston, 2013).

3.3. Critical assessment of the literature review

3.3.1. Key points

Evidence from current marketing practice shows that brands have already started associating themselves with the divine. Considering that traditional religious institutions can no longer fully satisfy transcendental needs due to the loss of their authority and due to the change of traditional values (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Maslow, 1954; Pargament, 1999), there is a potential market for new players. Examples of new players on the market for transcendence are brands. In the past years, they have been increasing in power in terms of financial value but also in terms of benefits they claim to provide to consumers (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2004; Interbrand, 2018).

Extant academic research provides evidence that religion affects many spheres of human life, including consumption. Moreover, one does not necessarily need to be religious in order to be affected by religion as findings from priming literature yielded comparable behavioral outcomes among both believers and non-believers (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009). Despite the fact that religion is a central aspect of life for many people worldwide, there is a scant research on how it affects people's non-religious routines.

3.3.2. Research gap

According to our knowledge, there is no clear stream of consumer research using a consistent psychological framework to study the effects of religious references in brand elements on consumers and their potential to act as cues to activate specific consumer evaluations and behaviors towards a given brand. Thus, the focus of the current research is on the explicit uses of religious references in brand names. Research provides evidence that brand elements act as cues that can help retrieve or signal product attributes, benefits, affect, or overall quality and thus influence consumer evaluations and preferences (brand names – Argo, Popa, & Smith, 2010; Wänke, Herrmann, & Schaffner, 2007; logo and visual stimuli – Hagtvedt, 2011; van Riel & van den Ban, 2001; typeface design – Childers & Jazz, 2002; Doyle & Bottomley, 2006; product design – Bloch, 1995; Cox & Cox, 2002; packaging – DeBono, Leavitt, & Backus, 2003; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008).

Keeping in mind that individuals have transcendental needs which some satisfy with consumption (Atkin, 2004; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Einstein, 2008; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010), the ultimate question arises: What is the effect of explicit religious references in brand names on consumers, and more specifically on their brand and product attitudes, on their product consumption and in addition on certain personality characteristics such as self-esteem and prosociality?

In the current research, instead of investigating the effect of religious concepts as a whole, we focus specifically on transcendental religious concepts. As research findings showed, people distinguished between three different types of religious concepts and therefore, it is a mistake to use them interchangeably as they may yield to different results (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Ritter & Preston, 2013). This is the reason why we made the choice to use transcendental religious concepts for the purpose of our research. The rationale behind the decision is that transcendental concepts are connected to one's own

relationship to the divine and thus are broad enough to be recognized by religious and spiritual people alike. In that sense, because they are more abstract in nature, they are more likely to activate associations related to one's own perception of the sacred rather than to the sacred according to a specific religious tradition, which we argue would be the case for concepts such as *Saint Paul* or *Koran* for example (Ritter & Preston, 2013). This is not to say that transcendental terms will not activate associations connected to agents or religious institutions, but instead that the focus will be on transcendence and the sacred and the way each person perceives it. According to statistics (The Pew Research Center, 2015), there is a decline in religiosity among younger adults and a decline in the power of institutionalized religion among religiously affiliated individuals, which means that it could be more relevant to study religious concepts connected to one's own relationship with the divine rather than to a religion-specific concepts. Therefore, we chose to study the effect of transcendental religious references on consumers. Further in the paper, we refer to this type of religious terms as transcendental concepts.

4. Conceptualization of brand associations with the sacred

On a theoretical level, we propose a conceptual model and a series of research propositions regarding consumer response to explicit transcendental references in brand names. The underlying conceptual paradigm of the proposed model is Keller's (1993) associative network model of consumer-based brand equity which is based on the associative network memory model by Anderson and Bower (1973). According to this latter model, semantic knowledge consists of a set of nodes and links: nodes are stored information and are connected by links of varying strength (Anderson & Bower, 1973). A node can cause activation for other nodes either when external information is being encoded or when internal information is retrieved from long-term memory. The association strength between the activated node and all other linked nodes determines the extent of spreading activation and the

information that can be retrieved from memory (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Keller, 1993). Information retrieval may be dependent on individual differences as well as on situational factors (Day, Shocker, & Srivastava, 1979). Thus, factors such as time pressure and attribute weight may play a role in determining which particular associations are important and activated in a specific decision situation.

Based on the associative network memory model discussed above, Keller (1993) conceptualized brand knowledge, the main element of customer based brand equity, in terms of two components, brand awareness and a set of brand associations (brand image). Brand associations are characterized by favorability, strength, and uniqueness. Customer-based brand equity thus occurs when the consumer is aware of the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (Keller, 1993).

From an associative perspective, the associations consumers have with a specific transcendental concept (such as *transcendental experience*, *eternity*, *perfection, power, control*) should be activated by a brand having it in its name (such as *Divine Kitchens*, *Blue Heaven Cosmetics,* etc.). Although people's beliefs about the sacred vary, we expect that certain associations with it remain the same for most people. Evidence showed that the representation of a deity, for example, was easily recognizable by nearly everyone in US culture regardless of religiosity (Sheffield, 2006) and the idea of a supreme force that was independent of the material universe was consistent across cultures and religions (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Thus, we expect the associations people have with different transcendental concepts to be similar to a certain extent and in addition to be activated when seeing a brand containing an explicit transcendental concept in its name.

The factors that are expected to affect the transfer of associations from transcendental references in brand names and their influence on subsequent consumer attitudes, intentions

and behaviors are depicted in the Conceptual Model (Figure 1) and are discussed in detail in the following section.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model
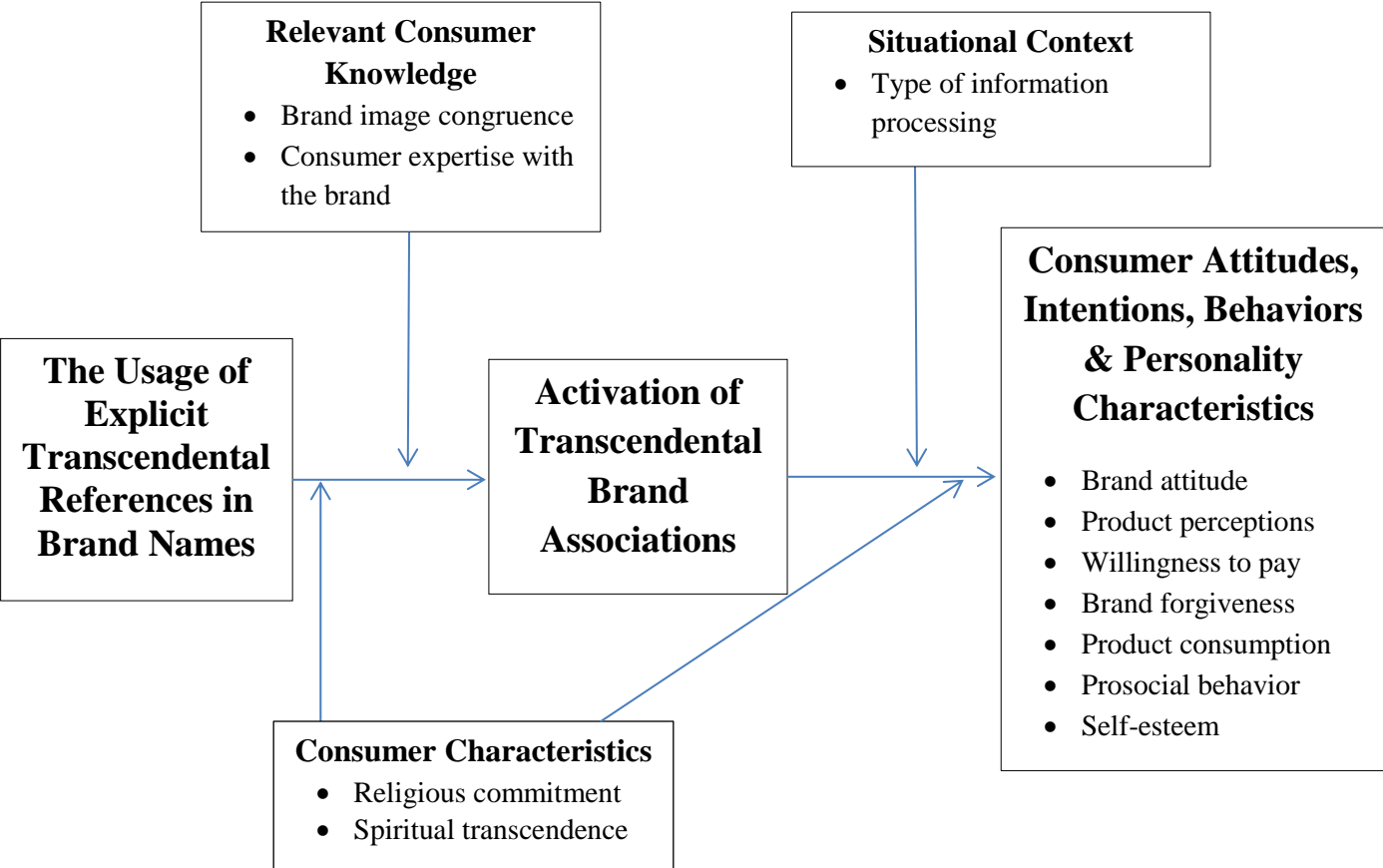
5. Propositions development

Some of the constituent associations of the brand image can be inferred by the brand elements. An inferred association occurs when the brand association is linked to some other information in memory that is not directly related to the product (Keller, 1993). As the brand becomes identified with this other information, consumers may perceive that the brand shares

associations with it, thus producing indirect or "secondary" links for the brand. Secondary associations may lead to a transfer of global associations such as attitude or more specific attributes and benefits related to the product.

In the case of transcendental concepts in brand names, that would mean that the associations consumers have with the specific concept will be transferred to brands carrying it in the name. Thus, our first proposition is:

P1: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to the activation of transcendental associations with the brand, over and above mere positive ones.

In other words, what consumers know and think of the specific transcendental concepts plays a role in determining the associations that will be activated by brands having it in their names. The activation will depend on both brand-image specific and context-/ consumer-dependent factors and should have consequences on consumer evaluations, preferences and behaviors.

5.1. Consumer attitudes and intentions

5.1.1. Attitudes towards the brand

Brand attitudes can be defined as the consumer's overall evaluation of a brand (Keller, 1993; Wilkie, 1986). They are important to consider because often they form the basis for consumer behaviors such as purchase behavior and amount spent. Brand attitudes are considered a function of the salient attributes and benefits associated with the brand (Keller, 1993). They can be related to beliefs about product-related attributes but also to non-product-related attributes (Rossiter & Percy, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). Furthermore, evidence from research showed that attitudes could be formed by less thoughtful decision making such as simple heuristics for example (Chaiken, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). If consumers lack

either the motivation or ability to evaluate the product or service, they may use signals or external cues such as product appearance or scent to infer product or service quality on the basis of what they know about the brand (Olson & Jacoby, 1972). Numerous studies showed that, in the absence of other information, consumers drew inferences about product features from marketing communication elements such as the brand name (Heath, Chatterjee, & France, 1990; Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube-Rioux, 1989; Pavia & Costa, 1993; Zeithaml, 1988). Generally, brand names should be meaningful or suggestive which means that the name should convey relevant information about product features or benefits (Keller, Heckler, & Houston, 1998; Pavia & Costa, 1993). Some of the qualities that make a name meaningful include the frequency of the specific word in the language and more importantly the ability of a word to evoke imagery (Paivio, 1971; Paivio & Begg, 1981). In addition, associating products with a favorable (vs. unfavorable) brand name is said to produce more positive brand and product evaluations (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992).

The sacred is whatever a person considers to be set apart from the ordinary and deserving of veneration, such as God, the divine or ultimate reality (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Because metaphors for the sacred are positive (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999) and consistently employ descriptions and imagery of ultimate perfection, beauty and power in both Christian and non-Christian religions, brands which have explicit transcendental references in the name are expected to share these descriptions. More importantly, we expect consumer attitudes towards brands having a transcendental concept in the name to be even more favorable than those towards brands having an equally positive non-religious word because everything connected to a divinity or a divine force is of highest perfection and no other positive word can depict something more perfect. Therefore:

P2: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward the brand.

5.1.2. Attitudes towards the product

In addition, products of brands having transcendental references in the names should also be evaluated favorably due to their link with the divine entity. Extant literature showed that thinking about certain concepts could not be done without activating relevant perceptual metaphors (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010). In line with the argument related to brand attitudes, we argue that products of brands having a transcendental reference in the name will be perceived as better performing, of better quality and of better design compared to similar products from a brand that simply has a positive non-religious term in the name. The reason behind is the association of the divine with ultimate perfection and beauty.

P3: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable product evaluations.

These perceptions may reflect the real product qualities but may also be influenced by the halo effect of the transcendental concept. Thus, in certain situations products may not actually be of good quality or may not perform well although they are perceived to do so. This illustrates that in some cases, transcendental references in brand names could have negative consequences for consumers by leading to biased product evaluations.

5.1.3. Willingness to pay

Consumers' willingness to pay for a product is an indication of the monetary value they attach to the product at a specific point in time (Wertenbroch & Skiera, 2002). Research suggested that willingness to pay a price premium was related to brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Blackston, 1995; Sethuraman, 1996). From a customer-based perspective, brand equity is considered as the value added to a product or service by a particular brand name (Chaudhuri, 1995). Thus, consumer mental responses towards the brand have an effect on how much individuals are willing to give for the brand and whether they are willing to recommend it to

others (Keller, 1993). Consumers who have developed strong, favorable associations towards a brand, for example, should be more willing to pay premium prices (Keller, 1993; Starr & Rubinson, 1978). Evidence from extant literature confirmed this by demonstrating that leading brands commanded large price differences (Agrawal, 1996; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Sethuraman, 1996; Simon, 1979).

As we argue that consumer associations with brands having transcendental references in their names are strong, favorable, and unique, one could expect consumers to be willing to pay a price premium for such brands. We, however, argue that this will not be the case due to the religious principle that one should distance herself from materialism and unjustified spending (Kurt, Inman, & Gino, 2018). Frugality is viewed as virtuous across different religions (Westacott, 2016) and many of them discourage overspending as it is believed to impede spiritual growth (Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, & Kuntze, 1999). This is supported by the research of Kurt et al. (2018), who found that religiosity and religious primes led to decreased spending on groceries and to fewer unplanned purchases for both religious and non-religious people. When it comes to spiritual transcendence, research (Grouzet et al., 2005) reported that spirituality and hedonism represented opposite poles on a physical-transcendence axis and that highly spiritual individuals were feeling little interest in a lavish lifestyle or high social status (Visser & Pozzebon, 2013). Because of this, we argue that transcendental references in brand names will activate associations related to these spiritual and religious values, which would result in a lower willingness to pay for the brands.

P4: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to lower (vs. higher) willingness to pay.

5.2. Consumer behaviors

Religion promotes a specific set of values, personality traits and behaviors. Existing literature on priming showed that merely exposing people to religious primes was sufficient to

activate these traits and behaviors (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2008; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). We expect to see similar results in the case of brands having an explicit transcendental concept in the name. In the following section we discuss the most relevant, according to our view, consumer behaviors and personality traits that we expect to be affected by these brands.

5.2.1. Product consumption

Related to the argument about product perception and willingness to pay, we expect that products of brands having a transcendental reference in the name will be perceived as better performing, of better quality and of better design compared to similar products from a brand having an equally positive non-religious concept as part of the name. Because of this, consumers should be willing to pay more for them but also to consume more of them. This, according to us however, will not be the case.

Hedonism and material pleasures are generally negatively correlated with religion, suggesting that religious individuals across religions may be driven less by hedonic motivation compared to less or non-religious ones (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). In addition, because religion specifically dictates moral guidelines promoting certain values such as transcending the material world, resisting temptation and exercising self-control, individuals may have to abandon certain pleasures for themselves (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Research found that people with stronger religious belief were less likely to engage in conspicuous consumption (Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). Further findings illustrated that reminders of God indeed led to decreased active goal pursuit and increased temptation resistance, which happened independently of preexisting religiosity (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Although spiritual transcendence is less ideological and less concerned with institutional prescriptions of how one should live her

life, it is still concerned with one's connection to a large universal realm outside of one's physical self, which implies the rise above everyday material or sensory experiences (Grouzet et al., 2005; Thoreson, 1998). Thus, spirituality too opposes hedonism and material pleasures. Research findings confirmed that argument by showing that spirituality was negatively correlated with hedonism which made individuals high on spiritual transcendence less interested in a luxurious lifestyle and material pleasures (Visser & Pozzebon, 2013).

Because of this, we expect the associations that are activated for brands having a transcendental reference in the name to curb consumer hedonic impulses. This in turn should make consumers less willing to consume products of such brands.

P5: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to lower (vs. higher) consumption.

5.2.2. Brand Forgiveness

Strong personal relationships are maintained not only through the cultivation of protective feelings of uniqueness and dependency but also through the encouragement of tolerance and forgiveness when confronted with adverse circumstances (Fournier, 1998). Extant research showed that personal forgiveness extended to consumer forgiveness of brands following service failure and recovery (Chung & Beverland, 2006) and firm moral transgressions (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). Arguably, the most effective way of making consumers forgive firm transgressions is to remind them of their religious values (Hill, Exline, & Cohen, 2005). In itself, forgiveness is one of the most important moral values in many religious traditions and spiritual formations (Jankelevitch, 1967). As such, it has been a topic of philosophical and theological inquiry for millennia (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). In theistic terms, forgiveness is a way of imitating God and enhancing one's relationship with the divine (Rye et al., 2000). For example, in Judaism forgiveness denotes reconciliation and its

theological basis is the fact that God himself is forgiving. Thus, as humans we should imitate God and also follow the laws of God which require that we forgive (Rye et al., 2000). In more general terms, when people forgive, the experience evokes religious and spiritual thoughts and images (McCullough, & Worthington, 1999)

For example, Bassett et al. (2008) had participants read a scenario about an offender's spiritual response to a transgression. In both studies, participants reported more forgiveness if the offender cultivated his or her relationship with the divine after a transgression by seeking forgiveness or growing spirituality than if the offender did not. There is also evidence that priming a religious (vs. neutral) mindset led to higher satisfaction ratings and loyalty intentions when judging a service failure and recovery effort (Hyodo & Bolton, 2015). Additionally reminding individuals of God after they had experienced a threat made them more forgiving in their reactions (Schumann, McGregor, Nash, & Ross, 2014).

Thus, in the context of brands having transcendental references in the names, we expect consumers to be more likely to forgive the brand in cases of service failure or company moral transgressions:

P6: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to higher (vs. lower) forgiveness in cases of company transgressions and/or service failures.

5.2.3. Prosociality

Across many cultures, the idea of religion evokes positive images of charity and altruism. Religion implies ideals of prosociality and concern for others (Erikson, 1963). One does not need to be religious in order to associate religion with prosociality. Pichon et al. (2007) revealed that even subtle reminders of God and religion could promote prosocial behavior. The results of de Dreu et al. (1995) showed that participants tended to cooperate

more, expect their peers to be more cooperative, and to find peers to be more honest and moral when they were told that their partner in the game was doing religious (vs. business) studies. In addition, implicitly priming religious thoughts was found to increase generosity in anonymous economic games (Ahmed & Salas, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Similar priming effects were shown to activate prosocial thoughts and to increase general prosocial concerns (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010).

When it comes to spirituality, research showed that it shares with religion a prosocial tendency, both in terms of personality and values (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). Spiritual individuals deemphasized values related to dominance and success over resources and people and, contrary to religious people they did not limit their prosocial behavior within in-group borders (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). Therefore, we expect that transcendental concepts will activate associations with prosociality and concern for others in consumer minds.

Due to the link between religion and spiritual transcendence and prosociality, we expect that consumers who use brands having an explicit transcendental reference in the name will be more likely to engage in a prosocial behavior after using the product of that brand.

P7: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the brand name will lead to an increase (vs. decrease) in prosocial behavior after using the product.

5.3. Personality characteristics

5.3.1. Self-esteem

Humans want to feel loved and worthy and thus self-esteem is a key ingredient in their most satisfying life events (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Individuals even choose to boost self-esteem over eating favorite foods, receiving paychecks, and seeing best friends (Bushman, Moeller, & Crocker, 2011). In addition, self-esteem is also

used for coping with existential fear and sustaining health and motivation (Routledge et al., 2010).

A number of research results showed a positive relationship between religiosity and self-esteem (Blazek & Besta, 2012; Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Duriez, & Hutsebaut, 2006; Pargament, 2002). One explanation for this is that individual self-evaluation is at least partly derived from how others evaluate this person. Because religion emphasizes the idea that there is a loving divine force that accepts people with all their imperfections, religious people should have a better self-evaluation than non-religious ones. Studies with largely Protestant samples of U.S. college students, high school students, and adults (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993) and studies with Catholic youths and adults in Belgium (Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Duriez, & Hutsebaut, 2006) showed that indeed internalized religious principles were associated with higher self-esteem, greater personality integration, higher self-actualization, and lower scores on measures of anxiety and depression. Spirituality too was found to be positively related to self-esteem (Hayman et al., 2007; Kamya, 2000; Reinert & Bloomingdale, 1999). Previous research, for example, found that found that college students with a stronger spiritual identity had higher self-esteem (Pederson, 1998).

Shachar et al. (2010) showed that as brands allowed individuals to express their feelings of self-worth, they could be seen as substitutes for religion and spirituality. Indeed, religion is a primary source of self-worth for many people, particularly when they hold benevolent images of God and a commitment to their religious beliefs (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Brokaw & Edwards, 1994). Religion may enhance feelings of self-worth because it provides the belief that one is loved, valued and unique in the eyes of God (Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010). As a part of their self-expressive function, brands also allow people to express that they are meaningful, worthwhile beings, and deserving of good things in their lives.

As for brands having a transcendental reference in the name, they should allow consumers to express their self-worth even to a greater extent than brands having any other non-transcendental concept in the name. Thus, we argue:

P8: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the brand name will lead to higher (vs. lower) consumer self-esteem after using the product.

One needs to note, however, that this effect will appear only if the transcendental concept is associated with a benevolent and carrying divine entity as research showed that seeing God as controlling was negatively related to self-esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973).

We expect that the effects of brands having transcendental references in the name on the consumer attitudes and behaviors discussed above are moderated by factors pertaining to the brand and product specificities, the consumer characteristics and the situational context. In the next sections we discuss in more detail the moderating role of these factors.

5.4. Relevant consumer knowledge

5.4.1. Brand image congruence

According to Park and colleagues (1986), brands can provide functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits. These three types of benefits are related to the three basic consumer needs – functional, symbolic, and hedonic (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). Functional needs motivate the usage of products that solve problems. According to this rational view, consumers use a variety of cognitive methods such as weighing the importance of each product attribute in order to choose the optimal brand (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Second, symbolic needs motivate the usage of products that fulfill internal needs such as self-expression, social approval, and self-enhancement. Finally, hedonic needs provide sensory pleasure and cognitive stimulation.

Researchers pointed out that communicating a clear brand image enabled consumers to identify the needs satisfied by a brand and thus be more satisfied using this brand (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). For example, functional brands satisfy immediate and practical needs, symbolic brands satisfy self-expression and prestige needs, while hedonic brands satisfy experiential needs.

In the context of brands associated with transcendental concepts, the congruence between the image of the brand and the image of the concept is expected to influence the likelihood of activation of transcendental associations. In other words, what consumers think of transcendence and the divine entity should be congruent to the perceived image of the brand, where congruence is defined as "the extent to which a brand association shares content and meaning with another brand association" (Keller, 1993, p. 7).

One of the most important functions of religion is to provide a source of meaning and purpose for people (Peterson & Roy, 1985). Religion provides a framework which makes life understandable and interpretable and spiritual transcendence refers to people's personal connection to, and experience of something beyond the material world (Brower et al., 2009). In that sense, we expect consumers to find it more difficult to associate transcendental concept with a product providing functional benefits. Additionally, religion opposes the gratification of material desires. Hedonism, in particular, is seen negatively by religion as it directly contradicts one of its primary functions—to temper self-indulgent tendencies (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). Therefore, associating transcendental concepts with products providing hedonic benefits should also be more difficult for consumers.

On the contrary, we argue that intangible product benefits of symbolic brands should be perceived more congruent with transcendence as these are the brands that satisfy personal needs for self-expression and emotion. Thus, associations with the transcendental aspects of religion should be more easily transferred to symbolic (vs. functional and hedonic) brands.

P9: The activation of transcendental brand associations through transcendental references in the brand name will be more (vs. less) likely for symbolic (vs. functional and hedonic) brands.

5.4.2. *Consumer expertise with the brand*

From an associative perspective, extant consumer knowledge about the product category or the brand is expected to moderate the effect of the role that the brand elements play on the activation of differential associations with the brand. Research on consumer memory showed that expertise with a specific brand/product category led to complex knowledge structures (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). In addition, there is evidence that brand evaluations by expert consumers are based on concrete product attributes (Dillon, Madden, Kirmani, & Mukherjee, 2001). On the contrary, brand ratings of novices stem from more general impressions about the brand (Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Dillon, Madden, Kirmani, & Mukherjee, 2001).

In the context of brands having a transcendental reference in their names, we expect consumers, who do not have prior experience with the brand, to rely much more on the associations that the brand name evokes. On the other hand, we expect expert consumers to rely on their extant knowledge about the brand and the product and be less affected by brand elements. Thus, the following statement is advanced:

P10: The activation of transcendental brand associations through transcendental references in the brand name will be more (vs. less) likely when the level of consumer expertise with the brand is low (vs. high).

5.5. Consumer characteristics

5.5.1. Religious commitment

In this paper, we define religious commitment as the "degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs and practices and uses them in daily living" (Worthington et al., 2003, p. 85). A person who is religiously committed tends to evaluate the world through religious schemas and to integrate his or her religion into many aspects of life. Transcendental concepts are common to all religious traditions (Pargament, 1999), and thus we expect religiously affiliated people to be more acquainted with them than non-religious ones. In addition, we expect religion-related concepts to be more chronically activated for religious individuals (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). The reason behind is that according to the network memory model, the activation of mental representations depends on the frequency with which they are encountered in the environment and we expect religious people to think more often of the sacred than non-religious ones (Anderson & Bower, 1973). Because of this we argue that:

P11: The activation of transcendental brand associations through transcendental references in the brand name will be more (vs. less) likely when the level of consumer religiosity is high (vs. low).

Religious belief is strongly associated with conservative and traditional values that stress transcendence and humility, and the preservation of social order (Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2012). Religions as authoritative traditions are systems of information that provide individuals with knowledge and resources for living a life of purpose and direction (Emmons & Palutzian, 2003). One of the functions of a religious belief system is to provide an ultimate vision of what people should be striving for in their life and strategies to reach these ends. Religious scholars agree that a widely endorsed tenet of Western monotheistic faiths is that God is controlling and makes sure that people stick to the prescribed principles (Kapitan,

1991; Lawrence, 1997; Metcalf, 2004; Newton & McIntosh, 2010). One such principle is that the divine is separated from physical material creation (Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). Most religions criticize the usage of God-related references outside of sacred domains. As commercial practices are not considered sacred, the usage of transcendental concepts for commercial purposes and in commercial domains is considered wrong according to institutionalized religion (Belk, 1983; Brower et al., 2009; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). Because religious individuals live according to the schemas which their specific institution provides, we expect these individuals to consider the usage of transcendental concepts in secular domains as blasphemous and offensive. Therefore, they should evaluate negatively brands making use of transcendental concepts as part of the name.

P12: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to less (vs. more) favorable attitudes toward the brand when the level of consumer religiosity is high (vs. low).

Generally, religious principles should be more chronically activated for religious (vs. non-religious) individuals as these are the people who integrate religion in each aspect of their lives. As religion emphasizes the idea that one is loved and accepted and in addition promotes certain values such as forgiveness, carrying for others, resisting temptation and material pleasures (Erikson, 1963; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), we expect that religious concept, including transcendental religious ones, will be more likely to prime these ideas and values for highly religious (vs. non-religious or less religious) consumers. Therefore, the effect of the transcendental concept on subsequent behaviors and personality traits should be stronger for highly religious individuals:

P13: The effects in P4 - P8 will be more (vs. less) likely to occur when the level of consumer religiosity is high (vs. low).

5.5.2. Spiritual transcendence

Religions, once the sources of meaning binding people into a common view of the universe, have started losing their power and influence (Eliade, 1959; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). This change started with the emergence of alternative explanations of the universe as well as with the increase in choice of different religions. People have begun searching for their subjective meaning, picking and choosing from various religious offerings (Pargament, 1999; Swatos, 1983). This is what many would refer to nowadays as spirituality or spiritual transcendence. It is the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger more objective perspective (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). As it is the case with religious individuals, we expect that for spiritual people transcendental concepts are more chronically activated as spiritual individuals also integrate the sacred in many aspects of their lives (Emmons & Palutzian, 2003; Pargament, 1999; Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott, 1999). Therefore, similar to religious individuals, spiritual people should be more acquainted with transcendental concepts than non-spiritual ones and this knowledge should be more easily activated when a transcendental reference is encountered in the environment.

P14: The activation of transcendental brand associations through transcendental references in the brand name will be more (vs. less) likely when the level of consumer spirituality is high (vs. low).

The main difference between religiosity and spirituality according to Zinnbauer et al. (1997) is that spirituality emphasizes a personal search for connection with a larger supernatural force while religiosity provides a more social emphasis on encountering the divine. Thus, spiritual transcendence is less ideological and much more personal in nature, which means that religious stereotypes and prescriptions should be lower for predominantly spiritual consumers. Their search for the sacred and their openness to find the sacred in

various places, even popular culture and consumption activity (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012) will allow them to evaluate favorably brands calling on spiritual meaning to enhance the value of their products, services and experience.

P15: An explicit transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) reference in the name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward the brand when the level of consumer spirituality is high (vs. low).

Findings from extant literature found that spirituality was negatively related to hedonism and positively related to forgiveness, prosocial behavior, and self-esteem (Grouzet et al., 2005; Hayman et al., 2007; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). Spirituality is generally connected to a belief in a higher power and the search for the sacred beyond the material (Pargament, 1999; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Similar to religious people, spiritual individuals in the pursuit of spiritual growth may be more likely to avoid vices such as gluttony, lust, envy, pride and practice virtues such as compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope. Therefore, we argue that for highly spiritual (vs. non-spiritual or less spiritual) consumers such transcendental religious ideas and values will be more chronically activated by a transcendental concept in the brand name. The effect of transcendental concepts on subsequent behaviors and personality traits should be thus stronger for highly spiritual individuals:

P16: The effects in P4 - P8 will be more (vs. less) likely to occur when the level of consumer spirituality is high (vs. low).

5.6. Situational context

Whether or not consumer attitudes are affected by brand elements depends also on the way that these elements are processed. The heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980) differentiates between two modes of information processing. When processing happens in a

heuristic way, message recipients are not motivated and/or do not have the cognitive capacity to process the information in a message and thus assess the validity of communication through a superficial consideration of cues. On the other hand, when processing in a systematic way, message recipients are motivated and have the time and capacity to exert cognitive effort and thus they carefully process all relevant information and assess its validity in relation to the conclusion of the message.

Systematic processing, which occurs under high motivation, is more the exception than the rule in consumption contexts as most judgment situations are routine rather than personally involving due to motivation inhibitors such as distraction, time pressure, lack of prior knowledge and multitasking (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992; Ratneshwar & Chaiken, 1991; Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985). Thus, in situations in which consumer motivation to process a message is low, it is possible that brand elements automatically activate specific mental representations which are then attributed to the brand itself. Evidence from literature confirmed that mere exposure of the brand name directly influenced brand choice behavior when consumers perceived brand alternatives to be similar, or when they did not have the motivation to search for brand differences (Baker, 1999). The mere exposure effect is an automatic effect of brand name exposure that is not mediated by subjective perceptions of brand name familiarity (Baker, 1999). The instant learning created by a name that implies a key benefit may occur when consumers do little deliberating prior to choice. This is in line with the findings of Maheswaran et al. (1992) who showed that subjects' product evaluations were influenced by brand name valence only in the low-importance task condition. As soon as the task became of high importance, however, both brand valence and attribute importance (when product attributes and brand name were congruent) or attribute importance alone (when product attributes and brand name were incongruent) influenced product evaluation (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992).

We expect to obtain similar findings in the context of transcendental references in brand names. Under heuristic processing, we expect mental representations to be automatically activated by the name of the brand and consumer evaluations for that brand to be influenced by these representations. This should not be the case under systematic processing when consumers are expected to inspect all other relevant information in order to create an attitude towards the brand.

P17: The effects in P2 – P8 will be more (vs. less) likely to occur when under the heuristic (vs. systematic) processing mode.

6. General discussion

Extant research has shown the importance of religion for understanding human behavior and has provided evidence that religion affects personality traits and numerous behaviors, including consumption behaviors and choices (Saroglou, 2014). Academic research so far has been mostly done in the CCT field and has focused on the religious-like aspects of consumption. In the field of marketing research, scholars have looked at the effects that different religious traditions and different levels of religiosity produce on consumer behavior. Finally, research on the priming of religion illustrated that attitudes and social behaviors were triggered automatically by the mere presence of a religious prime (e.g. Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014). Findings confirmed that individuals do not necessarily need to be affiliated with a specific religious institution for experiencing the effects of religion on their personality or behaviors as priming participants with religious words had an effect on the behavior of both religiously affiliated and non-affiliated individuals (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

Despite the increasing academic interest in religion in recent years, many questions have remained unanswered, especially concerning how consumers in consumption contexts react to the presence of religious references as part of the brand communication. Therefore,

scholars have called for more theory development and quantitative work to enhance our understanding of the effects of religion on consumer psychology and behavior (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). To our knowledge, one meta-analysis on the effects of religious priming on prosociality exists (Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016) and thus there is a need for such an enterprise which includes academic work done on all types of behaviors and personality characteristics.

In this paper, our goal was to apply a well-established framework to shed light on the way one specific type of religious references, and namely transcendental ones, affects certain consumer behaviors and personality characteristics when used as part of the brand name. Employing the association network memory model (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Keller, 1993), we proposed that the associations consumers have with a specific transcendental concept would be transferred to brands having it in the name, which in turn would affect consumer metrics such as brand attitude, brand forgiveness, product perceptions, consumption, self-esteem, and prosocial behavior. The conceptual model, which we proposed, predicts that under certain conditions consumers may be more forgiving towards brands having a transcendental reference in the name and may evaluate such brands and the products of these brands more positively. At the same time, we predicted that transcendental concepts would activate associations related to spiritual transcendence which would result in a decrease in product consumption and willingness to pay. Possible moderators of the above mentioned relationships are consumer religiosity, spirituality, and expertise, brand image congruence and the type of information processing. Despite the fact that we have tried to outline the most important, to our view, factors which play a role in determining the effect of transcendental associations in brand names on consumers, we believe this model can be further extended and enriched. We recognize our inability to provide an entirely comprehensive model capturing all the possible relationships between brands using transcendental references and relevant

consumer attitudes and behaviors. The model can be enriched in future research with other moderators such as consumer age, gender, or type of religious affiliation and other mediators such as specific associations activated with religion and spirituality such as altruism, frugality, or self-control. Because religious concepts are complex and multifaceted, even individuals from the same culture and religious traditions will differ in terms of the associations they have with them. Knowing how a consumer thinks about a specific concept will help clarify the underlying psychological process of consumer behaviors affected by the activation of transcendental associations. For example, spiritual transcendence can bring about decreased consumption through increased self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), through an increased sense of meaning in life (Steger & Frazier, 2005) or through a belief in a controlling God (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2009). Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the full mediation model and the possible situational effects on the established conceptual relationships in Figure 1 and also the influence of the factors that we de did not include in it.

In addition, we have focused on one specific group of religious concepts – the transcendental ones. We expect that the effects of the other two groups of religious concepts on the consumer metrics we used will be different. Thus, it would be insightful to study the effect of all three types of religious references as part of brand elements on consumer reactions towards the brand. This will also shed light on the possible negative effects of religious references on consumer brand metrics. For example, consumers for whom the concept *pope* evokes negative associations may also have unfavorable attitudes towards brands that use this concept in their communication elements. In addition, for consumers who have negative attitude towards religion and spirituality in general, we also expect to observe the transfer of these negative associations from the religious concept to the brand having it in its elements. The consequences of such negative associations with a religious concept or with religion in general could extend to consumers themselves. Findings from research in priming,

for example, showed that individuals who believed in a controlling (vs. loving and carrying) God, showed lower self-esteem and insecure personal attachment (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Wiegand & Weiss, 2006).

Finally, it is important to mention that research in the fields of religion and the priming of religion has been mostly done in a very specific cultural and religious context – that is a Western Christian context. The propositions we made in this paper are thus also specific to this context. Further research is needed in order to investigate how consumers from other religious traditions such as Buddhism and Islam, for example, perceive transcendental references in consumption contexts. Extant research confirmed that there was a difference in the way individuals from different cultural contexts perceived the divine. For example, omnipotent and omniscient gods or spirits are thought to be the product of large, relatively anonymous societies where humans cannot prevent free riding and norm violation, while in smaller or more anonymous societies, the divine entity may be associated with lesser powers (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Norenzayan, Shariff, & Gervais, 2009). Furthermore, the general idea that religion promotes (in-group) prosociality and out-group prejudice is only based on monotheistic religions, as research found that Buddhist concepts activated extended prosociality and tolerance of out-groups, at least among those with socio-cognitive and moral openness (Clobert, Saroglou, & Hwang, 2015). Thus, we expect to see differences in terms of the associations that consumers from non-Western and non-Christian cultures have with transcendental religious concepts and additionally in the ways these associations are transferred to brands. In general, we expect this transfer to be less likely to happen in non-Western that in Western cultures where brands are already using religious references in their marketing strategies, making this practice relatively normal and inoffensive.

7. Conclusion and implications

In this paper, we argued that due to the loss of authority of institutionalized religion and due to the increasing number of unaffiliated individuals around the world, a potential market for other players who want to fulfil the universal human need of transcendence was open. Possible other players are brands as they have become increasingly powerful in today's consumption societies. Evidence from practice shows that in their communication and positioning brands indeed associate themselves with transcendental concepts. In academic work, however, the effect of brands employing explicit religious references in their marketing communication has not been studied. Thus, this research intends to contribute to the branding literature by investigating the value of religious references in brand names and specifically one type of religious concepts – transcendental ones.

On a conceptual level, our research seeks to find out how transcendental references in brand names affect consumers, their perceptions towards the brand and their consumption behaviors. The research findings present important managerial implications as they hopefully point out which brands and consumer segments, and in what situations, can (cannot) benefit from transcendental associations. For example, we argue that attitudes towards brands using transcendental (vs. an equally positive non-religious) references in their names will be more favorable due to the associations of the divine with ultimate perfection and beauty. Consumers may be even more willing to forgive such brands in case of transgressions due to the link between religion and forgiveness. At the same time, when it comes to product consumption, we expect transcendental references in the name to curb consumption impulses and to lead to less buying behavior. Therefore, it is important for managers to adapt their marketing strategies in order to ensure their sales. We expect that store promotions will help counteract the effect of transcendental concepts in brand communication as they should alleviate consumers' perception of indulgence. Additionally, we expect that emphasizing the

brand's social or environmental practices will help consumers feel less guilty for spending money on material goods. Another option will be to have a stand at the exit of the store where consumers could join a social cause or could sign to volunteer for one. Thus, in addition to branding literature, the findings of this research contribute to other domains such as retailing, licensing, and social marketing.

On a broader level, this research will provide insights on the frontiers of brands as building blocks of meaning in today's consumption-oriented societies. It is plausible to assume that consumers who seek to satisfy their need for transcendence but who cannot do it with the help of traditional institutions, will actually benefit from brands associating themselves with the divine through the usage of a transcendental concept in the name. For example, the usage of such brands may improve consumer self-esteem, one of the pillars of life satisfaction and subjective well-being, due to the positive link between religion and self-esteem. It could also help engage consumers in less impulsive and less conspicuous consumption as placing value in that which transcends the individual is at odds with placing value in material goods. Finally, because religion promotes values such as care for others, consumers might even be more willing to engage in social activities.

To conclude, the implications of the current research are threefold: first, we hope to advance academic knowledge in the fields of branding and consumer research and why not to open new perspectives for advancement in other domains of marketing such as licensing, social marketing, and retailing; second, our research has the potential to help managers to find beneficial marketing strategies for their brands; and lastly, it will hopefully benefit certain consumers by pointing out another source for satisfying their need for transcendence.

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Appendix

Table: Religious priming literature review

Authors	Manipulation	Religious primes used	Dependent variable	Effect	Results
Ahmed & Salas, 2011	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Spiritual, divine, benediction, holy, Jerusalem, god, Jesus, and prophet.	Prosociality	Positive effect	Priming religious words significantly increased prosocial behavior. The priming effect was present regardless of participants' self-reported religiosity.
Ben-Nun Bloom, & Arikan, 2013	Self-reported religious behavior and belief	N/A	Support for democracy	Mixed – depends on the nature of the prime	Priming religious social behavior facilitated, while priming religious belief impeded support for democracy. These results were independent of participants' intensity of religious belief or the frequency of their religious social behavior.
Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007	Priming: a passages either from the Bible or from an ancient text (for half of the participants the text read that God sanctioned violence)	N/A	Aggression	Positive effect	Aggression increased when the passage participants read was from the Bible.
Carpenter & Marshall, 2009	Participants read nine Bible verses, addressing themes such as love for God and God's love for humanity	N/A	Moral hypocrisy	Mixed effect – depends on levels of intrinsic religiosity	A religious prime decreased moral hypocrisy among intrinsically religious participants.
Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014	Subliminal and supraliminal priming	God	Risk taking	Positive effect	*God* primes increased risk taking compared to a neutral prime, a secure attachment/fatherly prime, or a supernatural prime. Psychological control mediated these effects. The effect of God primes on risk taking was independent of religious affiliations.
Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008	Subliminal priming	God	Feeling of authorship	Mixed – depends on whether one believes in God	Subliminal primes of God decreased feelings of personal authorship only for those who believe in God.

Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012	Priming: rating adjectives according to different criteria - frequency in everyday speech, how well they describe God, or extent to which they describe how others view them; Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	God, spirit, divine, prophet, sacred	Self-awareness and socially desirable responding	Positive effect	God heightened public self-awareness in a manner comparable to thinking about social evaluation. Even thoughts of God activated without conscious awareness increased both public self-awareness and socially desirable responding. *God* primes increased perceptions of social surveillance for believers across all studies, but the results regarding nonbelievers were inconsistent, even when using identical implicit primes.
Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009	Self-reporting on prayer frequency and organized religious service attendance; Priming: prayer to God vs. synagogue attendance	N/A	Support of suicide attacks	Mixed – depends on the nature of the prime	Suicidal attacks were positively predicted by frequency of attendance at organized religious services, but not by frequency of prayer.
Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver, 2012	Subliminal priming; Priming: scrambled sentences with religious vs. non-religious words	Belief, prayer, devotion, elation, and salvation	Response times for recognition of God-related words	Mixed – depends on personal attachment insecurities	Threat priming heightened cognitive access to God-related concepts in a lexical decision task. Priming with *God* heightened cognitive access to positive, secure base-related concepts and priming with a religious symbol caused neutral material to be better liked. Results were independent of participant religiosity.
Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010	Self-report on extent one believes in God and what kind of God one believes in; Scrambled sentence task (religious vs. non-religious words)	Spirit, divine, sacred	ERN amplitude	Mixed – depends on whether one is vs. is not a believer	For believers, conscious and nonconscious religious primes caused a decrease in ERN amplitude. In contrast, priming nonbelievers with religious concepts caused an increase in ERN amplitude. Thus, religion has the power to act as a buffer against anxious reactions to self-generated, generic errors—but only for individuals who believe.
Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010	Subliminal priming	Bible, faith, Christ, church, gospel, heaven, Jesus, messiah, prayer, sermon	Racial prejudice	Positive effect	Participants subliminally primed with Christian words displayed more covert racial prejudice against African-Americans and more general negative affect toward African-Americans than did persons primed with neutral words. The

					effects of priming on racial prejudice remained even when statistically controlling for pre-existing levels of religiousness and spirituality.
LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2011	Situational context priming	Participants passing by either a religious or nonreligious structure	Attitude towards outgroups	Positive effect	Even for participants who were not overtly religious, normative cultural knowledge and the salience of religious concepts encouraged them to respond more conservatively and negatively toward outgroups when exposed to religious contexts.
Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Divine, God, sacred, spirit, and prophet	Active goal pursuit and temptation resistance	Positive effect on temptation resistance Negative effect on active goal pursuit	Reminders of God can impair some aspects of self-regulation (active goal pursuit) while improving others (temptation resistance). In all studies, reminders of God led to decreased active goal pursuit and increased temptation resistance independently of preexisting religiosity.
McKay, Efferson, Whitehous, & Fehr, 2011	Subliminal priming with religious vs. punishment vs. religious-punishment vs. control primes	Divine, holy, pious, religious	Costly punishment of unfair behavior	Negative effect	There was no main effect of religious primes, whether alone or in combination with punishment primes, on punishment behavior. However, religious primes did strongly increase the costly punishment of unfair behavior for a subset of our participants—those who had previously donated to a religious organization.
Morewedge & Clear, 2008	Self-report on frequency of attendance of religious services, praying to God, the role of prayers, and the presence of God	N/A	Moral judgment	Mixed – depends on the God concept participants endorsed	Religious believers considered actions prohibited by their religious doctrine to be severer moral transgressions if they endorsed an anthropomorphic God concept.
Pichon & Saroglou, 2009	Religious vs secular context of person in need (church vs. gym)	N/A	Willingness to help homeless vs. illegal immigrants	Mixed – depends on the perception of justice	The activation of religious context increased the willingness to help, but only the homeless people not for immigrants.

Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007	Subliminal priming; Word search task of positive and neutral religious vs. non-religious words	Heaven, miracle, wedding, spirituality, angel, praise, baptism, tradition, aureole, salvation, soul, beatitude, Christmas, belief, bless, faith, temple, pilgrimage, prayer, communion, mitre, monk, steeple, bishop, sacrament, missal, holy-water stoup, ordination, parish, apostle, bible, priest, rosary, disciple, incense, chapel, solemn, genesis, altar, host	Prosocial behavior	Mixed – depends on the valence of the prime	Religious primes doubled the likelihood of a subject's voluntarily picking up a pamphlet on charity located by the door. The increase of prosociality emerged only in the case of positive religion priming, whereas priming religious elements neutral in valence did not activate prosocial concepts or behavioral intentions.
Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010	N/A – theoretical piece	Religion vs. supernatural agent	Prosociality	Mixed – depends on type of the prime	Activating a religious principle should motivate the protection of in-group values, and to facilitate co-operation with fellow group members while inhibiting prosocial behavior toward outsiders. The supernatural principle should activate a goal of virtue – to live up to the moral standards set by supernatural agents.
Preston & Ritter, 2013	*God vs. religious leader* question; Questions about participant belief in God or religious affiliation; subliminal priming	Religion, God	Prosocial behavior with in-group vs. outgroup	Mixed – depends on type of the prime	*Religion* primes enhanced prosociality toward in-group members, consistent with in-group affiliation, whereas, *God* primes enhanced prosociality toward outgroup member.

Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007	Scrambled sentences with religious vs. sport-related vs. neutral words; Subliminal priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Heaven, bless, gospel, cross, faith, prayer, salvation, saved, holy, worship, baptism, amen, church, resurrection, commandments, communion, saint, prophet, Sabbath, and preacher	Honesty	Positive effect	Participants primed with religious words cheated significantly less on a subsequent task. In addition, participant's intrinsic religiosity had no influence on rates of cheating with the prime received.
Ritter & Preston, 2013	Religious words in a card sorting task	Angel, baptism, belief, Bible, bless, Christmas, church, commandments, communion, cross, divine, faith, God, gospel, heaven, holy, Jesus, messiah, miracle, pilgrimage, prayer, preacher, prophet, religion, Sabbath, sacred, saint, salvation, sermon, soul, spirit, and worship	N/A	N/A	There are three relatively distinct kinds of religious concepts which produce different mental representation: agents (e.g., God, angel), spiritual/abstract (e.g., faith, belief), and institutional/concrete (e.g., shrine, scripture).
Rounding, Lee, Jacobson, & Ji, 2012	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	God, spirit, divine, righteous, virtue, and moral	Self-control	Positive effect	When religious themes were made implicitly salient, people exercised greater self-control, which augmented their ability to make decisions in behavioral domains that are theoretically relevant to both major religions and humans' evolutionary success. When self-control resources were minimized, implicit reminders of religious concepts refueled people's ability to exercise self-control.

Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001	Exposure to a religious video vs. a humorous one vs. a non-stimulation condition	N/A	Humor	Negative effect	Religion both as a trait and as a state predicted low humor spontaneous responsiveness. Participants' religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy predicted low humor creation in the religious condition but not in the humorous one.
Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009	Subliminal priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Heaven, miracle, wedding, spirituality, angel, praise, baptism, tradition, aureole, salvation, soul, beatitude, Christmas, belief, bless, faith, temple, pilgrimage, prayer, communion	Submissive behavior	Mixed – depends on personal submissiveness	For people scoring high on self-reported submission, activating religious concepts increased accessibility of submission-related concepts as well as the production of submissive behaviors, even when a target request was related to a morally and religiously reprehensible behavior such as taking revenge.
Sasaki, Kim, Mojaverian, Kelley, Park, & Janusonis, 2011	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	God, prophet, spirit, sacred, divine	Prosocial behavior	Mixed – depends on participant DRD4 susceptibility variant	Findings indicated that participants with DRD4 (dopamine receptor) susceptibility variants were more prosocial when implicitly primed with religion than not primed with religion, whereas participants without DRD4 susceptibility variants were not impacted by priming.
Schumann, McGregor, Nash, & Ross, 2014	Primed vs. not with religious belief system ("Which religious belief system do you most identify with?"); a statement "turn the other cheek", vs. "eye for an eye" vs. no prime	N/A	Hostility after threat	Mixed – depends on whether or not one's religious tradition promoted forgiveness	A general religious belief system prime reduced the hostility of people's thoughts, behaviors, and judgments following threat. The religious belief system prime only reduced hostile reactions to threat among participants who held religious beliefs that oriented them toward forgiving ideals. Directly priming these ideals yielded effects similar to those produced by a religious belief system prime.
Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Sacred, divine, spirit, god, prophet	Prosocial behavior	Positive effect	Subjects allocated more money to anonymous strangers when God (vs. neutral or no concept) concepts were implicitly activated. A trait measure of self-reported religiosity did not seem to be associated with prosocial behavior.

Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011	The "Views of God" scale and a single item accessing belief in God	N/A	Cheating behavior	Mixed –depends on whether one sees God as loving or punishing	Participants who assigned greater levels of punishing attributes to supernatural agents were less likely to cheat on a behavioral task.
Toburen & Meier, 2008	Scrambled sentences priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Spirit, divine, God, sacred, prophet	Anxiety and task persistence on a stressful task	Positive effect on both	God-related primes caused participants to persist longer on a stressful task, but also to feel more anxious after finishing it. No effect of religious affiliation was found.
van Cappellen, Corneille, Cols, & Saroglou, 2011	Subliminal priming with religious vs. non-religious words	Heaven, miracle, wedding, spirituality, angel, praise, baptism, tradition, aureole, salvation, soul, beatitude, Christmas, belief, bless, faith, temple, pilgrimage, prayer, communion	Informational conformity	Positive effect	Participants assimilated their estimates to that of their peers more after religious than control priming, at least for participants scoring higher on dispositional submissiveness. The conformity effect emerged independent from participants' self-reported religiousness but depended on their dispositional submissiveness.
Weisbuch-Remington, Mendes, Seery, & Blascovitch, 2005	Subliminal priming with positive religious vs. negative religious vs. non-religious words	Positive symbols included images of Christ ascending to heaven, Mother Mary holding the Baby Jesus, and Christ's healing powers. Negative symbols included images of satanic worship, demons, and satanic symbols.	Cardiovascular responses	Mixed – only when religious symbol was task- or self-relevant	Positive and negative religious symbols influenced cardiovascular responses consistent with challenge and threat states during a subsequent speech task, particularly when the speech topic concerned participants' mortality, and only for Christian participants. Similar images lacking Christian meaning were not influential.

Wenger, 2004	Two-word target phrases including vs. not including religious words	Hear Sermons, worship God, attend church, sing hymns	Response times	Mixed – depends on participant intrinsic religious orientation	The automatic activation of religious concepts depended on participants' levels of intrinsic orientation toward religion. The automatic activation of religious concepts did not depend on participants' levels of extrinsic orientation.
Wiegand & Weiss, 2006	Self-report of belief in a divine being, and a description of that being using the Benson and Spilka (1973) measure of God images	N/A	Momentary mood; life satisfaction ratings	Mixed – depends on the valence of the images of God one holds	Some religious beliefs can affect hedonic experiences in the form of momentary mood states and local judgments of life satisfaction. Those who report having positive images of God generally tend to be in more positive moods.

Essay 2

The meaning of the divine in consumption contexts

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Abstract

The present research aims to investigate consumer reactions to brands that use explicit transcendental religious references in the brand name. According to my knowledge, there is no research that systematically investigates how consumers react to brands associated with the sacred through the usage of transcendental concepts in the brand name. In four studies, I investigated the meaning of one specific transcendental concept and namely *divine* in marketing and non-marketing contexts and I showed that it activates transcendental religious associations over and above equally positive non-religious ones. I also obtained initial support that brands having the term *divine* in the name evoked more positive attitudes towards both brand and product which resulted in higher willingness to pay for these brands.

Keywords: branding, brand communication**,** transcendental religious references, consumer behavior

1. Introduction

According to the Best Global Brands report (Interbrand, 2018), the average brand value of the top three brands in the world in 2016 was 128.16 billion USD and it increased to 156.92 billion USD in 2018, where brand value is defined as the present worth of the benefits of future ownership. In addition to their economic value, brands have also gained power in terms of the functions they provide for consumers. Evidence from research illustrates that consumers show no difficulty in consistently assigning personality qualities to brand objects (Aaker, 1997), in thinking about brands as if they were human characters (Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985), or in assuming the perspective of the brand in order to articulate their own relationships (Fournier, 1998). Brands have even become potential candidates for satisfying consumer transcendental needs after the loss of authority and market share of institutionalized religion (Pargament, 1999; Pew Research Center, 2015). In fact, examples such as *Divine Chocolate* and *Angel Soft* indicate that brands have already started associating themselves with the sacred.

The influence of religion on social behavior was considered taboo for scientific inquiry for many years despite the fact that it was a central area of research among the early social scientists like Durkheim, Marx and Weber (Rindfleisch, Wong, & Burrough, 2010). In recent years, however, the study of religion has revived in the field of social sciences. Although attention from marketing academics has been limited, research on religion's connection to marketing and consumption is not completely new. Academics have mainly investigated the way religiosity affects consumer behaviors (Delener, 1994; Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004; Hirschman, 1981; LaBarbera & Gürhan, 1997; McDaniel & Burnett, 1990; Tellis, Stremersch, & Yin, 2003), the religious-like aspects of consumer culture (Belk & Tumbat, 2005), and the sacralization of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). Still, studies on the effects of religion on consumer psychology and behavior are scattered and

have to be systematized. The research of Shachar et al. (2010) is one of the few looking into the similarities between religion and consumption (brands in particular) in terms of psychological process. Findings showed that people with stronger religious beliefs exhibited less brand reliance than those with weaker or no religious beliefs (Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010). This finding was later confirmed by Cutright et al. (2014) who showed that exposure to brands reduced one's commitment to religion. These findings imply that brands and religion implicitly compete over consumers and believers. However, additional theory development and quantitative work are needed to enhance our understanding of how religion influences consumers (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

Building on prior research, the present project aims at investigating consumer reactions to the usage of explicit religious references in consumption contexts. Based on Keller's (1993) associative network memory model, I am interested in the types of brand associations that are triggered in consumers' minds by explicit religious references in brand names. I hypothesize that certain brands and under certain conditions can benefit from associating themselves with concepts related to a supernatural powerful entity. In addition, I expect religious and spiritual consumers to respond differently to the usage of religious references in consumption contexts than individuals who are not affiliated with any religious or spiritual tradition.

2. Literature overview

The need for transcendence seems to be a universal human characteristic (Haidt, 2006; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Myers, 2000). Regardless of their differences, all religions have sacred places, times and activities which allow people to communicate with some supernatural and powerful force (Eliade, 1959). Although common triggers to transcendental experience are usually religious such as sacred texts, rituals and symbols, they can also be non-religious like for example personal crises, role transitions,

romance and exceptional beauty. More specifically, in the context of consumption, triggers

can be different combinations of products, services and contexts such as sensory experiences

like sights, sounds and smells (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). When a person

experiences transcendence in the context of consumption, that person may develop strong

emotional ties with the individuals, product, and/or institutions that facilitate it (Schouten,

McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). Creating strong links between consumers and brands is

exactly what companies are striving to achieve.

Brands have become the tools for creating personal identities and in this sense they

replace career, family, and sometimes even religion as signifiers of who people are and what

they believe in (Einstein, 2008). Some brands explicitly claim that their products are for the

soul. For example, *Rituals* write on their website that their products are intended to "soothe

body and soul", while one of Nespresso's slogans was "coffee, body and soul" (Rituals.com,

2018; Siegfried, 2014). In this sense, brands are overtaking to some extent the role of

religions in taking care of human souls and providing a bridge between man and heaven.

Considering that traditional religious institutions can no longer fully satisfy transcendental

needs due to the loss of their authority, there is a potential market for these new players (Pew

Research Center, 2015). Certain brands are imbued with very explicit religious references

such as "Jesus is my Homeboy" T-shirts, Mecca Cola, "True religion" jeans, etc. (Rindfleisch,

Wong, & Burroughs, 2010), while others (such as L'Occitane or Rituals) associate themselves

with the sacred in a more indirect way by claiming that their products are made for the soul

and/or are heavenly created.

According to my knowledge, there is no research that investigates the effect of explicit

religion-related references used for commercial purposes and in commercial domains. I argue

that for some consumers this usage will be considered wrong, offensive and even

blasphemous, which in turn should affect their attitudes towards the commercial entities using

the references. This is not desirable by companies as what we know from extant literature is that brand attitudes and specifically strong and favorable attitudes predict behaviors, including brand consideration, intention to purchase, purchase behavior, and brand choice (Fazio & Petty, 2007; Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995; Priester, Nayakankuppam, Fleming, & Godek, 2004).

In summary, in the context of brands associated with the sacred through explicit religious references in the name, the influence of the reference on consumer attitudes and behaviors will depend on the type of meaning consumers attach to it and whether or not it activates religious associations in a consumption context. My goal in this paper is first to investigate whether explicit religious references in a brand name activate religious associations in consumption contexts and second to study their effect on consumer metrics such as attitude toward the brand and willingness to pay. I focus on one specific type of religious concepts and that is transcendental religious concepts, for reasons which I discuss in the next chapter.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. The meaning of *divine*

Religious primes have been shown to affect a number of behaviors such as prosociality (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), honesty (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007), submissiveness (Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009), agency beliefs (Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008), attachment-related processes (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 1999), and humor (Saroglou & Jaspard, 2001). In addition, research has shown that religious terms are not conceptually interchangeable and concepts such as *God*, *spirit* or *prayer* activate different associations for different people and thus may have different effects on individual behavior (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Ritter & Preston, 2013). From all the religious terms used in the religion

priming literature, people easily distinguished three groups − religious agents, institutional religious concepts, and transcendental religious concepts (Ritter & Preston, 2013). Religious agent concepts are likely to be driving effects related to feelings of being watched (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), while institutional ones are more likely to make people more concerned for their religious practice and one's in group (Ritter & Preston, 2013). Lastly, transcendental concepts activate a mindset related to one's own relationship to the divine, personal purity or spiritual well-being (Ritter & Preston, 2013).

In the current research, my interest lies in studying the effect of transcendental religious concepts in brand names on consumer attitudes towards the brand. More specifically, for the purpose of the project, I will focus on one term that falls in this category and that is *divine*. The rationale behind the decision is that *divine* is a comprehensive transcendental term, broad enough to be recognized by religious and spiritual people alike (Ritter & Preston, 2013). In addition, because it is more abstract in nature, it is more likely to activate associations related to the sacred in general rather than to the sacred according to a specific religious tradition in contrast to institutional religious concepts (Ritter & Preston, 2013). This is not to say that *divine* will not activate associations connected to the latter, but instead that the focus will be on transcendence and the sacred and the way each person perceives it. According to statistics, there is a decline in religiosity among younger adults and a decline in the power of institutionalized religion among religiously affiliated individuals, which means that it could be more relevant to study religious concepts connected to one's own relationship with the divine rather than to a religion-specific concepts (The Pew Research Center, 2015). In addition, *divine* is a common everyday word and it is used in registered brand names (WIPO, 2016). Due to all these considerations, only brands having the word *divine* in their names have been chosen for this research.

The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology (Brower et al., 2009) defines the term *divine* by its six attributes − self-sufficiency, omniscience, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, and moral perfection. Because the current research focuses on consumer responses to *divine* references in brands, it is important to investigate how consumers define the term and more specifically whether it has kept its original transcendental meaning. I argue that this is the case despite its usage in current language to refer to something of surpassing excellence, beauty, pleasure, and perfection (The Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2016). Because of this, I expect consumers to ascribe transcendental attributes to brands associated with the *divine*, over and above mere positive non-transcendental ones.

H1: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the brand name will lead to the activation of transcendental associations over and above equally positive non-religion-related ones.

3.2. Brand and product attitudes

A brand attitude can be defined as the consumer's overall evaluation of a brand (Keller, 1993; Wilkie, 1986). It can be related to beliefs about both product-related functional attributes or to non-product related symbolic benefits (Rossiter & Percy, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). Product-related attributes relate to a product's physical composition, while the non-product benefits are external aspects of the product that relate to its consumption (Keller, 1993). Many studies have shown that, in the absence of other information, consumers draw inferences about product features from marketing communication elements such as the brand name (Heath, Chatterjee, & France 1990; Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube-Rioux, 1989; Pavia & Costa, 1993; Zeithaml, 1988). Generally, brand names should be meaningful and suggestive or in other words the name should convey relevant information about product features or benefits (Keller, Heckler, & Houston, 1998; Pavia & Costa, 1993). Some of the qualities that make a name meaningful include frequency of the specific word in the language and the

ability of a word to evoke imagery (Paivio, 1971; Paivio & Begg, 1981). In addition, new brands judged to have a more typical name for the product category appeared to elicit more favorable attitudes than brands with atypical names (Zinkhan & Martin, 1987). Lastly, associating products with a favorable (vs. unfavorable) brand name was found to produce more positive brand and product evaluations (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992).

In the case of brands having an explicit *divine* mention in the name, I expect consumer attitudes towards the *divine* concept to influence the overall attitude towards the brand (Keller, 1993). Because metaphors for the divine are positive (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999) and consistently employ descriptions and imagery of ultimate perfection, beauty and power, brands which have an explicit *divine* mention in the name are expected to share these descriptions.

H2: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the brand name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward the brand.

In addition, products of brands having *divine* references in the names should also be evaluated favorably due to the link between the *divine* concept and the sacred. In line with the argument for brand attitudes, products of brands having *divine* mentions in the name will be perceived to perform better, be of better quality and of better design compared to products from a brand with a positive non-religious word in the name, due to the association of the term *divine* with ultimate perfection, and excellence.

H3: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the brand name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable product evaluations.

3.3. Willingness to pay

Consumers' willingness to pay for a product is an indication of the monetary value they attach to the product at a specific point in time (Wertenbroch & Skiera, 2002). Research

suggested that willingness to pay a price premium was related to brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Blackston, 1995; Sethuraman, 1996). Consumers who have developed strong, favorable associations towards a brand should be more willing to pay premium prices (Keller, 1993; Starr & Rubinson, 1978).

As consumer associations with brands having transcendental references in their names are strong, favorable, and unique, one could expect consumers to be willing to pay a price premium for such brands. I argue that this will not be the case, however, because religion advocates distancing oneself from materialism and unjustified spending (Kurt, Inman, & Gino, 2018). Many of the world religions discourage overspending as it is believed to impede spiritual growth (Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, & Kuntze, 1999). This is supported by the research of Kurt et al. (2018), who found that religiosity and religious primes led to decreased spending on groceries and to fewer unplanned purchases for both religious and non-religious people. When it comes to spiritual transcendence, research (Grouzet et al., 2005) reported that spirituality and hedonism represented opposite poles on a physical-transcendence axis and that highly spiritual individuals were feeling little interest in a lavish lifestyle or high social status (Visser & Pozzebon, 2013). Because of this, I argue that a *divine* reference in brand names will activate associations related to these spiritual and religious values, which would result in a lower willingness to pay for the brands.

H4: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the name will lead to lower (vs. higher) willingness to pay.

3.4. Relevant brand knowledge and consumer characteristics

3.4.1. Brand image congruence

A well-known typology of consumer needs makes a distinction between three basic consumer needs – functional, symbolic and hedonic (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). Functional needs motivate the usage of products that solve problems. According to this

rational view, consumers use a variety of cognitive methods in order to choose the optimal brand such as weighing the importance of each product attribute and judging the levels of each attribute in competing brands (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Symbolic needs motivate the usage of products that fulfill internal needs such as self-expression and self-enhancement. Finally, hedonic needs provide sensory pleasure and cognitive stimulation. Whereas for satisfying their functional needs, individuals use objective criteria, for satisfying symbolic and hedonic needs, they use personal or subjective criteria such as taste and a desire for expressing themselves (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1994).

Researchers have pointed out that communicating a clear brand image enables consumers to identify the needs satisfied by a brand which then leads to greater satisfaction when using this brand (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). The long-term success of brands therefore depends on the ability of the brand to select a meaning, operationalize this meaning in the form of an image and maintain this image throughout time. For example, functional brands satisfy immediate and practical needs, symbolic brands satisfy self-expression and prestige needs, while hedonic brands satisfy experiential needs. According to Park et al. (1986), many brands offer a mixture of symbolic, functional, and experiential benefits. Nowadays with more brands competing on the market, it is even more important for them to answer a multitude of needs if they want to be successful and differentiate themselves from competitors.

One of the most important functions of religion is to provide a source of meaning and purpose for people (Peterson & Roy, 1985). *Divine* as transcendental religious concept refers to people's personal connection to, and experience of something beyond the material world that makes life meaningful. In that sense, I expect consumers to find it less suitable to associate the term with a product providing functional benefits. Additionally, because religion and spirituality oppose the gratification of material desires, associating the sacred with

products providing hedonic benefits should also be perceived as unsuitable (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). On the contrary, I argue that intangible product benefits of symbolic brands should be perceived more congruent with the term *divine* as these are the brands that satisfy personal needs for self-expression and emotion. Thus, associations with the *divine* concept should be more easily transferred to symbolic (vs. functional and hedonic) brands.

H5: The activation of transcendental brand associations through an explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the brand name will be more (vs. less) likely for symbolic (vs. functional and hedonic) brands.

3.4.2. *Consumer religiosity and spirituality*

When a person is born into a religious tradition, he or she develops a religious identity or affiliation through the action of its institutional influences such as church attendance for example. Religiously affiliated people are viewed as sharing a common cognitive system of beliefs, values, expectations and behaviors (Hirschman, 1983). This belief and value system is then used to evaluate the surrounding environment. Because transcendental concepts are common to all religious traditions (Pargament, 1999), I expect religiously affiliated people to be more acquainted with the term *divine* than non-religious ones. I also expect that for religious individuals the *divine* concept is more chronically activated than it is for others (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). This should also be the case for spiritual people who may not associate with any specific religious tradition, but who still have transcendental needs and engage in a search for the sacred (Emmons & Palutzian, 2003; Pargament, 1999; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Therefore, religious and spiritual people should be more acquainted with transcendental topics and concepts and this knowledge should be more easily activated when a reference about the divine is encountered. The reason behind is that according to the network memory model, the activation of mental representations depends on the frequency with which they are encountered in the environment and we expect religious

people to think more often of the sacred and of spiritual transcendence than non-religious ones (Anderson & Bower, 1973).

Religions as authoritative traditions are systems of information that provide individuals with knowledge and resources for living a life of purpose and direction (Emmons & Palutzian, 2003). One of the functions of a religious belief system is to provide an ultimate vision of what people should be striving for in their life and strategies to reach these ends. Religious scholars agree that a widely endorsed tenet of Western monotheistic faiths is that God is controlling and makes sure that people stick to the prescribed principles (Kapitan, 1991; Lawrence, 1997; Metcalf, 2004; Newton & McIntosh, 2010). One such principle is that the divine is transcendent which means that it is separated from physical creation (Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). Most religions see the pursuit of material goods as a hindrance to spiritual pursuits (Belk, 1983) and in general criticize the usage of divine and God-related references outside of sacred domains. As commercial practices are not considered sacred, the usage of religious elements for commercial purposes is considered wrong and offensive according to institutionalized religion (Belk, 1983; Brower et al., 2009; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). As highly religious individuals see their environment through the prism of their faith-based principles, they will consider the integration of religious symbols in a commercial domain as wrong.

H6: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the name will lead to less (vs. more) favorable attitudes toward the brand when the level of consumer religiosity is high (vs. low).

At the same time, because spirituality is less institutionalized and dogmatic, spiritual consumers are less likely to have internalized religious principles of what is right and wrong (Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Spiritual consumers' search for the sacred and their openness to find the sacred in various places, even

popular culture and consumption activity (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012) will allow them to evaluate favorably brands calling on spiritual meaning in order to enhance the value of their products, services and experience.

H7: An explicit *divine* (vs. an equally positive non-religious) mention in the name will lead to more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward the brand when the level of consumer spirituality is high (vs. low).

4. Overview of studies

For the purpose of testing the proposed hypotheses, four studies were conducted. The first two studied the meaning of *divine* in consumer contexts and the third and fourth looked at the effects of brands having with explicit *divine* mentions in the name on consumer attitudes towards the brand and the product.

5. Study 1

In this study, the meaning of *divine* for two different groups of consumers was investigated. The goal was to determine if the concept evoked religious associations when it was used outside religious context.

5.1. Procedure

In this study, data on the meaning of *divine* for 352 non-paid French-speaking voluntary students (M_{age} = 20.58, SD = 1.63, 36.1% female) was collected. I used a discrete free word association task. Students were given five words (*sports*, *divine*, *consumption*, *brand*, and *product*) and were asked to write ten spontaneous associations with each word. In the first condition (not preceded by marketing words), the word *divine* came first and in the second condition (preceded by marketing words) it came after the marketing-related words. The purpose of this manipulation was to see whether a more (vs. less) commercial context has an effect on the associations consumers have towards the term *divine*. Each student had one

minute to write down ten associations for each of the five words. After collecting the responses, students were briefed about the true purpose of the task and thanked for their participation. In total, 1788 associations with the term *divine* were collected. Those mentioned only once were excluded from further analysis (Szalay & Deese, 1978). This resulted in a total of 1486 associations, which were then weighted following the method proposed by Szalay and Deese (1978). Responses were grouped into categories based on their semantic content. The main researcher and an external coder independently grouped the list of associations. After a discussion regarding several differences in the categories, an agreement was reached and a final list of 37 categories was created.

    5.2. Results

The five most frequent categories for the *divine* concept in both conditions were religion-related (36.49%), which included transcendental, institutional, and supernatural agent words, excellence (13.81%), food (5.67%), aesthetic appeal (5.56%), and power (4.17%). The discrete associations were considered positive or neutral by the two coders, with the exception of 13 associations. All 13 were grouped in one of the following five categories - caprice (0.32%), lie (0.26%), war (0.22%), stupidity (0.18%) and punishment (0.12%).

    Looking separately into the two conditions, in the not preceded by marketing words condition, 653 associations were collected and then grouped into 32 categories. The five most frequent categories were religion-related (40.81%), excellence (11.38%), aesthetic appeal (6.49%), power (4.92%), and food (4.85%). Three of the categories in this condition were negatively-valenced – lie, stupidity, and war (0.51%, 0.31%, and 0.43% respectively).

    In the preceded by marketing words condition, 833 associations were collected and then grouped into 34 categories. The five most frequently mentioned categories were religion-related (34.79%), excellence (15.88%), aesthetic appeal (4.95%), value (4.37%), and

perfection (4.14%). In this condition, all categories apart from "caprice" (0.73%) and

punishment (0.23%) were positively or neutrally-valenced words.

A summary of the results can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of the most frequent categories of word associations (above 2%) translated in English in the two conditions (not preceded by marketing words and preceded by marketing words)

Condition	Categories	Frequencies	Examples of associations within the category
Not preceded by marketing words			
	Religion-related	40.81 %	God, religion, spiritual, supernatural
	Excellence	11.38 %	Fabulous, incredible
	Aesthetic appeal	6.49 %	Beauty, elegance
	Power	4.92 %	Power, strength
	Food	4.85 %	Food, gastronomy
	Nature	4.49 %	Nature, star
	Positive adjective	3.21 %	Good, well
	Femme	3.06 %	Feminine
	Perfection	2.66 %	Ideal, perfect
	Antiquity	2.52 %	Mythology, antique
	Metaphysics	2.12 %	Abstract, inimaginable
Preceded by marketing words			
	Religion-related	34.79 %	God, religion, spiritual, transcendence
	Excellence	15.88 %	Excellent, fabulous
	Aesthetic appeal	4.95 %	Beauty, attractive
	Value	4.37 %	Precious, expensive
	Perfection	4.14 %	Perfect, ideal
	Power	3.68 %	Power, strength
	Food	3.65 %	Chocolat, food
	Positive adjective	3.60 %	Positive, good
	Quality	3.34%	Quality
	Antiquity	2.68%	Antiquity, mythology
	Product	2.42%	Products, perfume
	Nature	2.3%	Cloud, nature
	Uniqueness	2.04%	Special, unique

I compared the number of religion-related associations between the two conditions. In the not preceded by marketing words conditions, there were 248 associations and in the preceded by marketing words one, there were 263. The results of a chi-squared test showed that the difference between these two numbers (being preceded vs. not being preceded by marketing words) was not statistically significant, χ^2 (1) = .44, p = .51.

5.3. Discussion

The results of this study illustrate that the term *divine* evokes religion-related associations over and above equally positive non-religious ones, despite the fact that nowadays the term is often used to describe something of surpassing beauty or excellence. In addition, these associations seem to be of all three types – transcendental, supernatural agents, institutional – and seem to be activated regardless of the type of context. Therefore, this first study provides initial evidence that in a commercial context the religious meaning of the term *divine* still exists.

One major limitation of the experiment is the fact that it was done in a marketing class, meaning that students were already in a marketing setting which could have influenced the associations they had with the words I provided. It is plausible to assume that students would have provided different associations if they were asked to do the task in a non-marketing-related situation. Additionally, the fact that the study was done in a marketing setting could be the reason for the non-significant difference between the two conditions (preceded vs. not preceded by marketing words) as in both conditions participants were primed with marketing to a certain extent and thus the manipulation, which I used, did not work.

Another limitation of the experiment is that it was done with French-speaking students. In French, *divine* is also often used to describe things and beings that are extraordinary, perfect, and sublime (Larousse Online, 2017).

To address these limitations, I decided to replicate our results in a new online study among English speaking adults.

6. Study 2

The purpose of the second study was again to investigate whether *divine* evokes transcendental associations when it is used outside a marketing class context.

6.1. Procedure

The second study was done online and 392 US participants took part ($M_{age} = 36.71$, $SD = 12.89$, 57.5% female). As in Study 1, participants were asked to write ten spontaneous associations with five words, one of which was *divine*. Again, two conditions were included – not preceded by marketing words and preceded by marketing words. In addition, I asked participants to evaluate their own associations on a scale from −3 (very negative) to +3 (very positive). A total of 2411 associations with the term *divine* were collected. As in the first study, the associations mentioned only once were excluded from further analysis (Szalay & Deese, 1978). This left us with a total of 1978 associations, which were then weighted following the procedure by Szalay and Deese (1978). Independently, two coders assigned each of the associations to a category, resulting in a final list of 36 categories.

6.2. Results

The five most frequent categories for the *divine* concept in both conditions were religion-related (45.93%), which as in Study 1 included transcendental, institutional, and supernatural agent words, excellence (12.36%), positive adjective (5.82%), aesthetic appeal (5.72%), and transcendence (3.72%). All but two categories were evaluated neutrally or positively by the participants. The two categories with overall negative scores were "lie: with a score of −3 (frequency: 0.26%), and "gender" with a score of − .34 (frequency: 0.22%).

There were 1122 associations in the not preceded by marketing words condition, which were grouped into 35 categories. The five most frequently mentioned categories were religion-related (43.07%), excellence (12.62%), positive adjectives (7.02%), aesthetic appeal (6.46%), and authenticity (3.03%). In this condition, two of the 35 categories were negatively evaluated – "gender" (frequency: 0.4%) and "royalty" (frequency: 0.65%) with scores of − .75 and − .33 respectively. The rest of the categories were neutrally or positively evaluated.

In the preceded by marketing words condition, there were 856 associations, which were grouped into 30 categories. The five most frequent categories were religion-related (49.53%), excellence (10.66%), positive adjectives (5.40%), aesthetic appeal (4.67%), and food (3.90%). One of the categories in this condition was negatively evaluated - "lie" with a score of −3 (frequency: 0.26%).

A complete list with the most frequent categories and examples of words classified in each of them can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of the most frequent (above 2%) categories of word associations in the two conditions (not preceded by marketing words and preceded by marketing words)

Participants self-evaluated their associations on a scale from -3 to +3.

Condition	Categories	Frequencies	Valence	Examples of associations within the category
Not preceded by marketing words				
	Religion-related	43.07%	1.31	God, religion, spiritual, otherworldly
	Excellence	12.62%	2.12	Fabulous, excellent
	Positive adjective	7.02%	1.94	Good, fine
	Aesthetic appeal	6.46%	1.53	Beautiful, pretty
	Authenticity	3.03%	2.24	Unique, original
	Power	2.96%	2.39	Power, omnipotent
	Food	2.85%	1.33	Chocolate, dessert
	Taste	2.66%	2.05	Delicious, taste
	Pleasure	2.33%	1.74	Pleasant, delightful
	Value	2.31%	1.88	Precious, expensive

Preceded by marketing words				
	Religion-related	49.53%	1.48	God, religion, spiritual, otherworldly
	Excellence	10.66%	2.38	Excellent, exquisite
	Positive adjective	5.40%	1.81	Good, nice
	Aesthetic appeal	4.67%	1.78	Pretty, gorgeous
	Food	3.90%	1.6	Cake, ice-cream
	Perfection	3.44%	1.94	Perfect, utmost
	Taste	2.99%	1.79	Delicious, tasty
	Value	2.73%	0.44	Pricey, expensive
	Purity	2.08%	2.12	Pure, pristine

I compared the number of religion-related associations between the two conditions. In the not preceded by marketing words conditions, there were 441 associations and in the preceded by marketing words, there were 398. The results of a chi-squared test showed that the difference between these two numbers was not significant (being preceded vs. not being preceded by marketing words), $\chi^2 (1) = 2.20$, $p = .14$. Additionally, I compared the valence of the religion-related associations between the two conditions. The results showed that despite the fact that all of them were on average positively evaluated, in the not preceded by marketing words, they were evaluated more favorably than in the preceded by marketing words one, $M_{np} = 1.82$, $SD = 1.47$, $M_{pm} = 1.54$, $SD = 1.56$, $t(815) = 2.71$, $p = .01$.

6.3. Discussion

In conclusion, the results of Study 2 confirmed the results of Study 1 and namely that the *divine* concept evokes religion-related associations (such as "God", "otherworldly", "sacred", etc.) over and above equally positive non-religious ones (such as "beautiful", "tasty", "amazing", etc.). In addition, the activation of these associations does not seem to depend on the context in which participants encounter the concept. Language or cultural differences in terms of associations with the *divine* concept were not found. Finally, religion-

related associations were on average neutrally or positively evaluated, which means that *divine* should also be evaluated favorably by most consumers.

After providing evidence that the term *divine* has the potential to evoke religion-related associations both in marketing and in non-marketing contexts, the next step is to examine under what conditions transcendental religious associations are activated by brands with *divine* in their names.

7. Study 3

In the third study, I investigated the meaning of the term *divine* when used in a brand name, as well as the consumer attitudes towards such "divine" brands.

7.1. Pretest

In order to run Study 3, a concept that evokes similar positive associations like *divine* but that does not activate religious associations was needed. The reason behind is that as hypothesized earlier in the paper, I expected brands having a *divine* mention in the name to be evaluated more favorably than brands having an equally positive non-religious word. Based on the two word association studies I conducted, I selected the adjective *sublime* as a potential comparison to *divine*. The word sublime comes from Latin and refers to "great excellence or beauty, an unparalleled attitude or behavior and an overwhelming sense of awe" (The Oxford Dictionary Online, 2015).

I ran a pretest study to make sure that *sublime* indeed evoked positive associations that were not connected to supernatural agents, institutionalized religion or more generally to transcendence. Thirty-eight undergraduate students ($M_{age} = 23.49$, $SD = 1.98$, 51.4% female) from a mid-European university participated. As in Study 2, I asked participants to mention ten spontaneous associations with six words which they were provided with − *divine, brand, consumption, sport, sublime*, and *nature* − in a randomized order. All associations were self-

evaluated by the participants on a scale from −3 (very negative) to +3 (very positive). In total,
208 associations for *divine* and 190 for *sublime* were obtained, which were coded into
categories by two independent coders.

The associations with *divine* were grouped into 14 categories and with *sublime* into 12
categories. The five most frequent categories for *sublime* were aesthetic appeal (41.99), value
(11.55%), feminine (8.92%), quality (8.66%) and positive adjectives (6.56%). For *divine*, the
most frequent categories were consumption (25.73%), religion-related (19.15%), value
(12.96%), feminine (11.99%) and aesthetic appeal (6.58%). Although it may come as a
surprise that the term *divine* was associated with consumption, there is a possible explanation
to this finding and namely that the study was done in a marketing class and students were
primed with marketing-related terms.

A summary of the categories for each of the two concepts can be found in Table 3 and
a comparison between the two in Table 4 below.

Table 3: Summary of the most frequent (above 2%) categories of word associations in the two
conditions (not preceded by marketing words and preceded by marketing words)

Participants self-evaluated their associations on a scale from -3 to +3.

Condition	Categories	Frequencies	Valence	Examples of associations within the category
Sublime				
	Aesthetic appeal	41.99%	2.13	Beautiful, good looking
	Value	11.55%	0	Expensive, luxury
	Feminine	8.92%	1.78	Girl, woman
	Quality	8.66%	2.50	Quality, top quality
	Positive adjective	6.56%	2.00	Nice, positive
	Excellence	6.04%	2.84	Wonderful, astonishing
	Divine	4.72%	2.00	Divine
	Consumption	3.67%	2.00	Cream, jewelry
	Taste	2.36%	1.50	Sweet
	Task-related	2.36%	1.50	Adjective

Condition	Categories	Frequencies	Valence	Examples of associations within the category
Divine				
	Consumption	25.73%	0.49	Perfume, brands
	Religion-related	19.15%	1.11	Angel, church
	Value	12.96%	0.13	Perfume, wine
	Feminine	11.99%	0.90	Woman
	Aesthetic appeal	6.58%	2.63	Beautiful
	Country	4.49%	1.00	Australia, French
	Excellence	3.48%	2.50	Excellent, extraordinary
	Food	3.29%	0.43	Wine
	Pleasure	3.09%	2.42	Pleasant, sensual
	Purity	2.51%	2.75	White, purity

In terms of valence, I observed that all categories were neutrally or positively evaluated. For *sublime*, the category "excellence" obtained a score of 2.84 and was the most positively evaluated. For *divine*, the category "purity" obtained a score of 2.75. For both concepts, the category "value" was evaluated least positively with scores of 0 and 0.13 respectively. In terms of discrete associations, "expensive" was the only association that received a negative score for *sublime*, while for *divine*, negatively evaluated associations these were "religion", "pink", "god", "fashion", "clothes", "cheap", and "expensive".

When the two terms are compared, it is noticeable that seven of the categories are shared. These are consumption, value, feminine, aesthetic appeal, excellence, quality, and taste. The categories which are specific to *divine* are religion-related, country, food, pleasure, purity, mythology, and light, while those specific to *sublime* are positive adjectives, divine, task-related, praise, and emotion (Table 4). I argue that the *divine* associations with the term *sublime* were context-specific and related to the fact that the concept is used in current language to refer to something of excellent or beautiful and were not connected to its religious meaning. This is so because there were no other religion-related associations, apart from the specific term *divine*.

Table 4: Comparison between the two concepts *divine* and *sublime*

Condition	Categories	Condition	Categories
Divine		**Sublime**	
	Consumption		Aesthetic appeal
	Religion-related		Value
	Value		Feminine
	Feminine		Quality
	Aesthetic appeal		Positive adjective
	Country		Excellence
	Excellence		Divine
	Food		Consumption
	Pleasure		Taste
	Purity		Task-related
	Quality		Praise
	Mythology		Emotion
	Light		
	Taste		
	Unique categories		**Unique categories**
Divine		**Sublime**	
	Religion-related		Positive adjective
	Country		Divine
	Food		Task-related
	Pleasure		Praise
	Purity		Emotion
	Mythology		
	Light		

These results confirm that *sublime* is a suitable concept for the following studies in which I investigated consumer reactions to *divine* associations in brands. This is because *sublime* evokes similar positive associations as *divine*, but does not activate the religion-related associations that the *divine* concept does.

7.2. Procedure

This experiment investigated whether an explicit *divine* mention in the brand name activated transcendental associations over and above equally positive ones and the consequences on consumer attitudes towards that brand. An online sample of 586 participants

(Mage = 37.05, SD = 12.99, 60% female) evaluated four brand names where three of the brands were kept the same between participants and the forth brand was presented either as *divine* or s*ublime* brand (e.g., *Divine Jewelry* vs. *Sublime Jewelry*). The type of brand image (functional, hedonic and symbolic) was also manipulated between subjects. All stimuli brand names were real registered trademarks, except the *Sublime* brand. The list of all brands was as follows: *Divine/Sublime Soap, Divine/Sublime Chocolate, Divine/Sublime Jewelry, Radiance Toothpaste, Green Coffee, Glamour Suits, Smartline Machinery, Aroma Cosmetics, Royalty Watches, Savvy Appliances, Crown Perfumes and Gold Bags*. Each brand name was evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Very Low) to 7 (Very High) on 23 attributes found in the previous word association studies. Seventeen of these associations were randomly chosen from the list of all associations previously collected to which I then added the six divine attributes (Brower et al., 2009). The purpose was to have a mix of transcendental and non-transcendental- related associations in order for participants not to be able to guess the purpose of the experiment. A question about the general attitude towards the brand was also included. Finally, participants responded to 10-item scales measuring religious commitment, Cronbach's α = .97 (Worthington et al., 2003) and spiritual transcendence, Cronbach's α = .93 (Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997).

7.3. Results

7.3.1. Main effects

Findings indicate that brands presented as *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) activate more religion-related associations as predicted in H1 - "religion", M_d = 3.82, SD = 1.83, M_s = 3.08, SD = 1.67, $t(580)$ = 5.13, p <.01; "spirituality", M_d = 4.06, SD = 1.62, M_s = 3.61, SD = 1.58, $t(584)$ = 3.40, p <.01; "morality", M_d = 4.09, SD = 1.50, M_s = 3.79, SD = 1.40, $t(579)$ = 2.52, p =.01; "eternity", M_d = 4.06, SD = 1.63, M_s = 3.70, SD = 1.57, $t(579)$ = 2.72, p = .01. The "power"

dimension also differed significantly between the two conditions, M_d = 4.19, SD = 1.42, M_s = 3.94, SD = 1.42, $t(584)$ = 2.07, p =.04.

From the remaining dimensions, participant score on "uniqueness" differed between the two conditions, M_d = 4.32, SD = 1.46, M_s = 4.72, SD = 1.46, $t(584)$ = − 3.32, p <.01 and the ones for "perfection" and "individualism" were marginally significant, , M_d = 4.52, SD = 1.57, M_s = 4.28, SD = 1.48, $t(584)$ = 1.84, p = .07 and M_d = 4.23, SD = 1.53, M_s = 4.47, SD = 1.52, $t(580)$ = − 1.87, p = .06 respectively.

In terms of attitude towards the brand, I found that brands presented as *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) evoked a more positive brand attitude (M_d = 5.11, SD = 1.46, M_s = 4.82, SD = 1.48, $t(577)$ = 2.40, p = .02), which is in line with H2.
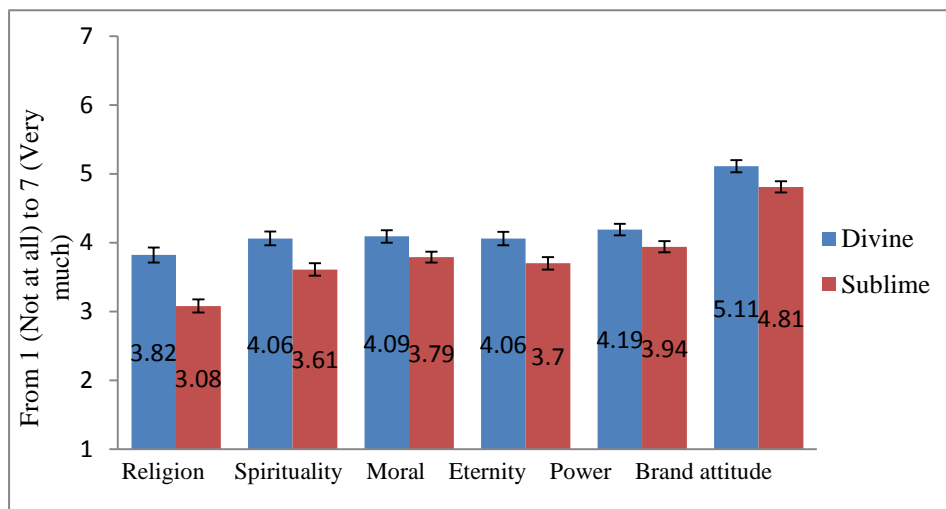
Note: Error bars represent +- 1 standard error.

Figure 1: *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands evoked significantly more religious associations (such as "religion", "spirituality", "morality", "eternity" and "power" than *Sublime*. In addition, these brands lead to more favorable attitudes towards the brand.

7.3.2. Interactions

When I looked at the 2 x 2 interaction of brand name (*Divine* vs. *Sublime*) and brand image (symbolic vs. hedonic and functional), I did not find significant differences on any of the religion-related dimensions (*p* values higher than .05), nor did I find significant results for

the attitude towards the brand, $p = .76$. This means that symbolic (vs. functional and hedonic) brands did not benefit more from *divine* references in the brand names. Thus, the results do not support H5.

In terms of consumer characteristics, a significant interaction between brand name and religiosity on brand attitude was found, $\beta = .20$, $p = .04$ (see Figure 2). For participants low in religiosity ($-1SD$), there was no significant difference in attitude for brands presented as *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*), $M_d = 4.76$, $M_s = 4.72$, $p = .81$; $M_d = 3.74$, $M_s = 3.72$, $p = .91$. However, highly religious participants ($+1SD$) showed a positive attitude towards a brand presented as *Divine* (vs. S*ublime*), $M_d = 5.48$, $M_s = 4.92$, $t(557) = 3.00$, p $< .01$). This is contrary to what I expected as I hypothesized (H6) that highly religious consumers would show more negative attitudes towards brands using explicit *divine* references in commercial contexts.

Looking at spiritual transcendence, I again found a significant interaction of brand name and spirituality on brand attitude, $\beta = .39$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 3). For participants who scored low in spiritual transcendence ($-1SD$), there was no significant difference in attitude for brands presented as *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*), $M_d = 4.68$, $M_s = 4.70$, $p = .91$. However, the highly spiritual participants ($+1SD$) showed a positive attitude towards brands presented as *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*), $M_d = 5.58$, $M_s = 4.91$, $t(560) = 6.07$, p $< .01$. This is in line with H7.

Figure 2: Participant religiosity moderates the effect of our manipulation on attitude towards the brand
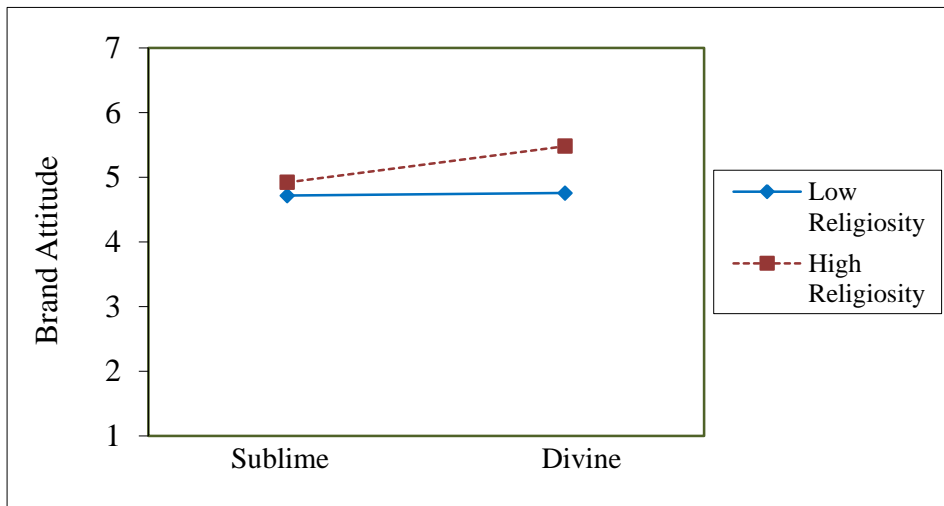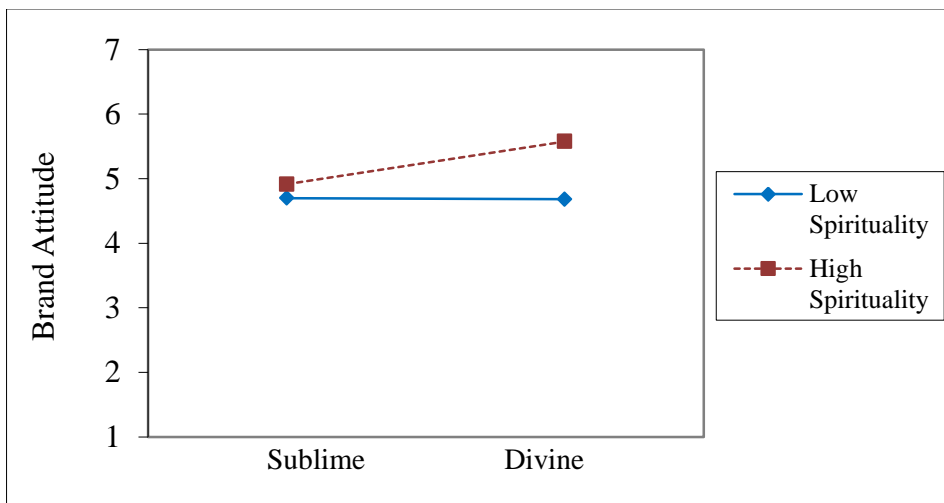

Figure 3: Participant spirituality moderates the effect of our manipulation on attitude towards the brand

7.4. Discussion

This experiment provides evidence that brands having the term *divine* in their names activate significantly more transcendental associations than brands having an equally positive non-religious word in the name. This finding illustrates the potential of explicit *divine* mentions in brand names to activate religion-related associations over and above equally positive ones, which shows support for H1. This activation seems to happen for both religious and non-religious consumers and illustrates the fact that the term *divine* has kept its transcendental meaning despite the broadening of its connotation.

In terms of brand image, I did not find a difference between symbolic, hedonic and functional brands using the term *divine* in their names. It seems that contrary to what was hypothesized in H5, all types of brand could potentially benefit from *divine* mentions in the names. In fact, evidence from practice shows that there are numerous functional and hedonic brands using *divine* as part of their name – *Divine Kitchens*, *Divine battery*, *Divine Chocolate*, *Divine water tanks*, *Divine Coffee*, *Divine Paper*, etc. (WIPO, 2016).

In addition, the results of this study showed that overall *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands evoked more positive attitudes towards the brand in support of H2. Contrary to what I hypothesized in H6, participants high in religiosity, showed more favorable attitudes towards *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands, whereas for low religiosity consumers there was no difference. One possible reason for this finding is that the attitude towards the *divine* concept is already so favorable for religious consumers, that the context in which it is used does not play a role for the overall attitude formation. Another possible reason is that nowadays even religiously committed people are less likely to follow the prescriptions of institutionalized religion and in this sense are becoming more spiritual. What I found in this study was that the more spiritual the participants were, the more favorable attitudes they showed towards brands having a *divine* (vs. s*ublime*) mention in the name. This was in line with what was predicted in H7.

In the next study, my goal was to replicate these results in a marketing setting and thus I conducted a drink taste test. In addition to the attitude towards the brand, I was interested in investigating the attitude towards the product and the willingness to pay for it.

8. Study 4

The goal of the fourth study was to investigate consumer attitudes towards products and brands associated with the divine in a real marketing setting.

8.1. Procedure

The fourth study was conducted with 86 students (M_{age} = 21.30, SD = 2.55, 43% female) in the lab of a mid-European university. Once seated, each participant was given a plastic cup of 1dl of fruit ice tea from a Swiss retailer. On each cup, the name of the tea brand – *Divine* or *Sublime tea* – was written in capital letters. Participants were told that I was testing a new brand name *Divine/Sublime tea* for a product and I asked them to take a moment to taste the tea and evaluate it on 11 dimensions. Five of these dimensions were evaluative such as the pleasantness of the taste and the smell and seven were functional such as the color of the tea, the acidity and the sugar levels. I also included a question on the overall liking of the product. I then asked participants to evaluate the name of the brand on how pleasant-unpleasant, likable-dislikable, attractive-unattractive, positive-negative and warm-cold they perceived it to be. Next, participants wrote the price they were willing to pay for a liter of the tea. Finally, they responded to scales measuring religious commitment, Cronbach's α = .95 (Worthington et al., 2003) and spiritual transcendence, Cronbach's α = .91 (Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997) and to the standard demographic questions.

8.2. Results

8.2.1. Main effects

I computed a brand attitude index composed of the five questions measuring attitudes towards the brand, Cronbach's α =. 84. In addition I computed an index for the five evaluative dimensions of the tea, Cronbach's α = .78. Then, for each specific analysis, I excluded the participants whose responses deviated from the cell mean with 2.5 standard deviations.

Findings indicated that there was a marginally significant difference for participants, who were in the *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) *tea* condition on the overall liking of the product, M_d = 4.86, SD = 1.14, M_s = 4.32, SD = 1.58, $t(78.19)$ = 1.82, p = .07. There was also a marginally

significant difference between the two conditions on attitude towards the brand, $M_d = 5.01$, $SD = .79$, $M_s = 4.60$, $SD = 1.30$, $t(71.68) = 1.75$, $p = .08$.
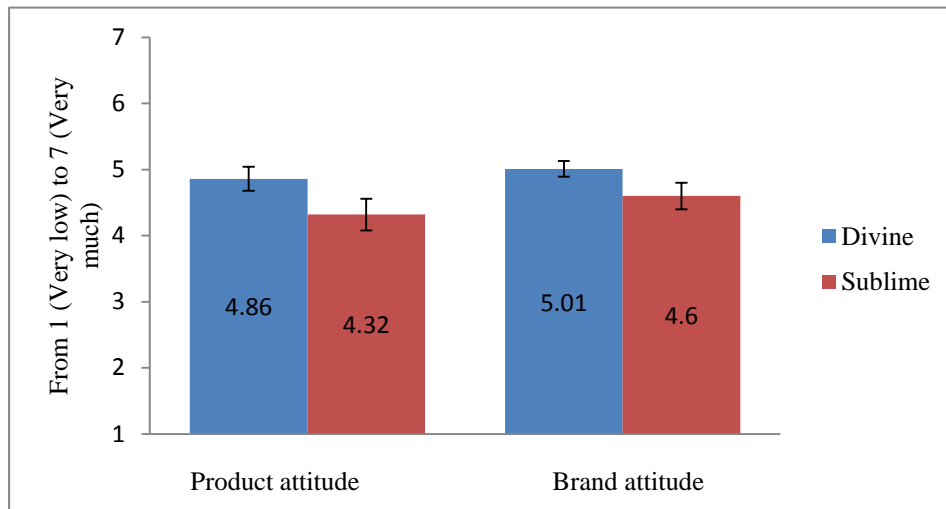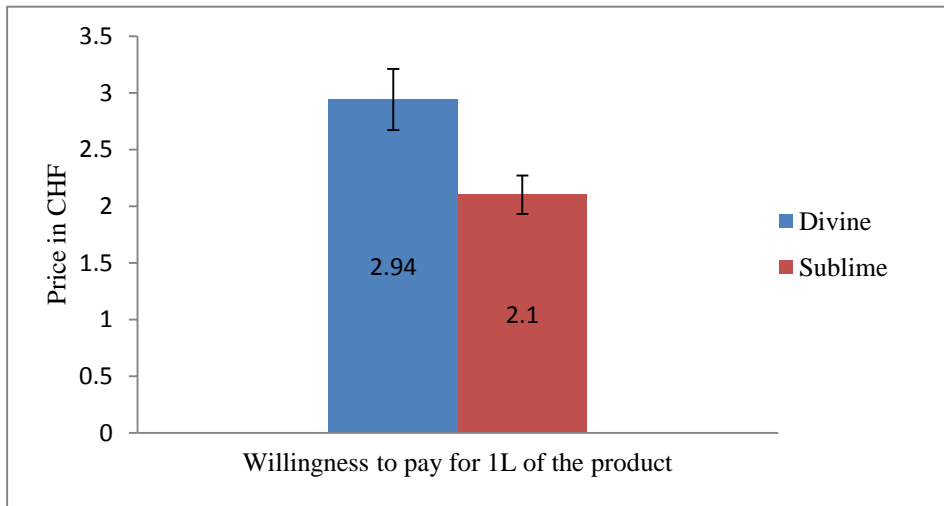

Note: Error bars represent +- 1 standard error.

Figure 4: *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands lead to more favorable attitudes towards the brand and the product.

When it comes to the evaluative tea score, I did not find a difference between the conditions, $M_d = 5.13$, $SD = .83$, $M_s = 4.88$, $SD = 1.08$, $p = .24$. When considering the 11 dimensions separately, the deepness of the tea color and the pleasantness of the taste were the only two for which there was a significant difference between the conditions, $M_d = 4.27$, $SD = 1.38$, $M_s = 4.91$, $SD = .88$, $t(67.34) = -2.53$, $p = .01$ and $M_d = 5.15$, $SD = 1.15$, $M_s = 4.41$, $SD = 1.80$, $t(73.90) = 2.27$, $p = .03$ respectively.

In terms of willingness to pay, participants were willing to pay significantly more for one liter of a *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) *tea*, $M_d = 2.94$, $SD = 1.73$, $M_s = 2.10$, $SD = 1.08$, $t(66.78) = 2.62$, $p = .01$. This is contrary to what I argued in H4.

Note: Error bars represent +- 1 standard error.

Figure 5: *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands lead to higher willingness to pay.

8.2.2. Interactions

Finally, I did not find evidence that religiosity and spirituality moderate the effects of the tea brand name on the following dependent variables: attitude towards the brand, liking the product, willingness to pay or the evaluative or functional dimensions (*p* values above .05).

8.3. Discussion

The findings of this study provide support for H2 and H3. Indeed, brands having the term *divine* in their names seem to evoke more favorable attitudes both towards the brand and also towards the product. Interestingly, when it comes to the specific evaluative and functional dimensions, I did not find a significant difference between the two conditions. However, the name of the tea affected the overall appreciation of the brand and product.

In addition, results provided evidence for the effect of *divine* mentions in brand names on willingness to pay. The findings indicated that consumers were willing to pay more for brands having explicit *divine* mention in their names, which is contrary to what I expected. One possible reason is that the associations participants had with the *divine* concept were so strong and positive in nature that they outweighed the associations with frugality.

Finally, I did not find support for H6 and H7 as participant religiosity and spirituality did not moderate the effects of the manipulation on brand and product attitudes. One possible reason is that the student sample I used was low in religiosity and spirituality ($M_{\text{religiosity}} = 2.39$, $SD = 1.52$ and $M_{\text{spirituality}} = 3.94$, $SD = 1.49$ on a Likert scale from 1 to 7). Therefore, it would be useful to run this study again with a sample that scores higher on religiosity and spirituality. Another possible explanation is the inability of the scales used for measuring religiosity and spirituality to capture these consumer characteristics in the geographical and cultural settings in which the study was conducted.

9. General discussion

Extant research has shown the importance of religion for understanding human nature and has provided evidence that it affects numerous behaviors, including consumption behaviors and choices (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Most research so far has been done in the CCT field and has focused on the religious-like aspects of consumption. In marketing research, the focus of existing literature has been on the effects that different religious traditions produce on consumer behavior. Despite the increasing academic interest in the marketing of religion in recent years, many questions remain unanswered, especially concerning how consumers react to the presence of religious references in consumption contexts and whether brands can satisfy the need for transcendence. Therefore, scholars have called for more theory development and quantitative work to enhance our understanding of the effects of religion on consumer psychology and behavior (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016).

In this research project, I contribute to consumer behavior literature by showing that transcendental religious concepts activate religion-related associations even in consumption settings and that these associations have an effect on consumer attitudes towards brands and

products. I have also obtained initial evidence that religious references in brand elements have the potential to affect certain consumer behaviors.

More specifically, the first two studies which I conducted provided evidence that the term *divine* activates religion-related associations (transcendental but also institutional and religious agents) over and above positive non-religious ones. These associations were mostly positive and overlapped to some extent with the six divine attributes which define the *divine* concept according to The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology (Brower et al., 2009). Furthermore, Study 2 showed that the activation of transcendental associations led to more favorable consumer attitudes towards brands associated with the divine. Contrary to what was expected, highly religious participants showed more favorable attitudes towards *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands than participants low in religiosity. This is possibly due to the loss of authority of institutionalized religion which means that even religious individuals tend to follow less strict religious prescriptions (Pargament, 1999; Pew Research Center, 2015). Thus, it could be that religious people are getting closer to spiritual people in terms of the connection they have with the sacred, which is more personal and less related to dogmatic principles. Because religious consumers nowadays are more open to the usage of a religious reference in popular culture and consumption activity, and thus they evaluate favorably brands calling on spiritual meaning (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). This also holds true for spiritual consumers, which was confirmed in Study 3, in which I found support for the hypothesis that participants high in spirituality showed more favorable attitudes towards *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands.

Finally, the results of Study 4 illustrated that attitudes towards brands and products were more favorable for *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brands, even if the difference was marginally significant. In addition, I found that consumers were willing to pay more for brands having an explicit *divine* mention in the name, which is contrary to what I expected. This finding,

however, is consistent with results from extant literature showing that leading brands which had a positive customer-based brand equity, commanded large price differences (Agrawal, 1996; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Sethuraman, 1996; Simon, 1979).

Finally, in this study, I failed to obtain support for the hypotheses that religious and spiritual consumers show differential attitudes towards a *Divine* (vs. *Sublime*) brand. A possible reason is the fact that participants in my studies were not highly religious and spiritual and thus I did not have enough variance on these characteristics. Additionally, it could be that religious references have already been used in consumption contexts and religious people have become used to seeing them in brand elements and in brand communication. Therefore, they are not likely to perceive such usage in a negative way.

10. Limitations and future directions

Even though this set of studies produced some interesting insights, there are also limitations to the findings and questions that remain unanswered.

First of all, from the *Pretest* studies, I got evidence that the associations evoked by *divine* were mostly positive or neutral. However, I did not use the same participants for the main studies, which implies that I did not directly test the specific associations evoked by the concept for the main study participants, nor their valence. Therefore, future research should incorporate these two – investigating the associations that *divine* evokes and testing their mediating role on the formation of differential consumer attitudes towards the brand – in the same study.

Second, the religious concepts used in the religious priming literature could be grouped into three categories – religious agents, institutional religious concepts, and transcendental concepts (Ritter & Preston, 2013). In this project, I was interested in the effect that the transcendental type of religious concepts produces on consumers. Although a

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transcendental concept does not activate solely transcendental concepts (which was confirmed by the first two studies, in which *divine* evoked all three types of religious associations), it would be insightful to test the effect of brand names that include terms from the remaining two categories – supernatural agents and institutionalized religion. Thus, I recommend that future research investigates whether other types of religious concepts such as *angel*, *heaven*, *prayer, God* lead to the same results. This would provide external validity to the present findings.

Furthermore, it would be of interest to study the effects of negative religious words such as *devil* or *hell* on subsequent consumer attitudes and behaviors. In this project, I used a term that is positively evaluated. However, one might argue that even using a term that is negatively-valenced but evokes associations related to an omnipotent, omniscient, supernatural force still leads to more favorable attitudes towards brands using it in their names. It could be that it is the association of brands with a powerful supernatural mystical force that gives these brands a special status in the eyes of consumers and not necessarily the valence of the associations.

Additionally, further research is needed to investigate the types of consumer intentions and behaviors that are affected by religion-related references in brand names. I expect that in addition to the willingness to pay, which I studied in this paper, behaviors such as brand forgiveness after a brand transgression and levels of consumption could also be affected. I expect this to be the case because of the link between religion and forgiveness and religion and temptation resistance. Furthermore, because religion was found to have an important role in establishing and expressing identity as an individual and as a member of a group (Chong, 1997; Seul, 1999; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010), I expect the usage of brands having religious mentions in the names to lead to heightened self-esteem in consumers. In addition to such positive consequences, I expect brands having a religious

reference in the name to also have negative consequences on consumers in certain situations. Extant research showed that priming religious concepts decreased the likelihood of prosociality and led to prejudice and aggressive behaviors in certain situations (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). Thus, it is possible that consumers using brands with a religious term in the name are less likely to give to an out-group member and are more likely to behave more aggressively towards her. Moderators of this effect could be the type of religious term used in the brand name, the religious affiliation and the in-group identification of the consumer. This provides yet another direction for future research.

Next, I recommend testing the hypotheses of this project using a sample in which there is more variance in terms of trait religiosity and spirituality. It is plausible that in the last study, H5 and H6 were not supported by the data because the student sample I used scored low in religiosity and spirituality. In addition, the scales used to measure religiosity (Worthington et al., 2003) and spirituality (Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997) are adapted for the North American context and it could be that they are not suitable for measuring these traits in a European context. For example, whereas in the US it could be popular to read magazines about one's faith, in Europe this is less the case. Because of this, the scales I used might not have been able to capture the actual religiosity or spirituality of our participants. Future research should address the question whether consumer religiosity and spirituality moderate the effect of religious references in brand names on subsequent attitudes and behaviors. This should be done by using adequate scales measuring these individual characteristics.

Furthermore, the framework by Park, Jaworski and McInnis (1986) has limited validity with brands nowadays as these are playing multiple functions for consumers. Thus, a functional brand such as a laundry detergent may also have a hedonic benefit because of its specific fragrance for example, which makes it difficult to test the effect of brand image type on consumer attitudes. In the case of my experimental studies, one can argue that the choice

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of functional, hedonic, symbolic product categories may not be contrasted enough in order to allow me to study the brand image effect on brand attitudes. For example, soap which I used as a functional product category may be both functional and hedonic at the same time. Thus, I would suggest for future research to pretest carefully different products in order to choose ones that are clearly functional or symbolic or hedonic and that do not combine some or all of these brand images.

Finally, it would be interesting to know how transcendental reference in other brand elements influence consumer attitudes towards the brands and additionally whether they have an influence on consumer behaviors. Extant research has shown that all brand elements, that is names, logos, typeface design and packaging, can act as cues that signal product attributes, benefits and overall quality (Argo, Popa, & Smith, 2010; Doyle & Bottomley, 2006; Hagtvedt, 2011; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008). One could imagine different scenarios such as brands having an angel in their logo or packaging in the shape of a cross or commercials showing that the product is consumed in heaven. Research should look at the effect of these references when they are used in various brand elements in order to test whether there are differences in the ways consumers react to transcendental references in brands and in logos for example.

11. Conclusion and implications

In this paper, I argued that the loss of authority of institutionalized religion and the increasing number of unaffiliated individuals around the world have opened the market to other players who want to fulfil the universal human need of transcendence. Brands have become increasingly powerful in today's consumption societies and thus have become potential players in the market for transcendence. Evidence from practice shows that they have already started associating themselves with the sacred by including divine references in

their brand communication and positioning. It is not clear, however, how consumers perceive the practice of using the sacred in profane domains.

Although the study of religion is not new in the field of social sciences, academics have not yet looked at the effect of brands that use transcendental references in their communication on consumer attitudes towards and behaviors with these brands. The present research intends to contribute to the branding and to the consumer behavior literature by investigating the value of explicit *divine* references in brand names and their effect on consumers. The findings indicated that religious references in consumption domains were accepted by consumers nowadays. Terms such as *divine* evoked religion-related associations when used in brand names and these associations further led to more favorable brand evaluations. Furthermore, religion-related associations with transcendental concepts seem to be universal as they were activated for religious and non-religious consumers alike. This means that contrary to what brands are doing in recent years and namely trying to distance themselves from religion by removing any religious references in their communication and brand elements not to insult certain consumers, brands could actually benefits from such references. The research findings present important managerial implications as they point out that brands can benefit from an association with the *divine* as consumers transfer the associations they have with the concept to brands using it in their names. One should note, however, that *divine* as a transcendental religious concept is not connected to any institutionalized religious tradition and thus consumer associations with it are mostly positive, which may not necessarily be the case for some of the other religious terms such as *church* or *pope*. Thus, marketing managers have to choose carefully the concept they want to use in the brand elements in order for it to be able to benefit the brand image and the product perception. More encompassing transcendental concepts can benefit in particular brands which want to emphasize the longevity of their products, the power of the brand as well as their ethical

practices as explicit *divine* mentions in the brand name was shown to activate strong associations with eternity, morality and power.   In addition, it could be recommended for brands that want to change their image and be perceived as high status, to integrate a transcendental references in their brand elements because results indicated that *divine* was associated with ultimate excellence and perfection and possibly this was the reason why consumers were willing to pay more for brands having *divine* in the name.

To conclude, brands have started associating them with the divine by incorporating religious and spiritual references in their marketing communication and the findings of the current research illustrate that consumers seem to accept this usage of sacred references in secular domains. This raises the questions of whether there are any limits to marketing and if yes, where the border between the sacred and the profane lies.

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Essay 3

Merry Christmas vs. Happy holidays:
Christmas sells but when, how and for whom?

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Abstract

Christmas is one of the most celebrated holidays worldwide. While many engage in the holiday customs and behaviors, there are also some consumers who react negatively to the commercialization of Christmas. Although there is extensive literature on Christmas gift exchange, little is known about the variance among individuals to engage in holiday behaviors depending on the way they see Christmas – as a religious or as a non-religious holiday. This research investigates if and how gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations change after priming consumers with the sacred character of Christmas through religious references in both brand and non-brand communication. We argue that seeing Christmas as a religious (vs. as a predominantly commercial) holiday leads to more gift giving intentions because of the activation of communion as communion is related to consideration of others (vs. self). In addition, we expect that reminders of the religious origins of Christmas lead to lower gift receiving expectations due to the fact that religion primes self-control. We investigate whether this is especially true for consumers high (vs. low) in religiosity.

Keywords: Christmas, gift giving, gift receiving, religion, priming

1. Introduction

Christmas is one of the most celebrated holidays worldwide. Despite the fact that for Christians it began as a celebration of Christ's birth and an occasion to renew ties with family and engage in different religious traditions, the secular aspects of the holiday have become more prominent in recent years. For some retailers, the Christmas season represents 30% of their annual income, making it one of the busiest times of the year (Bhattacharjee & Wohl, 2012; Statista, 2018). Very few other holidays affect people's behaviors as Christmas does: offices close down, people travel home, church attendance increases and billions of dollars are spent on gifts (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). In 2015, US consumers planned to spend 487 USD on gifts and in 2017 this number increased to 906 USD (Deloitte, 2015; Statista, 2018).

Accordingly, retailers and marketers in the Western world invest in various activities to evoke the Christmas spirit and to engage consumers in holiday commercial behaviors. While some use Christian symbols and themes on commercial products or as part of the holiday decorations, others remove religious references in order to emphasize the commercial aspect of Christmas. Evidence shows that consumers respond differently to such efforts (Mortelmans & Damen, 2001; Restad, 1995). As an example, in 2015 Starbucks' holiday cups featuring traditional Christmas-themed designs were replaced with plain red ones, which provoked negative reactions from some consumers: "Do you realize that Starbucks wanted to take Christ, and Christmas, off of their brand-new cups?" (Moyer, 2015). At the same time, others supported Starbucks' initiative to remain neutral. "If you need a coffee chain to be your ambassador of Christ you need to re-examine your relationship w/God.", wrote another consumer on his Twitter account (Moyer, 2015). This controversy illustrates that for some consumers Christmas should not be separated from its religious origins and the religious character of the holiday should be present even in consumption domains. On the other hand, it seems that for other consumers the religious and the commercial sides of Christmas should

not be mixed. Overall, individuals are divided over whether the religious or non-religious holiday character of the holiday should be more present. A poll by the Public Religion Research Institute (Jones & Cox, 2016) illustrated that Americans were divided also over whether it was more appropriate for stores and businesses to greet customers with "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings" instead of "Merry Christmas" out of respect for people of different religious faiths: 47% said they should, while 46% said they should not. Considering that the goal of companies is to engage consumers into more holiday spending, the ultimate question arises: How does the perception of Christmas (as a religious or non-religious holiday) affect holiday-related behaviors and more specifically gift exchange in the Western, predominantly Christian, context?

Despite the importance of Christmas, there is surprisingly little empirical research on how consumer perception of the holiday affects holiday-related commercial behaviors and in particularly gift exchange. The goal of the current research is to advance knowledge by investigating whether in a Western Christian context the usage of religious holiday references affects people's consumption behaviors and specifically how much they buy for others and how much they expect to receive from them. Although one might expect that thinking of the religious origins of Christmas makes consumers engage more in activities such as family gatherings and charity donations rather than on spending money for consumer goods, we hypothesize that on the contrary, consumers will buy more. We expect the religious character of Christmas to prime consumers with communion, where communion stands for the integration of the self in a larger social unit through caring for others and involves qualities such as generosity, a focus on the well-being of others, cooperativeness, trustworthiness, and interdependence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Because of this, we expect the activation of communion to engage consumers into more buying as they will seek to offer more and more expensive gifts to others as a sign for their love and esteem for these people. At the same

time, because religion promotes certain values such as transcending the material world, curbing selfish impulses, resisting temptation and exercising self-control, individuals may have to abandon certain pleasures for themselves (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). As a result, we expect consumers primed with the religious character of Christmas to expect to receive less gifts from others. In addition, we investigate whether more (vs. less) religious segments are more (vs. less) sensitive to the religious character of Christmas.

2. Literature review

Although Christmas is still the most celebrated holiday in the Western world and more Americans celebrate it than any other December holiday, there are significant divisions over the degree to which the holiday is perceived as religious (Jones & Cox, 2016). More than four in ten (43%) Americans who were celebrating Christmas reported that for them, it was a strongly religious holiday and 29% said it was a somewhat religious holiday, while more than one in four (27%) Americans celebrating Christmas said their celebration of the holiday was not too religious (Jones & Cox, 2016).

Regardless of the way people perceive the holiday the big number of shoppers at stores and shopping malls before and during Christmas suggests that many Western consumers do engage in holiday-related behaviors. Thus, it is worthwhile studying Christmas and its impact on consumers.

In academic research, Christmas has been studied in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and consumer research. Anthropology has examined the origins of the holiday and its meaning in various cultures (Miller, 1993; Sherry, 1983) and psychology has looked into the effects of the holiday on well-being (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002), psychiatric admissions (Velamoor, Cernovsky, & Voruganti,, 1999) and suicide rates (Jessen & Jensen, 1999).

Consumer research has generally looked into Christmas myths, movies, and media messages (Belk, 1989; 1993), and also into gift-giving rituals (Belk, 1976, 1979; Caplow, 1982; 1984; Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989). It is worth noting that extant research was predominantly done in a Western Christian context and thus findings are specific to it.

2.1. Anthropology

While the religious origin of Christmas related to the celebration of Christ's birth can be traced to a number of pagan winter festivals such as the Roman Saturnalia and the Teutonic Yule (Golby & Purdue, 1986), Christmas as it is today is a relatively modern invention (Belk, 1989). Some Christmas traditions such as the Christmas dinner and charity to the poor have pre-Christian roots, while others such as gift exchange, Santa Claus, Christmas carols, Christmas trees, cookies and candies emerged or reemerged, during the Victorian period (Belk, 1989).

The lack of continuity between old pagan holidays and Christmas as we know it has been partly due to the negative reactions which arose among religious immigrants in the American colonies. In the 17th century, for example, Puritans in Massachusetts fined people who observed the Christmas holiday by feasting and stopping their work (Barnett, 1954; Golby & Purdue, 1986). A century later, small celebrations started emerging again among European immigrants, mostly in New York and Pennsylvania, but there was no legal recognition of Christmas until the 19th century (Golby & Purdue, 1986; McGinty, 1979; Shoemaker, 1959; Snyder, 1985). It was writers such as Charles Dickens and Washington Irving who brought back interest in the Victorian celebrations of home, family and children (Belk, 1993). The development of the holiday as a commercial one was additionally stimulated by the creation of popular charity bazaars in which handmade gifts were sold and additionally by the creation of displays of Christmas merchandise by retail stores (O'Neil,

1981). In 1874, Macy's store in New York presented a display of dolls which started the tradition of Christmas window shopping (Snyder, 1985). According to Waits (1978), it was precisely manufacturers and retailers who helped sacralize commodities by designating certain items as "Christmas gifts" rather than mere merchandise. Retailers also created the tradition of gift wrapping (Snyder, 1985).

2.2. Psychology and well-being

Past research suggested that seven main types of activities occur during the Christmas holidays (Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989). These are spending time with family, participating in religious activities, maintaining traditions such as the decoration of the Christmas tree, spending money on others via the purchase of gifts, receiving gifts from others, helping others, and enjoying the sensual aspects of the holiday such as good food (Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989). When researchers studied these activities, they found that more happiness was reported when family and religious experiences were especially salient, and lower well-being occurred when spending money and receiving gifts predominated (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Engaging in environmentally conscious consumption practices also predicted a happier holiday (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Therefore, it seems that the materialistic aspects of modern Christmas celebrations undermine well-being, while family and spiritual activities help people to feel more satisfied (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). These findings support work on religious experiences which suggested that religious experiences were powerful predictors of happiness (Emmons & Palutzian, 2003; Myers, 2000). Additionally, the fact that religious experience provides a sense of greater meaning may be another important determinant of happiness (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002).

2.3. Consumer research

In consumer research, one of the big topics related to Christmas is the sacred vs. secular character of the holiday. Belk (1989) proposed both sacred and secular metaphors to describe Christmas consumption. He argued that by the transfer of products from the profane commercial world into the sacred sphere of the holiday, people sacralized consumption and by engaging in hedonistic and materialistic behaviors during that time, they secularized it (Belk, 1989). In that way, the sacred and the secular aspects of Christmas are inextricably intertwined (Barnett, 1954). Moreover, although religious institutions condemn the commercial aspects of Christmas, it is now more common for a priest to support the secular celebration of the holiday such as lighting of the Christmas tree and the Christmas feasts (Belk, 1989). At the same time, despite the fact that Santa Claus is a modern invention, children were found to be reluctant to eat cookies with his image on them, illustrating that the figure of Santa Claus has acquired sacred qualities (Shlien, 1959). Therefore, paradoxically Christmas is at the same time the greatest religious and the greatest commercial holiday.

In addition to the sacred and secular character of the holiday, consumer research has been particularly interested in the different aspects of holiday gift exchange (Belk, 1979; Bienenstock & Bianchi, 2004; Sherry, 1983) such as gift selection (Belk, 1976; Brown & Transgrud, 2008), gift purchase (McGrath, 1995), and intangible gifts (Clarke, 2008). A gift was found to reflect the occasion, the donor, the recipient, and the relationship between the donor and the recipient (Sherry, 1983). Along possible donor motivations, research found the following: donor power, donor status but also an altruistic desire for creating pleasure (Goodwin, Smith, & Spiggle, 1990; Sherry, 1983; Wolfinbarger, 1990; Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1993). Christmas gifts are particularly value expressive and serve diverse social, economic, and personal purposes (Belk, 1979; Sherry, 1983). One message primarily conveyed by Christmas gifts is love, affection, and esteem for the recipient (Fischer & Arnold, 1990). The

gift giving ritual allows individuals to communicate and transfer some symbolic meanings into the life of the recipient (Belk, 1979). Christmas gift giving in particular should be of much greater importance to individuals who hold strong communal values since Christmas rituals underscore values such as generosity, love, and charity (Fischer & Arnold, 1990).

Finally, a few scholars have looked at some more commercial aspects of the holiday. Christmas is the peak of consumerism in Western societies when celebration, commercial goals and religious values are intertwined to create a unique consumption occasion for giving gifts (Caplow & Williamson, 1980; Clarke, 2006). In that sense, Fischer and Arnold (1990) spoke about gift selection and gift giving as consumption objects. Retailers on their side engage in variety of strategies in order to increase commercial behaviors. It was found, for example, that the congruent combination of Christmas scent and Christmas music improved consumer evaluations of a retailer, the environment and the merchandise available (Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott, 2005). Moreover, Grohmann et al. (2006) showed that consumer love for Christmas was a measurable construct that is influenced by their level of materialism, level of satisfaction with life, extraversion trait, their proneness for sensory pleasure, and their love for shopping. Consumers, who loved Christmas more, responded more positively to consumption behaviors related to the holiday such as gift exchange or Christmas wrapping (Grohmann, Sprott, & Spangenberg, 2006).

2.4. Research gap

In sum, Christmas as possibly the most celebrated holiday worldwide is associated with very specific holiday-related behaviors and rituals such as gift exchange, lighting the Christmas tree, singing Christmas carols, going to church and spending time with family. Researchers (Barnett, 1954; Belk, 1989) proposed both sacred and secular metaphors to describe these holiday-related behaviors. Evidence from practice also shows the co-existence

of the religious and the commercial aspects of the holiday. While some companies include religious Christmas-related references in their marketing communication, others remove such elements in order to emphasize the commercial (vs. religious) character of the holiday. We also have evidence that some consumers react negatively to the disassociation of brands with the holiday's religious character, which means that for some the sacred aspect of Christmas is still prominent. Others, however, seem to appreciate the lack of religious references in brand communication at Christmas time.

According to our knowledge, there is no consistent research investigating how the perception of Christmas as a religious (vs. commercial) holiday affects holiday-related consumption behaviors, and particularly in terms of gift exchange. As Christmas is a very special time of the year because of its religious and commercial character, we expect to see a difference between gift-related behaviors during Christmas and during any other time period. There is evidence in literature that religion relates to a variety of psychological outcomes and consumer behaviors (Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014). For example, priming people with concepts such as *God*, *spirit*, *holy,* etc. had an effect, among others, on self-evaluation concerns (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990), honesty (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007), attachment-related processes (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004) and prosociality (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that priming consumers with the religious character of Christmas by using religious elements in decorations or brand elements has an effect on gift giving and receiving. The purpose of this research project is to investigate specifically how gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations change, if they do at all, when consumers perceive Christmas as a sacred (vs. secular) holiday.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. Gift giving

Across many religions and cultures, the idea of religiosity evokes positive images of charity and altruism. Religion implies ideals of generosity and concern for others (Erikson, 1963) and provides specific reinforcements and punishments in order to foster moral and prosocial behavior (Skinner, 1969).

Academic research has also confirmed the link between religion and concern for others (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). Religion was found to make people more generous (Brooks, 2003, 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Weipking & Maas, 2009) and to promote more empathy and altruism (Smith, 2006). Religious participants were found to be more likely to engage in volunteering (Campbell & Yonish, 2003) and charitable giving (Bryant, Jeon-Slaughter, Kang, & Tax, 2003; Havens, O'Herlihy, & Schervish, 2002; Wang & Graddy, 2008). Evidence confirmed that one does not even need to be religious in order to be affected by religion (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Simply priming religious thoughts was enough to increase generosity in anonymous economic games (Ahmed & Salas, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). In addition, participants tended to cooperate more, to expect their peers to be more cooperative, and to find peers to be more honest and moral when they were told that their partner in the game was doing religious (vs. business) studies (Dreu, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1995).

Due to this link between religion and generosity, we expect people who perceive Christmas as a religious (vs. non-religious) holiday to give more gifts to others and to increase their spending on these gifts. The reason behind is that if religion is associated with generosity, compassion and interpersonal relationships, then religious concepts and images should evoke behavioral or perceptual responses in accordance with these associations (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007). Evidence from practice shows that indeed at Christmas

time, website donations increase by 42% during November/December compared to other months throughout the year (Causes.com, 2010). Additionally, three times as many people make donations during the holiday (vs. non-holiday) period (Causes.com, 2010). Not only donations increase during this time of the year, however. Gift giving is also an act of showing generosity and affection. In the past, American settlers maintained an old obligation to offer gifts to the poor without expecting anything in return (Batinga, Pinto, & Pimenta, 2017). Thus, the ritual of gift exchange initially was an act of gift donation. Thus, despite the fact that gifts are something material and religion promotes transcending the material world, we expect that at Christmas times the desire to be generous and give to others is stronger which makes spending money on gifts for others acceptable.

Therefore, we expect that religious symbols used to evoke the Christmas spirit during the holiday season will remind consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas, which in turn will result in a desire to be generous and create pleasure for others. Thus:

H1: Priming consumers with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will lead to stronger (vs. weaker) gift giving intentions.

The reason behind this effect is the activation of communion. There is extensive literature in social and personality psychology that distinguishes between two fundamental dimensions when describing persons and groups. This distinction appears under different names in research. Examples include masculine-feminine, agentic-communal, task-relationship orientation, individualistic-collectivistic, intellectually-socially good-bad, competence-morality, or competence-warmth (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt & Kashima, 2005). All these distinctions may be broadly grouped under headings such as communion and agency. Bakan (1966, p. 14-15) was the first to introduce the terms communion and agency. He argued that these are "two fundamental modalities in

the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is part" (Bakan, 1966, p. 14-15). Communion arises from strivings to integrate the self in a larger social unit through caring for others and involves qualities such as focusing on others and their well-being, cooperativeness, expressivity, warmth, trustworthiness, nurturance, and interdependence, in contrast to agency which is related to strivings to individuate the self and involves qualities such as instrumentality, ambition, dominance, competence, independence, stereotypical masculinity, and efficiency in goal attainment (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). People perceive communal individuals as allies and those low in communion as competitors (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997). As the potential beneficiary of others' communal generosity, people seek and value communal people (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2013; Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). It is important to mention that although communion includes generosity, the two are not interchangeable terms. Communion includes but is not limited to the concept of generosity. To be communal is to be generous, and in addition warm, honest, compassionate, and agreeable (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bakan, 1966).

In terms of individual differences, greater spiritual or religious interest, investment and commitment are positively associated with a communal value orientation (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Because religion is associated with communion, religious symbols and images also evoke behavioral or perceptual responses in accordance with communion (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007). Therefore, priming consumers with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas is expected to activate a communion mindset that is associated with a focus on the others and more specifically on generosity.

H2: Priming consumers with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will lead to stronger (vs. weaker) gift giving intentions due to the activation of communal (vs. agentic) mindset.

3.2. Gift receiving

One of the functions of a religious belief system is to provide an ultimate vision of what people should be striving for in their life and strategies to reach these ends (Kapitan, 1991; Lawrence, 1997; Metcalf, 2004; Newton & McIntosh, 2010). A core value of religion is connected to the idea of transcending the material world in order for one to live according to the will of God (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). In both Eastern and Western religious traditions, the pursuit of transcendence is viewed as conflicting with the acquisition of material possessions (Landis, 1957). Materialism is believed to hinder the pursuit for transcendence and that is why religion advocates resisting material temptations. Indeed, religious individuals across religions were found to be driven less by materialistic motivation compared to less or non-religious ones (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Religious individuals have sacred values for which they resist trade-offs with other values, particularly economic or materialistic incentives (Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012).

In addition, religion helps people transcend the narrow focus on the self and on self-enhancement (Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). Research found that participants assigned to engage in daily prayer reported more selfless concern for others compared to controls (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010). Other experimental work found that priming people with god concepts causes them to behave less selfishly in a dictator game (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Because of its religious origins and focus on giving, individuals should be even less focused on themselves during the Christmas holidays.

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Because Christmas is a time at which people are less driven by materialistic motivations and because the focus is on others rather than on oneself, we argue that individuals primed with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will expect fewer material gifts.

H3: Priming consumers with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will lead to lower (vs. higher) gift receiving expectations.

Among other things, sacred laws and standards specify what believers should and should not do, what they should eat or drink and how they should treat others and themselves (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Engaging in religious practices and exposure to religious stimuli may activate certain psychological mechanisms that increase people's readiness to engage in self-regulation. As a consequence, maintaining religious standards can mean that individuals must experience some discomfort and forego pleasurable experiences. Highly religious people tend to have a greater discipline on their consumption (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009) and are less likely to engage in conspicuous consumption (Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). Extant research showed that simple reminders of God also increased temptation resistance and self-control (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; McCullough & Carter, 2011; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Stark & Bainbridge, 2013). Individuals do not need to be affiliated with a specific religious institution for experiencing the effects of religion on self-control as priming literature showed that religion affects behaviors even of non-religious individuals (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

Thus we argue that priming the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas through religious symbols and images will activate religious ideals such exerting self-control in order to resist temptation, which will result in less gift receiving expectations (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

H4: Priming consumers with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will lead to lower (vs. higher) gift receiving expectations due to the activation of high (vs. low) self-control.

3.3. Consumer religiosity

Religious people evaluate the world through the prism of specific sets of beliefs, rituals, values, and community structures that are promoted by religion (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Thus, religiously affiliated people are more acquainted with religious values, and as a result these are more chronically activated. The reason behind is that according to the network memory model (Anderson & Bower, 1973), the activation of mental representations depends on the frequency with which they are encountered in the environment. Because religious people think more often of religious principles than non-religious ones, religious concepts and images should evoke behavioral or perceptual responses in accordance with these principles (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007). Therefore, we expect that for religiously affiliated people concepts such as generosity and social values are more chronically activated when primed of the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas.

H5: Priming consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will lead to (a) the activation of a communal mindset and thus (b) higher (vs. lower) gift giving intentions, for consumers high (vs. low) in religiosity.

In addition to generosity, we expect notions such as being less materialistic and exercising control in the presence of pleasurable experiences to be more chronically activated for religious consumers who have internalized these religious values. Academic research illustrated, for example, that generally religious individuals showed greater ability to resist temptations in the realms of sexual fidelity and honesty (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). In addition, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from around the world appear to value

individualistic and hedonistic pursuits less than do nonreligious people (McCullough &

Willoughby, 2009; Roberts & Robins, 2000; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Thus:

H6: Priming consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas will

lead to (a) heightened self-control and thus (b) lower (vs. higher) gift giving expectations, for

consumers high (vs. low) in religiosity.

To sum up, we argue that contrary what some may hypothesize, priming the religious

(vs. non-religious) origins of Christmas will lead to higher gift giving intentions which will

result in more buying. At the same time, we argue that priming the sacred (vs. secular)

character of the holiday will lead to expecting fewer gifts from others. We propose that the

reasons behind are the activation of a communion mindset as well as an increase in self-

control.

The conceptual framework we propose is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
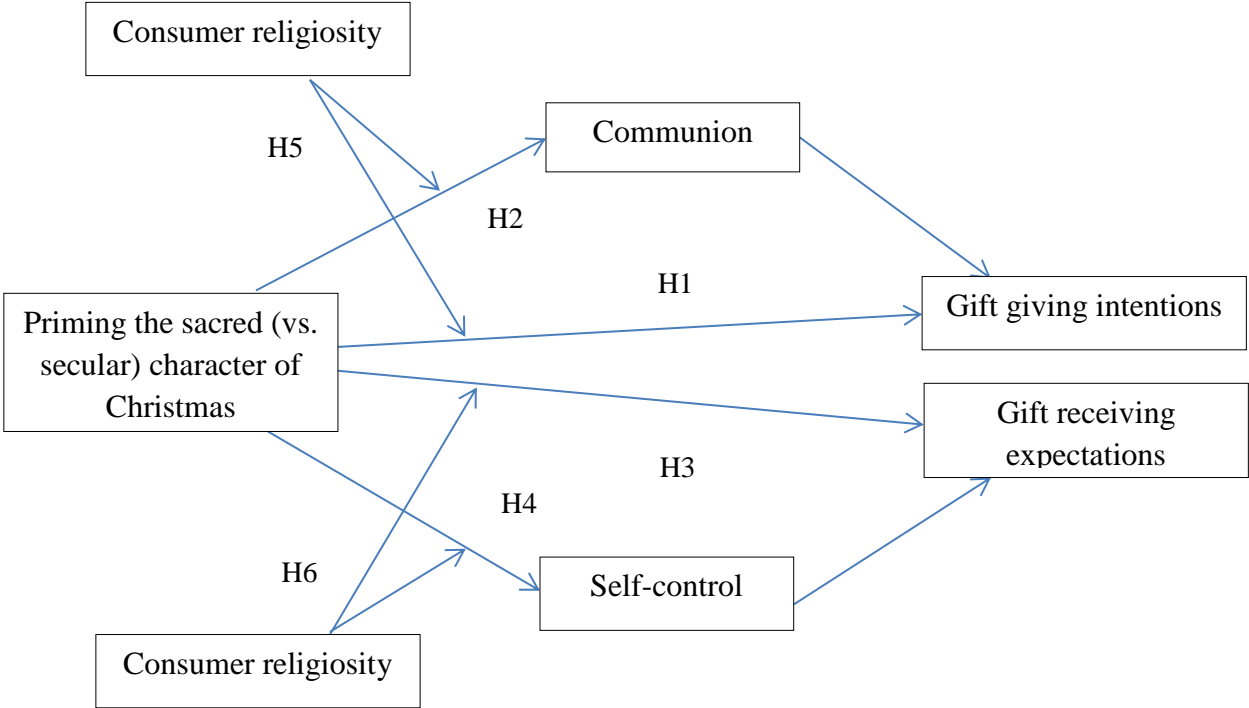
Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Three studies were conducted to investigate our hypotheses by using both non-student and student samples. In Study 1, our goal was to examine participant gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations by priming the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas through background images on the *Introduction* page of the experiment. In Studies 2 and 3, we used marketing related stimuli to manipulate the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas. Study 2 was conducted online, while Study 3 involved students at a mid-European university

4. Study 1

4.1. Pretest

In an online study, we presented 196 participants (Mage = 35.48, SD = 12.78, 56.9% female) with images of 16 biscuit cutters in different forms. All forms were related to Christmas – a snowman, a Gingerbread man, a wrapped present, a star, an angel, etc. (see Appendix A). We then asked participants to evaluate each image on how religious they considered it to be on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 10 (Very much).

Independent *t*-tests were conducted and results showed that the four images which scored highest on the religious dimension were nativity scene ($M_{nativity}$ = 8.24, SD = 2.43), angel (M_{angel} = 6.89, SD = 2.83), dove (M_{dove} = 6.56, SD = 2.88), and star (M_{star} = 5.47, SD = 3.10), while the four images which scored lowest on the religious dimension were Gingerbread man ($M_{gingerbread}$ = 2.55, SD = 2.97), Rudolph ($M_{rudolph}$ = 2.53, SD = 2.96), mitten (M_{mitten} = 2.48, SD = 2.87) and snowman ($M_{snowman}$ = 2.34, SD = 2.92). Thus, we decided to use these eight images in the subsequent studies as primes of either the religious vs. non-religious character of Christmas.
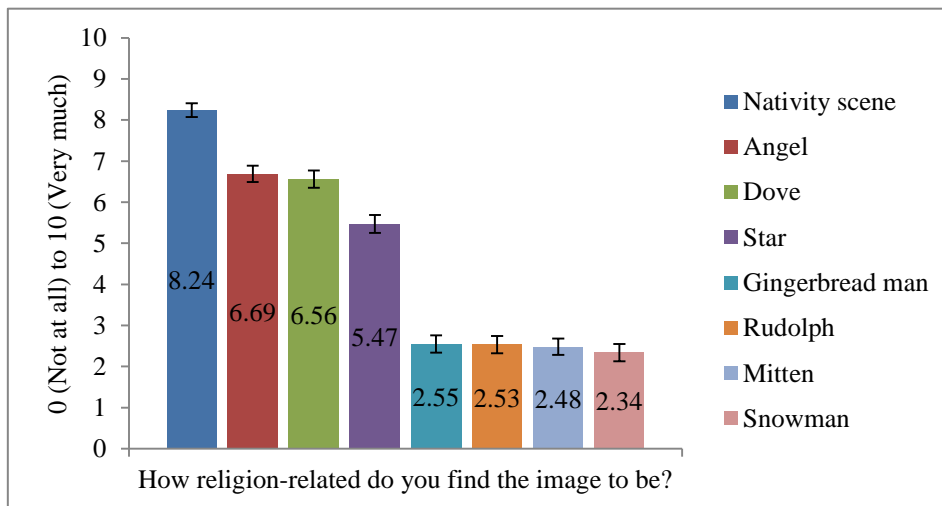
Figure 2: Means for eight of the 16 biscuit cutter images used in the *Pretest*

4.2. Method

In an online study of 300 US participants, we used the eight images from the *Pretest* study, which we grouped into two pictures, each comprising four images (four that scored very high on the religious dimension and four that scored very low on the religious dimension). We used the two pictures as background for the first two windows participants saw when they opened the study: the introduction and the informed consent. Our goal was to prime the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas, avoiding to make our participants consciously elaborate on it. Extant research has shown that supraliminal techniques such as priming with religious words or images activates behavioral schemas and concepts (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016).

We then asked questions regarding the plans of our participants for the coming Christmas: number of gifts to give, number of people to give to, number of gifts expected to receive, value of the gifts, etc.

Next, we measured religious commitment using a scale we adopted from Worthington et al. (2003), Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$. We also asked participants to evaluate their involvement in the study by answering the following question: "*Do you feel like you answered all the questions consciously enough for us to include your answers in our research? Please answer this question honestly, it will not affect your pay for this study nor your participation in following studies*". The study finished with demographic questions.

4.3. Results

We excluded three participants who indicated that their answers were not serious and should not be included in our analyses, leaving us with a final sample of 297 individuals ($M_{age} = 33.54$, $SD = 11.58$, 56.9% female). In addition, for each analysis, we excluded participants whose responses deviated from the cell mean by 2.5 standard deviations, which is a commonly used cut-off point (Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2017).

4.3.1. Main effects

Results indicated that there was a significant difference on the value participants planned to spend on gifts, depending on whether they saw the religious or the non-religious images ($M_{religious} = 439.06$, $SD = 479.08$, $M_{nonreligious} = 314.34$, $SD = 360.92$, $t(290) = 2.52$, $p = .01$).

We did not find a significant difference in the number of people participants planned to give gifts to ($M_{religious} = 6.25$, $SD = 4.82$, $M_{nonreligious} = 5.82$, $SD = 4.36$, $t(288) = .78$, $p = .43$), nor in the number of gifts they planned to give ($M_{religious} = 13.71$, $SD = 14.73$, $M_{nonreligious} = 11.57$, $SD = 11.43$, $t(267.80) = 1.38$, $p = .17$). We also did not find an effect on the number of people participants expected to receive gifts from, the total number of gifts and value of the expected gifts ($M_{religious} = 4.12$, $SD = 2.76$, $M_{nonreligious} = 3.97$, $SD = 2.70$, $t(281) = .44$, $p = .66$;

$M_{religious} = 5.61$, $SD = 4.83$, $M_{nonreligious} = 5.63$, $SD = 5.02$, $t(284) = -.04$, $p = .97$; $M_{religious} = 202.31$, $SD = 204.32$, $M_{nonreligious} = 204.91$, $SD = 239.57$, , $t(281) = -.10$, $p = .92$ respectively).
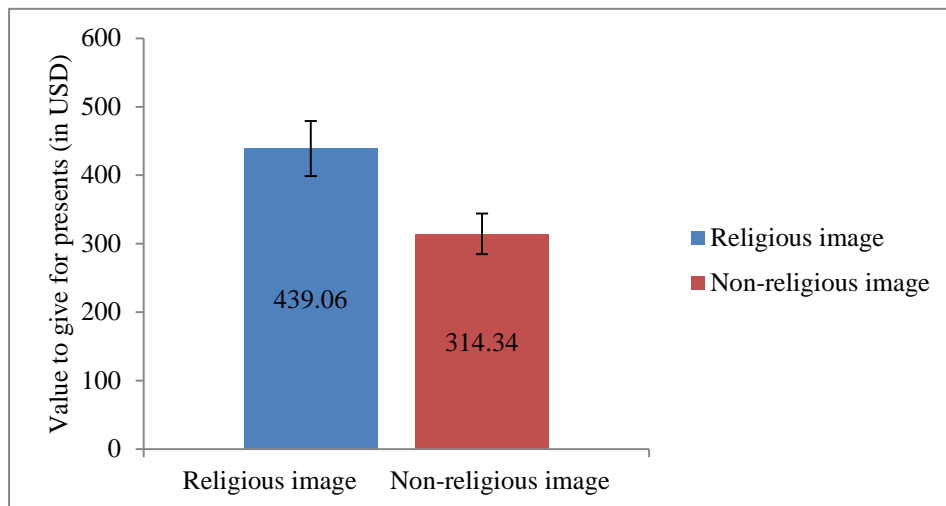
Note: Error bars represent +/− 1 standard error

Figure 3: The type of image (religious vs. non-religious) has a significant effect on the value participants intended to spend.

4.3.2. Interactions

The results of a linear regression did not reveal a significant interaction of image type (religious vs. non-religious) and consumer religiosity on gift giving intentions ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .16$, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .19$, $\beta = .08$, $p = .53$ for number of people to give gifts to, number of gifts to give and the value of these gifts respectively) and gift receiving expectations ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .15$, $\beta = -.20$, $p = .13$, $\beta = -.05$, $p = .69$ for number of people to give gifts to, number of expected gifts and the value of these gifts respectively). This means that whether participants were high or low in religiosity did not affect how the Christmas image they saw influenced their holiday gift intentions and expectations, which is contrary to what we hypothesized.

4.4. Discussion

In this study, we obtained partial support for our first hypothesis (H1). Consumers who were primed with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas were indeed willing to spend more on gifts for others. In addition, these participants were willing to give more gifts and to more people, even though the difference was not significant.

In terms of gift receiving, participants did not expect to receive less when they were reminded of the sacred (vs. secular) origins of the holiday, which means that we did not find support for our third hypothesis. Some also said in their answers that it was difficult for them to imagine the gifts they would receive and that it was even inappropriate to imagine what they would receive, which could be a possible explanation as to why we failed to obtain support for H3.

Finally, we did not obtain support for the moderating role of consumer religiosity (H5b and H6b) on gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations. Participants both high and low in religiosity were equally affected by the Christmas-related images they saw.

In Study 2, we used a different manipulation to test the hypotheses of this paper. Instead of including religious vs. non-religious Christmas-related images on the introduction page of the experiment, we used a more marketing-related supraliminal prime. More specifically we used a coffee cup with a (religious vs. a non-religious) Christmas-related image on it.

5. Study 2

5.1. Pretest

In an online study, we presented 100 participants ($M_{age} = 32.40$, $SD = 10.57$, 43.8% female) with images of eight coffee cups, each of them with a drawing of one of the eight Christmas-related biscuit cutters pretested previously (Appendix B). We then asked

participants to evaluate each cup on how religious, commercial, Christmas-related and nice they considered it to be on a Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 10 (Very much).

Once we had our final sample, we analyzed the religious scores each coffee cup received (Figure 4). The cup which scored highest on the religious dimension was the one with the nativity scene image ($M_{nativity}$ = 6.08, SD = 3.44), and the two which scored lowest on the religious dimension were the Gingerbread man ($M_{gingerbread}$ = 2.74, SD = 3.20) and Rudolph ($M_{rudolph}$ = 2.76, SD = 3.06). After running pairwise t-tests, we found that the only significant difference between the cups with a nativity scene drawing and the one with Rudolph was on the religious dimension ($t(97)$ = 7.92, $p < .01$). The extent to which participants found the two cups to be commercial, Christmas-related and nice was not significantly different ($M_{nativity}$ = 5.85, SD = 3.33, $M_{rudolph}$ = 6.14, SD = 3.32, $t(97)$ = −1.13, p = .26; $M_{nativity}$ = 7.89, SD = 2.61, $M_{rudolph}$ = 7.87, SD = 2.50, $t(97)$ = .08, p = .93; and $M_{nativity}$ = 6.19, SD = 3.23, $M_{rudolph}$ = 6.27, SD = 3.23, $t(97)$ = −.31, p = .76 respectively). There was also no difference between the two on how much participants liked them ($M_{nativity}$ = 5.83, SD = 3.55, $M_{rudolph}$ = 5.70, SD = 3.48, p = .64). At the same time, the cups with nativity scene and Gingerbread man differed significantly on both how religious and how Christmas related they were perceived to be ($t(97)$ = 8.09, $p < .01$ and $t(97)$ = 3.04, $p < .01$ respectively). Because they only differed on how religion-related they were , which is what we were aiming at, we decided to use the cups with the nativity scene and Rudolph in the following studies as primes of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas.
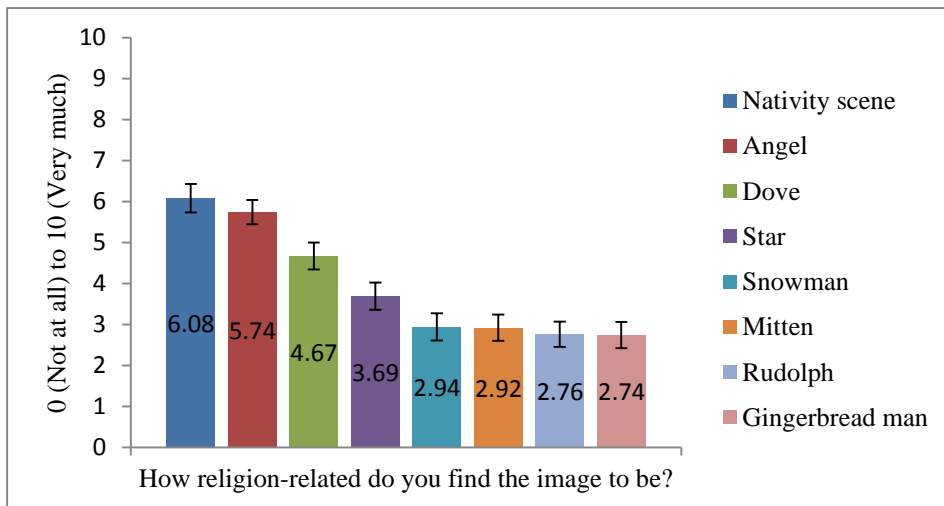
Figure 4: Means for eight of the eight coffee cup images used in the pretest

5.2. Method

In a second online study with 181 US participants, we used two cups from the *Pretest* study to prime participants with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas. After reading the instructions and the informed consent form, participants were asked to write a short text about the design of a coffee cup.

We then asked questions regarding the plans of our participants for the coming Christmas: number of gifts to give, number of people to give to, number of gifts expected to receive, value of the gifts, etc.

As in Study 1, we measured participants' religious commitment using the scale proposed by Worthington et al. (2003), Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$. We also asked participants to evaluate their involvement in the study and let us know if they thought their answers were honest and serious enough. The study finished with demographic questions and a question on how commercial, Christmas-related, nice, and religious the design was perceived to be.

The final sample consisted of 168 individuals (M_{age} = 38.28, SD = 13.06, 57.7% female) as we excluded participants whose responses deviated from the cell mean by 2.5 standard deviations for each of the analyses (Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2017).

5.3. Results

5.3.1. *Manipulation check*

Participants who saw the coffee cup with the religious image on it perceived the cup as significantly more religious than the cup with Rudolph, $M_{religious}$ = 6.49, SD = 3.44, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 2.41, SD = 2.89, $t(159)$ = 8.07, $p < .01$.

5.3.2. *Main effects*

Results indicated that the type of cup participants saw (religious vs. nonreligious image cup) had a significant effect on the number of gifts they planned to give ($M_{religious}$ = 12.17, SD = 12.77, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 7.95, SD = 9.35, $t(158)$ = 2.36, p = .02). In addition, participants were willing to give gifts to more people and spend more on these gifts even though the difference was not significant ($M_{religious}$ = 5.47, SD = 4.41, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 4.64, SD = 3.98, $t(152)$ = 1.22, p = .22 and $M_{religious}$ = 657.18, SD = 722.62, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 584.60, SD = 658.90, , $t(156)$ = .66, p = .51 respectively).

In addition, we found a significant difference in the manipulation on the number of people our participants expected to receive gifts from and on the number of expected gifts ($M_{religious}$ = 4.79, SD = 5.02, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 3.24, SD = 3.00, $t(160)$ = 2.33, p = .02 and $M_{religious}$ = 5.04, SD = 5.07, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 3.45, SD = 3.17, $t(153)$ = 2.30, p = .02 respectively). Contrary to what we hypothesized earlier, participants expected to receive more (vs. less) gifts when they were reminded (vs. they were not reminded) of the religious character of Christmas.

Finally, we did not find a significant difference between the two conditions on the value of the gifts participants expected to receive ($M_{religious} = 315.16$, $SD = 401.88$, $M_{nonreligious} = 238.94$, $SD = 325.94$, $t(150) = 1.28$, $p = .20$).

Figure 5a, b, c: The type of image (religious vs. non-religious) has a significant effect on the number of gifts consumers intended to give, as well as on the number of people they expected gifts from and the number of gifts they expected to receive.

Note: Error bars represent +/− 1 standard error.
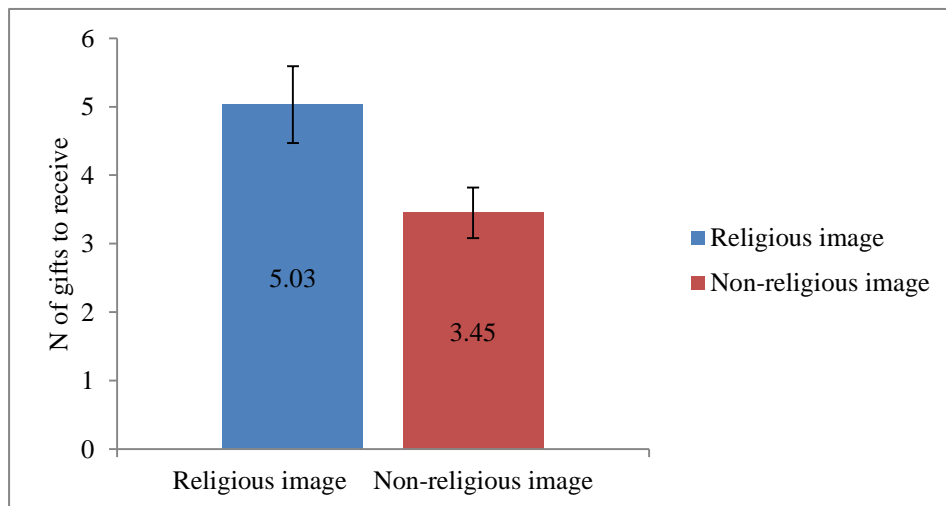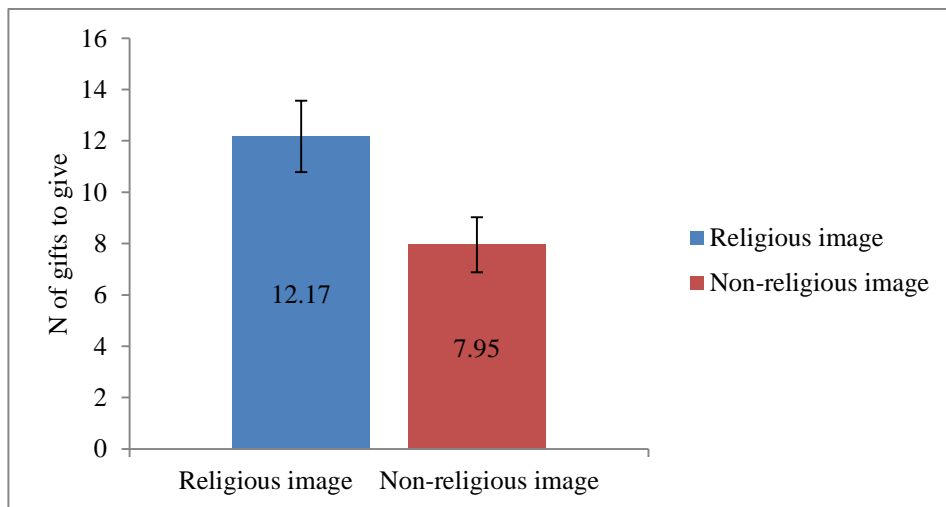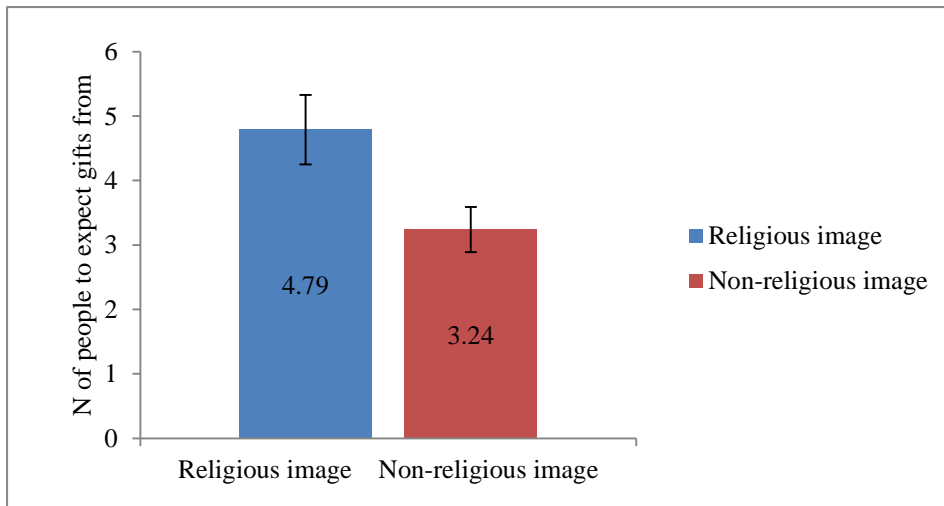
5.3.3. Interactions

The results of a linear regression did not reveal a significant interaction of image type (religious vs. non-religious) and consumer religiosity on the number of people participants planned to give gifts to, the number of these gifts, and their value ($\beta = -.29$, $p = .13$, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .36$, $\beta = .06$, $p = .76$ respectively), nor on the number of people participants expected gifts from and the value of these gifts ($\beta = -.25$, $p = .17$, $\beta = .29$, $p = .12$). However, there was a marginally significant interaction of image type and religiosity on the number of gifts participants expected to receive ($\beta = -.33$, $p = .08$). Those low in religiosity ($-1SD$) expected to receive more gifts when they saw a religious (vs. non-religious) image ($M_{\text{religious}} = 6.22$, $M_{\text{nonreligious}} = 3.43$, $p < .01$), whereas for those high in religiosity ($+1SD$) there was no significant difference ($M_{\text{religious}} = 3.96$, $M_{\text{nonreligious}} = 3.59$, $p = .68$).

This means that generally whether participants were high or low in religiosity did not affect how the Christmas image they saw influenced their holiday gift intentions and expectations. The only difference was the number of gifts consumers expected to receive, in which case, contrary to what we hypothesized, there was a difference between the two conditions (religious vs. non-religious image) for consumers low in religiosity.
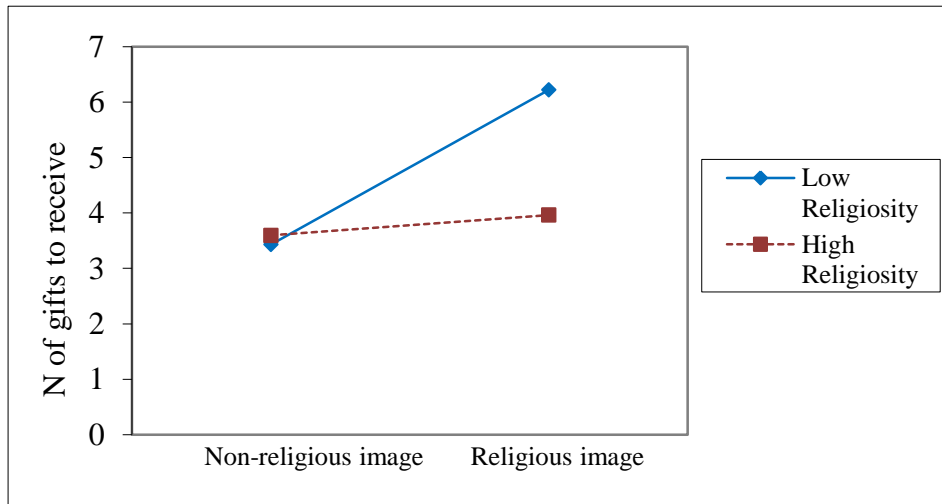
Figure 6: Participant religiosity moderates the effect of our manipulation on the number of gifts participants expected to receive.

5.4. Discussion

In this study, we obtained partial support for our first hypothesis (H1). Indeed, participants intended to buy more gifts when they were reminded of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas. Although they were also willing to spend more and offer gifts to more people, the difference was not significant between the two conditions.

In terms of gift receiving, participants in the religious (vs. non-religious) image condition expected to receive significantly more gifts and from more people. This is contrary to what we hypothesized as we argued that when reminded of the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas, participants would expect fewer gifts due to religion's focus on transcendence rather than on material possessions. One possible explanation for our results is the fact that religion is also associated with heightened feelings of self-worth (Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010), which means that participants who saw the religion-related images were reminded of their own self-worth and thus they expected to receive more.

Finally, consumer religiosity significantly moderated the effect of our manipulation on the number of gifts participants expected to receive. Participants low in religiosity expected to

receive more gifts after seeing the coffee cup with the religious image on it, whereas for participants high in religiosity there was no difference. In this case again, religion could have primed non-religious participants with heightened feelings of self-worth, thus leading to the expectation of more gifts. At the same time, for religious participants Christmas as a holiday had already primed some of religion's core values such as less focus on material possessions and thus the type of image related to the holiday was not able to prime these values any further.

In Study 3, our goal was to replicate the results in a different setting and with a different sample. In addition, we tested H2 and H4 related to the mediating roles of a communal mindset and self-control.

6. Study 3

6.1. Method

The third study involved 240 students from a mid-European university. We used a similar between-subject design as in Study 2. First, we showed participants a picture of a coffee cup (with either a religious or a non-religious Christmas-related image) and asked them to write several sentences about the design. Afterwards, participants responded to a 14-item Communion-Agency scale (Cronbach's α = .83) adopted from Wojciszke and Bialobrzeska (2014), which we reworded in order to emphasize the fact that we were interested in the way participants would describe themselves in that specific moment rather than in general. In addition, we included a 10-item measure of self-control adopted from Tangney et al. (2004), Cronbach's α = .78. We then asked questions regarding the plans of our participants for the coming Christmas – number of gifts to give, number of people to give to, number of gifts expected to receive, value of the gifts, etc.

Participants also answered questions measuring their individual differences such as religious commitment on a scale adopted from Worthington et al. (2003), Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$. As in the previous two studies, we asked participants to evaluate their involvement and how serious they were when answering the questions. The study finished with demographic questions.

The final sample consisted of 237 individuals ($M_{age} = 20.81$, $SD = 2.67$, 46.4% female) as we excluded two participants who indicated on the self-involvement question that their answers should not be included in our analyses and in addition participants whose responses deviated from the cell mean by 2.5 standard deviations for each of the analyses (Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2017).
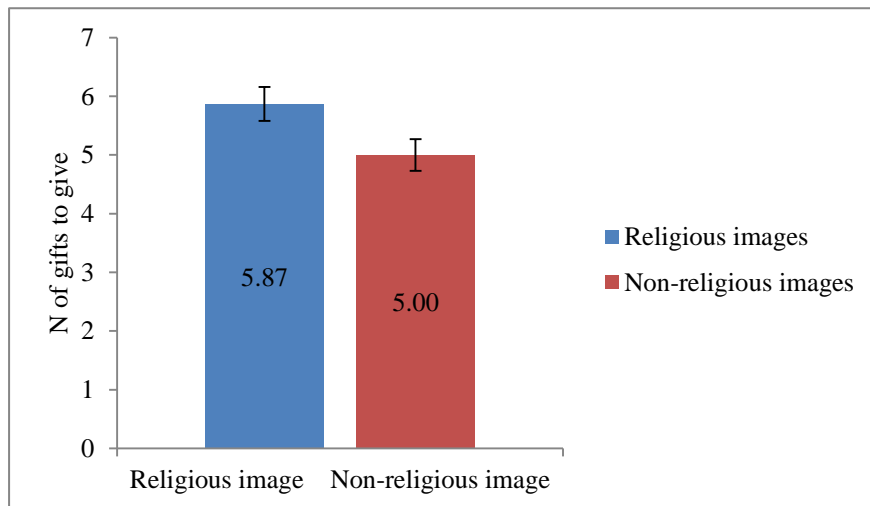
6.2. Results

6.2.1. Manipulation check

There was a significant effect of our manipulation (nativity scene vs. Rudolph cup) on how religious participants perceived the cups to be, $M_{religious} = 4.09$, $SD = 3.68$, $M_{nonreligious} = 1.28$, $SD = 2.02$, $t(235) = 7.30$, $p < .01$.

6.2.2. Main effects

The type of cup participants saw (religious vs. non-religious image cup) had a significant effect on the number of gifts participants planned to give to others ($M_{religious} = 5.87$, $SD = 3.19$, $M_{nonreligious} = 5.00$, $SD = 2.89$, $t(229) = 2.19$, $p = .03$). In terms of number of people to give gifts to and value of the gifts, we did not find a significant difference between the two conditions ($M_{religious} = 4.94$, $SD = 2.18$, $M_{nonreligious} = 4.58$, $SD = 2.53$, $t(229) = 1.15$, $p = .25$, and $M_{religious} = 184.91$, $SD = 108.89$, $M_{nonreligious} = 183.16$, $SD = 129.95$, $t(228) = .11$ $p = .91$).

We did not find a significant effect of our manipulation on the number of people, the number of gifts or the value of the gifts they expected to receive ($M_{religious}$ = 4.88, SD = 2.26, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 4.92, SD = 2.99, $t(229)$ = −.11, p = .91; $M_{religious}$ = 5.18, SD = 3.03, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 5.33, SD = 3.71, $t(230)$ = −.34, p = .73; and $M_{religious}$ = 298.45, SD = 270.85, $M_{nonreligious}$ = 273.25, SD = 214.57, $t(228)$ = .78, p = .44 respectively).

Note: Error bars represent +/− 1 standard error.

Figure 7: The type of image (religious vs. non-religious) has a significant effect on the number of gifts consumers intended to give.

6.2.3. Interactions

The results of a linear regression did not show a significant interaction between the type of image (religious vs. non-religious) and consumer religiosity, neither on gift giving intentions, nor on gift giving expectations. This again points out to the conclusion that whether participants were high or low in religiosity did not affect how the Christmas image they saw influenced their holiday-related plans in terms of gift giving and receiving.

6.2.4. Mediation

We performed a mediation analysis using the PROCESS SPSS macro (Model 8, Hayes, 2012) and followed a bootstrapping procedure that generated a sample size of 5000 to

examine the mediation role of communion. A 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of image type (religious vs. non-religious) and religiosity interaction on the number of gifts participants intended to give through a communal mindset included zero both for participants low ($-1SD$) and high ($+1SD$) in religiosity (95% CI $= -.0525$ to .2006 and CI $= -.0147$ to .2894). Thus, we can conclude that a communion mindset did not mediate the effect of image type on gift giving intentions and in addition participant religiosity did not moderate the mediation.

6.3. Discussion

In this study, we again obtained partial support for H1. After seeing a coffee cup with a religious image (vs. non-religious image), participants intended to buy more gifts for others. Although they also planned to spend more on gifts and offer gifts to more people, the difference between the two conditions was not significant. Contrary to what we expected, participants high in religiosity did not plan to give more when primed with the religious (vs. non-religious) image (H5b). One possible reason is that Christmas being a religious holiday had already primed them with religious values and beliefs and thus it was not possible to prime these participants even more by showing them a religion-related image.

Regarding gift receiving expectations, we did not find a significant difference in the number of gifts our participants thought they would receive depending on the condition they were in, and thus we failed to obtain support for H3. This could be again related to the fact that the exchange of gifts at Christmas time is not a transactional act in which reciprocity is of great importance but rather an act of giving without necessarily expecting something in return. This seems to be the case for both religious and non-religious participants as we did not find a difference in gift receiving expectations among participants high and low in religiosity (H6b).

In terms of the psychological mechanisms explaining the predicted effects, we did not find support that communion mediated the effect of image type on gift giving intentions (H2). Although religion advocates abandoning pleasurable experiences, self-control did not mediate the effect of image type on gift receiving expectations either (H4).

7. General discussion

In this paper, we proposed that reminding consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) origins of Christmas would activate mental representations related to communion and self-control, which in turn would lead to higher gift giving intentions and lower gift giving expectations. We proposed that this would be especially true for religious consumers who had internalized religious values and principles. We conducted three studies to test the six hypotheses of this paper.

The findings partially support our first hypothesis in which we argued that reminding consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas would make them more giving in terms of number of gifts and value of these gifts. This is in line with the findings of extant research which showed a link between religion and generosity (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Systematic findings across cultures, religions and cohorts illustrated that religion was positively associated with prosocial personality traits and values (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). The current research also provides partial evidence that in some situations, emphasizing the religious origins of Christmas supports the commercial side of the holiday. Thus, apart from the increase in donations which we observe during that period, we could also observe an increase in holiday-related commercial behaviors and more specifically in gift giving. As Hirschman & LaBarbera (1989) argued, gift giving is bipolar in nature, representing materialism and interpersonal bonding at the same time.

At the beginning of this paper, we argued that priming the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas would lead to the stronger gift giving intentions through the activation of communion. Under a communal mindset people feel responsible for the other's welfare and thus they focus on benefitting others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). The results from our experimental studies, however, did not show support for this hypothesis. One possible explanation is that Christmas is one of the most celebrated holidays worldwide and people have already strong preexisting associations with it. Christmas is mostly associated with taking care of others, giving to them and being generous in general. Thus, it could be that regardless of whether or not consumers are reminded of the sacred origins of the holiday, they plan to give more and make others happy. It could also be that other factors mediate the effect of the religious character of Christmas on gift giving. For example, for some consumers the fear of an omnipotent and omniscient God could lead to more gift giving intentions and behaviors. Giving could be seen as a way to avoid punishment for not adhering to religious values. Thus, reminding consumers of the religious origins of Christmas can actually prime images of an omnipotent controlling God, which in turn leads to being more generous. Finally, a measurement problem may also exist. It is possible that the scale we adopted (Wojciszke & Bialobrzeska, 2014) is more suitable for measuring communion as an individual difference rather than a state. Despite the fact that we changed the wording of the scale, it is possible that we did not succeed in capturing communion as a state. Without further empirical work, we cannot decisively refute or substantiate any of these explanations.

In terms of their receiving expectations, overall there was no difference between participants who were primed with the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas. Only in Study 2 we obtained significantly different results for two of the dependent variables related to gift receiving – number of gifts to receive and number of people to expect gifts from. Some respondents mentioned in the "comments" section of the studies that it was hard

for them to think about the gifts they would receive and in addition it was inappropriate to do so. It could be that adults unlike children focus less on receiving gifts including Christmas gifts, which is true regardless of whether or not they are reminded of religion. It could also be that reciprocity is less important when it comes to Christmas gifts as the focus at that time of the year is on giving rather than receiving. Still, we obtained evidence that in certain situations and for some consumers, reminders of the religious origins of Christmas led to higher gift receiving expectations in terms of the number of people expected to offer them gifts and the number of these gifts. This is contrary to what we hypothesized. In our second study, participants expected to receive more gifts in the religious (vs. non-religious) image condition. A possible explanation of this result is that the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas primed a heightened feeling of self-worth. Extant literature has shown that religion increases one's own feelings of self-worth due to religion's ability to nurture the belief that one is loved, valued and unique in the eyes of God (Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2010). This could be the reason why participants in the religious image condition expected to receive more gifts than those who saw a non-religious Christmas-related image. Further research is required to understand the effect of religious primes on gift receiving expectations, as well as on the mechanism behind this effect. Earlier in this paper we hypothesized that reminders of the religious origins of Christmas would lead to heightened self-control due to the link between religion and heightened self-control. In this project, however, we could not provide support for this mechanism.

Lastly, we did not obtain consistent support for the hypothesis that trait religiosity moderates the effect of religious images on gift giving intentions and receiving expectations. The only support we obtained was in Study 2 in which results showed that participants low in religiosity expected to receive more gifts after having seen a religious (vs. non-religious) Christmas-related image. For participants high in religiosity there was no difference between

the two conditions. This is contrary to what we expected as we argued that we would see a difference for the participants high in religiosity for whom religious values and beliefs are internalized and thus more easily accessible. One possible explanation of these results is again related to the fact that Christmas as a time of the year had already primed religious participants with religious values and seeing religion-related images could not prime them with these values any further. Overall, it is possible that individuals have very strong existing associations with Christmas as a time to give and take care of others and their gift giving intentions and expectations do not depend on individual differences such as trait religiosity but instead are a result of universally activated associations with the holiday.

8. Limitations and future directions

Whereas the present research provides initial experimental evidence that priming consumers with the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas has under certain conditions an effect on some holiday-related behaviors, the limitations of our work should also be discussed and addressed in subsequent research.

First of all, we would suggest the usage of various marketing-related manipulations to prime the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas. As a priming method, we used religious images as the background for a study, as well as on coffee cups, but we could imagine that even Christmas store decoration or Christmas packaging could influence consumer gift giving intentions and expectations. Therefore, we would suggest using different types of stimuli to prime the religious (vs. the non-religious) character of Christmas. In addition, it would be interesting to know what kind of effect mixed (religious and non-religious) Christmas-related stimuli produce. It is plausible to assume that there is an optimal balance to be respected so that neither the religious nor the commercial aspect of Christmas is too much emphasized which would avoid negative reactions from certain consumers.

Additionally, we would suggest using a different measure of communion to ensure that the construct is captured correctly as a momentary state. It could also be advisable to use social desirability measures to control for participants evaluating themselves high on all communion dimensions because of social pressure.

Related to that, it could be that another mechanism is responsible for the effect of the prime on the intentions to give gifts. For example, priming the religious origins of Christmas may lead to spending less money on gifts and making fewer unplanned purchases just as being reminded of God makes people less likely to spend money due to the emphasis on frugality common to many religions (Kurt, Inman, & Gino, 2018). Therefore, despite of the activation of communion, in the cases in which participants associate religion more with frugality than communion, the former association will affect their gift giving behaviors. A second possibility is that priming the religious character of Christmas reduces materialism and the value one places on material possessions and because of that leads to less gift exchange when it comes to material gifts (Belk, 1984). Extant research found that strong religious beliefs corresponded to fewer fiscal liabilities and lower credit card debt (Gwin & Gwin, 2009) and that generally religious people avoided unnecessary spending and conspicuous consumption (Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, & Phillips, 2012). This is so because materialism conflicts with collective-oriented values and religious values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Finally, as discussed previously in the *General discussion* section, the type of associations religion evokes should mediate the effect of the religious prime on the intentions to give and receive gifts. If one thinks of a loving God when seeing a religious prime, this person may think of herself as a person of worth who merits receiving gifts. In this case it is through the mediating role of self-worth that priming the sacred character of Christmas would lead to more gift receiving expectations. In a similar manner, people who believe in a punishing God may feel obliged to offer more gifts as this is the right thing to do

and not because they are more concerned with the others. To summarize, the type of religious associations or values activated from a religious prime should mediate the effect the prime has on subsequent intentions and behaviors.

We would also suggest running experiments right after the Christmas holidays to gather data on actual gift giving and receiving behaviors. This would allow for more precise answers to the questions we investigated because as we have seen it was sometimes difficult for our participants to imagine what they would buy or what they would receive. Additionally, we would recommend the usage of different methodologies than the ones we used in order to get richer insights on real individual shopping behavior. For example, participants can be asked to keep a diary during the holiday period and to note their holiday related activities such as the gifts they intend to buy and why and what they actually bought. This could also give us information on other holiday related behaviors such as donations or other community related behaviors like bringing food to orphanages or retirement homes. We could also imagine a cell phone shopping mall application which during the holiday time will either show religious related or non-religious related holiday symbols. This will let us collect data on the stores that consumers visit and on the amount of time they spent shopping. This method will provide us with insights on real shopping behaviors.

In terms of dependent variables, we would suggest future research to study the different types of gifts that consumers offer at Christmas. For example, literature has looked into the difference between material and experiential gifts (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Buying an experience is typically more personally beneficial than buying a material good (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015). Extant research showed that experiences led to greater satisfaction (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), less regret (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), and greater happiness (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), when compared to possessions. The benefits of acquiring an experience over a

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possession stem from the fact that experiences are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013), contribute more to one's sense of self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), are more unique (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), and are harder to compare against alternatives (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). In the case of Christmas gift giving and receiving, we could imagine that reminders of the religious origins of the holiday would lead to more experiential gift. In addition, one could argue that due to link between communion and religion consumers would give more collective gifts such as board games which they could play with others than individual gifts. Finally, we would argue that priming consumers with the religious character of Christmas would result in them buying more uplifting (vs. indulgent) gifts for others. Thus, instead of buying chocolate or make-up for example, they would buy books. Further research is necessary in order to shed light into these propositions.

Additionally, we do recognize that different covariates controlling for individual differences in the demographics and the personality characteristics could potentially help us increase the effect sizes in the studies. Covariates can be used to absorb error variance in the dependent variables (Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2018). For example, in the current project, family size could have influenced how many gifts participants intended to give. When participants indicated that they intended to buy more gifts, it could be that they had many kids or many family members rather than the fact that they were more generous. Additionally, women are generally considered more socially-oriented than men (Eckel & Grossman, 1998), although we did not find a difference when controlling for gender. We did not find a difference when controlling for income either, although we expect it to play a role in consumer gift giving intentions.

Finally, we would suggest future research to test some of the alternative explanations provided in the general discussion section of this paper. This would allow for a better understanding of the factors affecting Christmas gift exchange.

9. Conclusion and implications

The goal of the present research was to investigate the effect of priming consumers with the sacred (vs. secular) character of Christmas on their gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations. Considering that at Christmas time people engage in specific holiday-related consumption behaviors, our interest was in understanding how these behaviors change, if they do at all, when the religious (vs. non-religious) origins of the holiday are emphasized. Imagine for example that a group of friends goes to Starbucks so that one of them can buy herself a coffee. Once inside the coffee shop, she sees the new Starbucks cups with Christmas-related religious images on them. We argue that these images will prime the person with religious values such as generosity and this will potentially result in her buying a cup of coffee for her friends. Similarly, we expect this person to decide not to buy the cake she wanted to because of the heightened self-control which was activated by the cups with religious images. In that sense, having religious symbols on the packaging of hedonic products might not be a good idea. Putting religious symbols in the brand communication of symbolic products and emphasizing that they make a great gift for family and friends, however, may be a beneficial strategy.

Although in the current research project we looked at religious references in brand communication, we argue that the implications can be extended to other situations too. Many cities and stores for example put Christmas decorations to evoke the holiday spirit. If we imagine that on the way home, a person passes by a store that uses religious images or symbols as part of its Christmas decorations, we could argue that it is very probable that this person goes in the store to buy gifts for others without having planned to do so. In a similar manner, the lighted angels hanging over the main street in some cities may lead to some consumers buying more and more expensive gifts for their family and friends. We argue that

this might be the case even after consumers eat Christmas cookies in the shape of angels or nativity scene.

The recent tendency in marketing is to replace religious images and symbols and in a way de-spiritualize Christmas in order to avoid offending consumers and thus make them engage in more consumption behaviors. At the end of the day, however, it could be that by employing such practices, marketers achieve the opposite effect. In some situations, it seems that reminding consumers of the sacred origins of Christmas could actually lead to more holiday-related consumption behaviors. Therefore, greeting consumers with "Merry Christmas" rather than "Season Greetings" may still be suitable.

In terms of consumer implications, we argue that having some Christmas-related religious images and symbols as part of brand communication and holiday decorations could potentially lead to happier consumers as generally more happiness is associated with the more religious experiences and the less-materialistic aspects of the holiday (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Thus, having a mix of religious and non-religious reminders of the holiday may minimize the materialistic aspects of modern Christmas celebrations and thus result in an increase in satisfaction with consumption during the holiday times.

Appendix A

Appendix B

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Concluding Note

The religious landscape around the world has been changing in recent years, mostly due to the decline in religiosity among younger adults and the declining power of institutionalized religion among religiously affiliated individuals (Pew Research Center, 2015; Pew Research Forum, 2012). These changes have been accompanied by a change in values and a move towards fragmented and pluralistic cultures, in which the need for transcendence is even more acute (Palazzo & Basu, 2007; Swatos, 1983). As traditional religious institutions have partly lost their function, people have started looking for transcendence elsewhere. Meanwhile, brands have been gaining power not only in terms of financial value but also in terms of the function they provide for consumers. Evidence shows they have even started associating themselves with religion, thus becoming potential candidates for satisfying consumer transcendental needs. It is important to point out that the evidence discussed here comes from a Western predominantly Christian context and therefore the propositions and findings of the present dissertation are also limited to this specific setting. The purpose of the dissertation was to study consumer reactions to the usage of specific transcendental references in a secular domain like marketing and the effect of such references on various behaviors and personality characteristics.

More specifically, I investigated issues related to the usage of religious references in brand communication and their effect on specific consumer behaviors. In Essay 1, I provided a conceptual model in which I outlined the possible consequences of the usage of one specific type of religious reference, and that is transcendental religious references, as part of brand names and I also proposed which consumer segments and in which situations would be affected by these. Overall, 17 propositions were provided for future research to test. In Essay 2, my goal was to test some of the propositions of the conceptual model from Essay 1. In four studies I provided initial support for the argument that even in consumption settings, a

transcendental reference as part of the brand name activated transcendental associations over and above equally positive non-religious ones, which resulted into more favorable consumer attitudes towards the brand and the product. In addition, I found that consumers were willing to pay more for brands having a transcendental concept in the name, which illustrates that consumer behaviors can also be affected by transcendental references in brand elements. In Essay 3, I studied the effect of religious references in brand elements during one specific time of the year – Christmas. Although partial support for the hypothesis that reminding consumers of the religious (vs. non-religious) character of Christmas affected certain gift giving intentions and gift receiving expectations was obtained, many questions pertaining to the mechanisms behind the effects and the factors moderating these effects remained unanswered.

Despite the fact that not all questions received an answer and that further research is needed to shed light on some of the effects and mechanisms of interest, the three Essays in this dissertation have implications for theory and practice. First of all, as it seems, consumers do not find it inappropriate or offensive for brands to associate themselves with transcendental concepts. Although, one could imagine that marketing has limits and cannot tap into spheres such as the personal connection with the sacred, evidence from the studies in this dissertation showed that consumers responded positively to the usage of transcendental references in brand names. This association has implications for marketers and retailers as consumers seemed to like more and even be willing to pay more for brands using a transcendental concept in the name, and in addition such concepts as part of the brand elements seemed to make consumers more generous and willing to buy and offer more gifts at Christmas times. At the same time, however, individuals may be willing to consume less of brands having religion-related references in the communication elements, unless marketing managers adapt their selling strategies for such brands.

Additional research is needed in order to investigate whether consumers also could benefit from consuming brands associated with the divine. For example, it is plausible to assume that consuming products of brands having transcendental references in the brand elements increases feelings of self-worth and leads to more prosocial behavior. One may also expect that such brands could help consumers regulate their consumption by increasing temptation resistance and by heightening self-control. These effects may result in an increase in satisfaction with consumption and even an increase in subjective well-being. My hope is that the implications of this dissertation are not only for marketing managers but for consumers as well.

On a more personal note, undertaking this PhD has been an invaluable learning experience. During the work on the different projects of this dissertation, I have grown as a researcher and I have gained a much deeper understanding of the nature of the research process. Although research can be extremely rewarding at times, it can be also very frustrating and tedious. Not everything can be predicted and organized perfectly and thus research requires constant reading, adaptation, re-thinking and re-organization. All of these specificities, however, helped me advance my knowledge in the fields of marketing and consumer research, develop my skills in terms of writing and experimental design, and improve my own working style.

In conclusion, although I hope that the projects of my dissertation provide quality work with an impact on both theory and practice, I am conscious that perfection is not attainable and that progress in research is made by perseverance and continuous improvement. In that sense, the projects of this dissertation remain a work in progress and the efforts on improving them do not finish with the end of this sentence.

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