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**How brands can build religious loyalty**

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# How brands can build religious loyalty

*Mirza Bander, Théo Caplet, Yasmine Hartvig*

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper investigates the four dimensions that constitute a religion (Saroglou, 2011) and through a literature review and case studies analyse how firms can create customer loyalty by applying these dimensions to their brand management.

**Methodology:** Literature review, case studies

**Findings:** By analysing three companies (Apple, Harley-Davidson, and Chanel) and comparing the elements of their brands with the four dimensions, a list of elements making up each religious dimension in the business world were found.

**Managerial implications:** We propose various practices (or suggested actions to be taken by managers) that can be used to create these elements. A framework is presented serving as a guide for managers wishing to use our combination of elements to positively influence their brand loyalty.

**Academical implications:** We have added to the field of research connecting religions and brands by starting a discussion on how certain brands use religious dimensions and practices to build their brands and create loyalty.

**Original/value:** This paper is the first that investigates Saroglou's (2011) religious dimensions and translates these into business practices.

**Keywords:** religious branding, brand loyalty, religion, community, brand engagement

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Dholakia (2016) discusses how world religions have shaped our behaviours for thousands of years. With their longevity and amount of followers, religions are arguably some of the most successful, long withstanding organisations who have produced long term loyal followers. From a brand perspective, it could be desirable to be able to create brand loyalty as successfully as religions have. The brand loyalty concept is central to create repeat purchase behaviour of consumers, creating

barriers for competitors, minimising the cost of customer acquisition and increasing revenues (Rundle-Thiele & Mackay, 2001). Various literature has discussed the success of religious institutions and how religions can apply branding concepts. However, research is limited in regard to how brands implement the dimensions that constitute a religion. In order to minimise this gap we are investigating the Big Four model by Saroglou (2011) who presents believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging as the dimensions that constitute a religious institution. The purpose of this paper is to use these four dimensions and through a literature review and case studies analyse

how firms can create and maintain brand loyalty by applying these dimensions to their brand management. Further, we aim to create a framework that can guide business practices and act as a tool in their brand management.

## **Methodology**

Since the aim of this study is to analyse religious dimension, which we deem problematic to quantify, a qualitative approach as suggested by Bryman & Bell (2011) were used.

First, the religious dimensions had to be identified. This was done through a literature review aiming to understand and explain the four dimensions proposed by Saroglou (2011) – Believing, Behaving, Bonding and Belonging – and to adapt those to the brand management context.

Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2011) state that research benefits from the differences and even potential tension between contrasting research methods, where case studies provide a flexible and context sensitive explanation to more complex settings. Therefore, after identifying the dimensions of religion in our literature review, a case study was conducted based on three companies: Apple, Harley-Davidson and Chanel. Information about these cases were gathered through secondary data. Although providing an objective view, case studies were used as they provided detailed observations into our field of research (Rowley, 2002). The companies mentioned were chosen as they provide examples of businesses with high loyal customer bases in three vastly different industries. As such, we hope to gain wider insight and open up our findings for usage by firms from various industries. A comparative study method was used to compare and contrast the case studies using the definitions from the religious dimensions in order to detect

similar behaviours and provide theoretical reflection (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Lastly, for managerial implications a framework was developed to aid researchers and business managers in the implementation of the four religious dimensions and help show how they coexist and become a strategic asset to your brand and create long term loyalty.

## **Literature review**

This part of the paper will analyse what constitutes the religious dimensions presented by Saroglou (2011) and compare these to general business concepts.

### **Believing**

#### *Religion*

The element of believing concerns the belief in something above humanity and is seen as more important than the individual (Saroglou, 2011). The way and in what people believe vary across religions, but most beliefs are directed towards a human-like entity that combines human-like features with elements that go beyond human boundaries into more all-knowing or all present states (Saroglou, 2011). People choose to believe as humans strive for and need consistency, control and a structure that can help them reduce uncertainty (Park, Edmondson & Hale-Smith, 2013). Researchers suggest that the common belief is what holds a community together and have kept religions alive for so long (Azar, 2010). Azar (2010) further presents that FMRI studies show how religious thoughts activate certain parts of our brains when we think about God, suggesting that a similar effect is shown when thinking about other special authority figures. Psychologists have also found that humans' cognitive equipment best remembers stories that have supernatural or counterintuitive elements, suggesting that our brains are pre-wired to believe and partly explains why humans are

drawn to create and join religions and similar communities (Azar, 2010).

### *Business*

Dholakia (2016) is one of the people who present ideas on similarities between branding behaviour and religions. He talks partially about how branding slogans are embraced and adapted in the lives of consumers as well as the near worshipping of divine leaders such as Steve Jobs. Bayley (2018) also talks about how branding creates something similar to worshipping from consumers and how brands are dependent on this faith and belief in the integrity of products.

The faith and belief in products and brands correlate with the notion that people choose to believe in order to structure uncertainties. Likewise, Soldevilla, Errando and Felici (2014) present how branding through advertisements creates an intangible image of the product and/or brand which adds value beyond their physical and usage value, feeding humans' need for sense and meaning. The authors further discuss how advertising transforms an organisation or its products into symbols filled with a soul and generates faith and belief which creates highly loyal evangelist consumers who almost spiritually believe in so called cult brands. Finally, Lindstrom (2004) suggests how some of the most successful companies almost become mini religions with brands that reflect trust and sell a spirit and a bigger picture that followers can admire.

## **Behaving**

### *Religion*

Similar to societal norms or socially desirable values, religions provide people with norms and moral guidelines (Saroglou, 2011). Saroglou (2011) discuss how often these two aspects often intertwine and have shaped each other, but that they differ on two points: religions provide moral standards that require self-control and

promote sacrifice and humility, and religions also ban certain actions or prohibit some values. Overall these promoted and prohibited norms and values guide people's behaviours as they wish to be seen by others as a moral and good person (Saroglou, 2011). Although religion is not necessary for morality, the existence of supernatural supervision influences people to act more morally (Norenzayan, 2014). This is further stated by researchers who found that a religion's beliefs, rituals, and thoughts of punishment are some elements that influence their followers' behaviour – often towards a more moral ground (Shariff, 2015).

### *Business*

Just how religions affect their followers' behaviours, brands and organisations change consumer behaviour – perhaps best proved by companies who launch discontinuous innovations that introduce a new behaviour pattern and change consumption patterns (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). Further, looking at brands' relationships with their consumers, Ruane and Wallace (2015) find that as a way to differentiate themselves, consumers tend to consume brands that enhance their inner selves and subsequently form lasting relationships with these brands. Consumers adapt acceptable beliefs, attitudes and behaviours to align with the brand to signify and express their brand/group membership (Park & John, 2010). Park and John (2010) further discuss how consumers who associate with a brand in the sense of a feeling or belief in similar personality traits will have these feelings amplified and subsequently the brand's personality will also rub off on the consumer.

Building on brands' ability to influence or change consumer behaviour Hilton (2003) talks about how brands, if they expand beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) to corporate social leadership (CSL), can inspire positive social change. Hilton argues that brands' economic and cultural

power can alter consumer behaviour to fit corporate moral standards, can strengthen brand reputation, and help change the world.

## **Bonding**

### *Religion*

According to Saroglou (2011) the notion of bonding is the result of self-transcendent experiences. Those experiences can be defined as circumstances where individuals emotionally connect and feel united with something greater than themselves, usually with other people or one's surroundings or environment (Yaden, Haidt, Hood Jr., Vago & Newberg, 2017). As a result, an individual's self-interest disappears to be replaced by the common interest of the group, composed of participants from the same self-transcendent experience (Haidt, 2012). In other words, the individual starts to prioritize the group over themselves (Yaden et al, 2017). In the context of religion, the self-transcendent experience can happen on different levels, either by emotionally connecting with other believers or emotionally connecting to a so call transcendent "reality" (Saroglou, 2011) that can be explained as supernatural concepts, such as God (Yaden et al, 2017). In both cases, religious individuals' ideas of self-importance decrease while the importance of the believer's religious community and the supernatural concept increase (Yaden et al, 2017). Often occurring through rituals, either performed individually (prayers) or collectively (pilgrimage) (Saroglou, 2011), those religious self-transcending experiences usually create positive outcomes (emergence of love, awe, well-being, memorable experiences, prosocial and altruistic behaviour or empathy) which change the individual (Yaden et al, 2017).

### *Business*

Similarly to the religious dimension of bonding, the concept of consumer experience can also be subject to transcendence providing various emotional

benefits to the consumer. Those kinds of transcendent consumer experiences can foster a consumer's emotional connection to others while also provoking extreme enjoyments and shifts in personal beliefs and behaviours (Schouten, McAlexander & Koenig 2007). Besides connecting with other consumers, individuals can also bond with the product and/or the brand as these help promote the transcendent customer experience – a connection that can be enhanced with the use of texts, icons, rituals and community offered by the brand (Schouten, McAlexander & Koenig, 2007). In that sense, transcendent consumer experiences can be used by brands to build stronger ties with their consumers, subsequently improving brand loyalty and brand experience whilst influencing customers' attitudes and behaviours (Shouten, McAlexander & Koenig 2007; Lee H., Lee K., & Choi 2018).

## **Belonging**

### *Religion*

Belonging refers to the humankind's need for finding a community to belong to where one can find social support and reinforce a social identity (Saroglou, 2011). Within a community, members believe that everyone is important and that their needs will be met through commitment to the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Emotional attachments to the community play a big role as participation in the community gives a meaningful feeling of belonging to a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When members of a community identify with each other and share the same beliefs and values, it can reinforce the strong feeling of belonging and social support (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Identifying as a believer is therefore a key dimension in religious communities (Saroglou, 2011). Every community has its norms and codes of conduct, usually formed by a leader who holds an immense function within the community (Saroglou, 2011). Furthermore,

storytelling and rituals are essential pillars of the community due to their ability to demonstrate a brilliant past as well as show us a bright future to come (Saroglou, 2011). A shared history amongst members, as well as rituals, help to unify and strengthen the community (McMillan, 1986).

#### *Business*

Brand communities' characteristics and core are similar to the belonging dimension of religion due to the fact that both highlight the importance of social relations, a shared consciousness, rituals, traditions, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

*Shared consciousness* refers to the emotional connection that members of a brand community have towards each other, separating them from the non-members and enhancing their feeling of belonging (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

*Rituals and traditions* embody those symbolic acts throughout the brand's history and are used by community members to spread the brand meaning and engrave behaviours, norms, and values within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

*Moral responsibility* refers to the engagement and duty that members feel they have towards each other and the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) further argue that brand communities are social objects that have a direct positive impact on brand equity. There are several drivers that construct a successful brand community that generates competitive advantages such as brand loyalty and increased brand sensitivity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009) suggest fostering social networking, McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) advocate engaging with consumers through various events and marketing programs, while Habibi, Laroche and Richard (2014) illuminate the importance of social media when building a brand community. Finally, strong brand communities are dependent on

having a leader within the community who can act as a role model, maintain rituals and encourage members (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

## **Case studies**

### **Apple**

#### *Company overview*

Apple Inc. is a designer and manufacturer of consumer electronics with famous innovations such as the iPhone smartphone, iPad tablet, and Mac computers – all with Apple's own operating system (Apple Inc., 2019). They are listed as number 9 of Forbes' list of the 2,000 most successful companies in 2020 (Murphy, Tucker, Coyne & Touryalai, 2020). They are a company with strong customer loyalty which stems from continuous innovativeness that brings true value or life improvement to their customers (Yang, 2020).

#### *Believing*

Riley and Boome (2011) write that neuroscientists have found similarities in brain activity between Apple fanatics and religious people and that even the Bishop of Buckingham have compared Apple to a religion. Pogacnik and Crnic (2014) talk about how Steve Jobs received near fanatical levels of idolisation and acted as a messiah who not only saved the company but also provided a vision and promise of a new technological era – especially after the introduction of the iPhone. Campbell and La Pastina (2010) write about how immediately after its launch the iPhone – being seen as a technological revolution and saviour – was nicknamed the 'Jesus phone'.

Pogacnik and Crnic (2014) discuss how Apple's identity and marketing creates a certain mythology and magic around the brand, making their followers believe that Apple is the only good and creative brand on the market. The authors further present how Apple's logo is a symbol which

differentiates their followers and how community members like to identify with and tell brand stories using slogans and ideas that have emerged from advertisements – the most popular ones being “Apple vs Windows” and “think different.”

### *Behaving*

Apple’s followers frequently engage in behaviours such as promoting and recommending the brand to others and adopting advertisements’ value statements to help escape the mundane (Pogacnik & Crnic, 2014). But the authors also explain how followers take critique towards the brand personally since their self-identity is deeply related to that of Apple’s and that taboos within the community exist where followers are condemned for expressing any critique against the brand.

During Apple’s financial struggles in the 90’s Apple encouraged customers to correct or re-inform journalists writing negative articles and volunteer as sales assistants, and as a result consumers also vowed to purchase solely from Apple rather than via retailers - presenting an example of Apple followers’ loyalty (Pogacnik & Crnic, 2014). However, Arruda-Filho and Lennon (2011) suggest that Apple’s followers are merely loyal to truly new product innovations as these are the only ones that positively affect purchase behaviour of both fanatics as well as more price sensitive, casual purchasers who won’t be swayed by mere upgrades.

Li (2019) discuss how the Apple stores and their unique design share corporate culture and stimulate customers’ senses as they enter the store, try the products and interact with staff – having an essential impact on purchase behaviour. Adjei, Noble and Noble (2012) explain how Apple also affects customer behaviour online by their community reward system that urged members to participate more fervently to gain points and badges.

### *Bonding*

Pogacnik and Crnic (2014) explain Apple’s community evangelism partly as a result of customers developing very personal relationships with their products, giving them names and buying accessories for them. Certain rituals can also be observed within the Apple fandom, as Riley and Boome (2011) write about store openings where customers travel from afar to experience the cheering and applauding from employees when they enter the store. Pogacnik & Crnic (2014) also claim that rituals are experienced privately with the euphoric unboxing of their new product. Dooley (2014) elaborate on how first impressions persist even when contradicted in the future and talk about how Apple spends significant amounts of resources on perfecting the unboxing experience, trying to design an unpacking ritual that gives the product a theatrical and special feeling.

Belk and Tumbat (2005) further discuss how Apple – through their identity as an alternative to the uniform and elitist corporation – have gathered a devoted following who adopt the belief that by purchasing products from Apple (ironically itself a major corporation) they will transcend corporate capitalism. Apple’s stores where community members gather to worship Apple’s products have been compared to temples providing an exclusive customer experience to their visitors (Pogacnik & Crnic, 2014). Furthermore, in comparison to their more conservative competitors in suits, Apple’s employees are seen as relatable and one with the people, wearing jeans and simple t-shirts (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

### *Belonging*

There is a strong community amongst Apple fans where they can ask questions or share their knowledge about products and by participation earn points, levels and awards (Apple Inc, 2020). Non-followers are seen as ignorant and misunderstanding



the value of Apple which is its community (Pogacnik & Crnic, 2014). Their strong community stems from their under-dog status in their early decades where Apple's values were presented as an alternative to the more uptight and elitist market leaders (Pogacnik & Crnic, 2014). However, the authors further state that with Apple's rise to success the distinction of Apple and the closeness of the community have diminished, although the fight against the common enemy continues. Likewise, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) emphasise how the unification of members against a common enemy is what makes the brand community exceptionally strong and also how the brand's history fosters a communal spirit.

## **Harley-Davidson**

### *Company overview*

Founded in 1903, Harley-Davidson Motor Company is one of the companies with the highest loyalty rate in the world (Aaker, 1996) with 90% of its customers reporting having the intention to buy a new bike after their last purchase (Bronson & Beaver, 2004). Thanks to its marketing actions, the company ranks as an iconic brand (Bronson & Beaver, 2004) by building a unique culture based on common values (Schouten & McAlexander 1995), shared experiences (Schembri, 2009) and a strong community (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

### *Believing*

Since its creation, the company has supported and defended their most important beliefs: personal freedom, unity and the rebel spirit (Harley-Davidson, 2020), and has infused them throughout its community. Those beliefs can be translated into a set of core values and are omnipresent in Harley-Davidson's world - shaping bikers' identity and philosophy (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). The idea of personal freedom is the most dominant value of all and influences the riders in different forms as their beliefs, oriented by

the company's value, change their perception of the world (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). For instance, most Harley owners associate their motorcycle with the symbol of freedom, contrasting with the automobile which is perceived as a cage or symbol of confinement and the antithesis of the company's ideology (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Those different beliefs are enforced through Harley-Davidson's mythology and narratives and are supported by the company's advertisements (Trendafilov, 2015). The bikers perceive themselves as outsiders and conquerors of undiscovered lands, who ride in no particular directions and do not belong anywhere, with a common goal to be free to ride wherever they want (Trendafilov, 2015).

### *Behaving*

The world of Harley-Davidson has its rules, norms and values that dictate the appropriate behaviour to follow within the community (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Within the Harley-Davidson family different subcultures and groups are found due to different hierarchical structures, rider social background, interpretation of the biker's common values or self-perception – some even perceiving themselves as better than others (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). However, even if behaviours can vary across different subcultures, a common set of conduct is adopted by the majority of bikers which can revolve around the bike itself (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). For example, bikers spend a great amount of time customizing and taking care of their motorcycle (Schembri, 2009). They replace their Harley piper for a louder one, polish the bike meticulously (Schembri, 2009), add a personalized license plate, or add custom painting to it like a tattoo (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). In parallel, those behaviours can go beyond the idea of the bike itself, where social interaction is at its centre. The Harley-Davidson lifestyle is prone to create a social atmosphere

(Schembri, 2009) where commonly large groups ride and share sacramental beer together in a Harley-Davidson sanctuary (garage) made by the bikers themselves (Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

### *Bonding*

As Gobble (2015) explains, Harley consumers are not just purchasing a motorcycle, but also the experience of owning a Harley bike. With this ultimate brand experience comes various consumer experiences that supports it (Harley Davidson, 2018). Those include different types of activities such as motorcycle rallies, racing activities or Riding Academy classes – all resulting in deeper engagement and emotional connection between the company and the bikers (Harley-Davidson, 2018). Beyond those activities organised by Harley-Davidson, a big part of the consumer experience comes from rituals and activities developed and maintained by the bike owners, making Harley-Davidson's brand experience a co construction between the consumers and the company (Schembri, 2009). This biker contribution to the overall experience has been observed by Schouten & McAlexander (1995). The authors report several rituals and activities conducted by the bike owners themselves such as the sacred cleansing and maintenance of their bikes or the creation of special "shrines" for housing and administering the motorcycles. The result of all those experiences and activities is deeply emotional, revolving around the notion of brotherhood and freedom (Schembri, 2009). While riding in large groups during rallies, members demonstrate a sense of altruism and philanthropy – if any rider drops out of the ride, the rider behind will automatically pull over to assist (Schembri, 2009). Furthermore, those experiences transcend the bikers, giving them a "sensation of elation and enchantment that takes them somewhere other than the road" (Schembri, 2009 p.1307). The biker feels closer and admirative to nature while taking

conscience of being an integral part of something bigger, a larger group and a purpose (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

### *Belonging*

Similar to its brand experience, Harley-Davidson's community philosophy helps to strengthen its connection with its customers (Fournier & Lee, 2009). The company understands the power of creating a strong community for its brand and has used a full range of strategies to maintain this philosophy alive and active (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Beside the creation of a corporate museum and the establishment of the member club Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) that aim to promote customers' interpersonal connections (Fournier & Lee, 2009), the company focuses on providing customers with all sorts of clothing, accessories, and motorcycle customisation to foster the sense of community (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Those visible and collectable items combined with the ownership of a bike give the bikers a sense of affiliation to the subculture and distinction from the nonowners (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). The bikers call each other "brother" and wear similar clothing, almost like a uniform, to be set apart from non-members (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Beyond this sense of community through shared characteristics and belonging among the Harley owners, there is also a shared value system. In the Harley-Davidson community the concept of personal freedom is central (Schembri, 2009) which can be observed in Harley owners with, for instance, their unwillingness to wear helmets to keep natural feeling of the wind in their hair (Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

## **Chanel**

### *Company overview*

In 1910 Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel decided to open up a hat boutique by the name of Chanel Modes at 21 rue Cambon in Paris

(Chanel, 2020a). Five years later she expanded her business and opened up the first Chanel Haute Couture house in Biarritz (Chanel, 2020a). In 1952 actress Marilyn Monroe was asked by the Life Magazine what she wore in bed, Marilyn replied "...I only wear Chanel N5" (Chanel, 2020b). Gabrielle Chanel passed away in 1971 (Chanel, 2020c) and Karl Lagerfeld was appointed as creative director for Chanel in 1983 (Chanel, 2020d). Today, in 2020 Chanel is one of the most valuable brands in the world (Swant, 2020).

### *Believing*

The values of Chanel lie in the woman who created the brand (Chanel, 2020e), but also within her successor who managed to renew and create Chanel as we know it today (Lagerfeld, 2020; Tse, 2019). A founder, or designer, is an essential asset to the brand and its DNA, having an influence on how the brand is perceived (Sugimoto & Nagasawa, 2017). Chanel's success also has to do with iconic products such as; *the gold chain bag*, *the tweed suit* and *N°5* perfume that consumers believe in and continue to purchase even 50 years after their first appearance (Sugimoto & Nagasawa, 2017). Gabrielle Chanel's goal was to create a style that didn't exist (Lagerfeld, 2020). She left a distinguishable style which was later re invented by Karl Lagerfeld who added the famous CC-logotype and camellias to make the brand and products even more attractive (Lagerfeld, 2020).

Chanel has managed to make the world believe in the brand's DNA through the re invention of iconic products and the strong link between these and their DNA that create coherence (Sugimoto & Nagasawa, 2017). Further, Kim, Lloyd and Cervellon (2014) indicate that Chanel seduces consumers through implicit storytelling in advertising, resulting in consumers identifying themselves with this narrative that Chanel created.

### *Behaving*

Gabrielle Chanel altered the societal norms and behaviors through her vision of a modern and liberated woman which was reflected through her design (Fondation Chanel, 2020a). Empowering women is part of the Chanel brand heritage and is mirrored in the corporate foundation (Fondation Chanel, 2020a) aiming to enable women to attain social as well as economic independence (Fondation Chanel, 2020b). Further, the company is helping women with education and health services in order to achieve social change and gender equality (Fondation Chanel, 2020b).

Chanel's long-term vision for their brand emphasises the importance of innovative sustainable products and a sustainable business model (Chanel, 2018). Being an industry leader, their aim is to set business standards on how to address and manage climate change and subsequently influence supplier and consumer behaviours (Chanel, 2018). The company also takes pride in being a human-driven brand with clear policies on supplier relationships and human-rights, striving to be a purposeful employer that creates value for their employees and offers a safe and inclusive work environment (Chanel, 2018).

### *Bonding*

Chanel has made a strategic choice to only sell their products in their own boutiques, with the exception from sunglasses and beauty products that are sold through authorized retailers (Chanel, 2020f). Chanel wants to offer the customer a unique experience through private viewings of the latest collection and a one of-a-kind experience by letting the customer book an appointment with a Chanel advisor at their boutiques (Chanel, 2020g). Chanel has managed to create valuable customer experiences, and their flagship store in Paris is now a landmark and destination for pilgrimage, which is exemplified in a customer review on TripAdvisor (2019): "*Wow! What a helpful, sweet, lovely, kind*

*sales associate! She made my visit and purchase into such a wonderful experience [...] She was nice enough to take pictures of me on Coco Chanel's legendary apartment staircase [...] Thank you for a wonderful memorable experience”* - Margia F. This review, along with several others, imply that Chanel's decision to solely sell through their own boutique makes it possible for Chanel to ensure that the customer experience is in line with the brand DNA and that sales advisors are able to bond with customers through products and subsequently impact customer behaviour to buy products.

### *Belonging*

Chanel creates a community for their customers, by for example the creation of a pop-up members club “Coco Club” in New York City to celebrate their watch collection (Patrarca, 2017). Chanel encouraged women to come by and connect with the brand and other customers while enjoying the perks of a beauty room, café and photo booth (Patrarca, 2017). Chanel also creates an online community for their customers where they can connect with the brand – their official Instagram account has 41,3 million followers (Chanel Official, 2020) – and Chanel is the luxury brand with the largest number of followers on Instagram (Statista, 2019). To encourage customers to engage and share their enthusiasm with each other, the brand has also created the account @WeLoveCoco where all content is created by customers and managed by officials of Chanel (We Love Coco, 2020). Chanel keeps the tradition of Paris Fashion Week alive and is known as the most spectacular show of the event (Jana, 2020). Chanel ensures that the whole community can participate in this annual ritual by streaming the show online and making it accessible on their website and social media afterwards (Chanel, 2020h).

## **Summarisation of findings**

### *Believing*

All three cases were found to have unique products that are worshipped by their customers. Apple and Chanel's followers were found to have a strong worshipping of their founders; however, this was not found in Harley-Davidson. All three companies were found to convey mythological and/or magical values and narratives through their advertisements. Further, all three companies use symbols full of meaning in forms of their logo or products as a way to get customers to connect to their brand identity. Although all companies to an extent have a slogan, only Apple were found to use it in their communication.

### *Behaving*

Looking at how the three examined brands affected followers' behaviour it is clear that through consumption of their products, consumers adopt certain behaviours, beliefs and ultimately personalities that are characteristic for each brand. All brands have also attracted their followers by providing values and/or beliefs that enhance consumers' inner selves. Chanel and Apple were found to alter their consumers' behaviours through their innovations and moral standards for their community, however this was not present in the case of Harley-Davidson that instead used certain norms and rules to alter behaviours. In contrast, Apple and Harley-Davidson's followers show certain behaviours in order to fit in with or publicly display their belonging to the brand, however no clear examples of this were found with Chanel.

### *Bonding*

In terms of bonding, the three companies create powerful customer experiences, all taking the form of rituals such as the unboxing of a new product for Apple, the sacred maintenance of the Harley bike by Harley-Davidson consumers or the idea of a pilgrimage to Paris to experience

Chanel's flagship store. All three companies were found to use physical places to bond with their customers (Apple's and Chanel's stores and Harley-Davidson's museum). In each case, those experiences create strong emotional ties between the consumer and the brand or the product resulting in powerful positive emotions such as enjoyments, pleasant memories or a sense of altruism. However, not all companies manage to provide transcending customer experiences. Only Apple and Harley-Davidson create intense emotional connections between their consumers leading to a sense of unity as being part of the same community.

### *Belonging*

In regard to belonging, all three companies illustrated characteristics constituting a community. Shared consciousness was demonstrated in terms of exclusivity of being an Apple-fan that has gone from being an under-dog to a market leader, the philosophy of life was fundamental for Harley-Davidson and the interaction on social media was important for Chanel. For rituals and traditions, Apple uses their stores to bond with customers, and Chanel is using fashion shows to activate their brand heritage. Moral responsibility, in different measures, was portrayed by consumers of all brands. The companies also presented various ways of engaging with consumers through events, members clubs and social media.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to analyse the four dimensions (Saroglou, 2011) that constitute a religion and analyse how firms can create brand loyalty by the usage of these dimensions. By our literature review and case studies we can answer how the religious aspects of believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging can be translated into business practices and how they contributed to the creation of customer loyalty to the companies.

Through our case studies we found common elements of each dimension between all companies. We suggest that there is one key shared element for each dimension, thus providing four elements that brands should strive to achieve: creating worship, impacting customer behaviour, creating customer experiences, and creating communities.

As Saroglou (2011) discussed, the four dimensions are independent but simultaneously interchangeably dependent on each other. Likewise, we would further want to suggest that the found shared elements are also interconnected through common practices which we will discuss below.

### **Four elements**

#### *Creating worship*

Just as Saroglou (2011) talks about how believing in something above humanity is key for religion, worshipping is also an important element in the formation of believing for businesses. Creating worship in your brand, product, or leader can arguably anchor an image in consumers' minds, acting as a defence mechanism for the brand where even if presented with other brands, the worshippers will believe so strongly in your brand that competitors cannot compare. Thus, we suggest that worshipping builds a deep emotional connection for customers, creating an intense form of loyalty.

#### *Impacting consumer behaviour*

Shariff (2015) presents how religions can influence their followers' behaviour. If a company, just like religions, can manage to influence and change consumer behaviour they arguably change the demand from these consumers as well. Thus, the company will not have to alter their products often to meet changing demands, but rather they have moulded these consumers' needs/demands to solely fit

their offering. Our case studies show that it is possible for a company to be a leader within societal change as well. By doing so, we suggest that companies create loyalty in the long run.

#### *Creating consumer experiences*

As Saroglou (2011) defines bonding as an intense form of human experience, we can make a parallel with business practices. By providing powerful customer experiences a company can create intense bonds between the brand and the consumer, as well as between consumers themselves, through emotional connections. If these experiences produce positive emotions for the consumer it can possibly generate a strong memory, leaving a more permanent imprint of the brand in consumers' minds. It can be argued that engagement through positive experiences will lead the consumers wanting more, thus promoting repeat purchases, hopefully driving up loyalty rates.

#### *Creating communities*

By creating brand communities, companies also create a sense of belonging and a feeling of security for consumers. In accordance with Saroglou (2011) communities fulfil the humankind's need for belonging that creates a sense of social support. The belongingness subsequently affects community members' behaviours and opens up the opportunity for the brand to set norms and values for their brand. We argue that companies can use these norms and values in terms of creating similar purchase patterns and behaviours across the community. Members of the community draw a line between themselves and the outsiders. This phenomenon fosters members' feeling of being united with each other. As a result from this we argue that brands are keeping their market share and protecting themselves against competitors - a form of loyalty.

## **Common practices**

There were different ways in which the analysed companies created the four elements, suggesting that there is no one way in which these can be achieved. However, there were a few business practices that all our cases had in common in order to create each element. These practices can act as a guidance and help companies in building these four elements to help strengthen their brands. It can be worth noting that those practices not shared by all companies can still be helpful when creating said elements, however in our research only the common practices will be discussed. Furthermore, other companies may have additional practices not listed here that are an effect of their brand values and the unique environment within which they operate. Those common practices identified in all cases are:

#### *Conveying mythical and/or magical narratives*

Through narratives in advertising, a company can create a sense of magic or an ideal to pursue in consumers' minds. As our cases demonstrate this can lead to strengthening consumers' belief of the brand. It could further be argued that these narratives will create an idea of a world that consumers want to belong to and can act as an ideal for consumer identity and behaviour.

#### *Using meaningful symbols*

The cases showed examples of the companies using symbols such as logotypes or products to communicate an identity that consumers wish to connect with. Hence, it could be argued that symbols can enhance a company's performance when they convey meaning for consumers to believe in. We would further suggest that symbols can act as a tool for consumers to portray their belonging to the brand community and that you share its identity.

*Providing physical places to bond with customers*

Our cases illustrate the importance of physical places when brands want to bond with consumers. Companies who have physical places are able to create strong emotional ties with their consumers, as well as create valuable experiences. Therefore, in a digitalising world we suggest that physical places are still important for brands to bond with their consumers and provide valuable experiences, potentially even providing a place for worship.

*Using rituals*

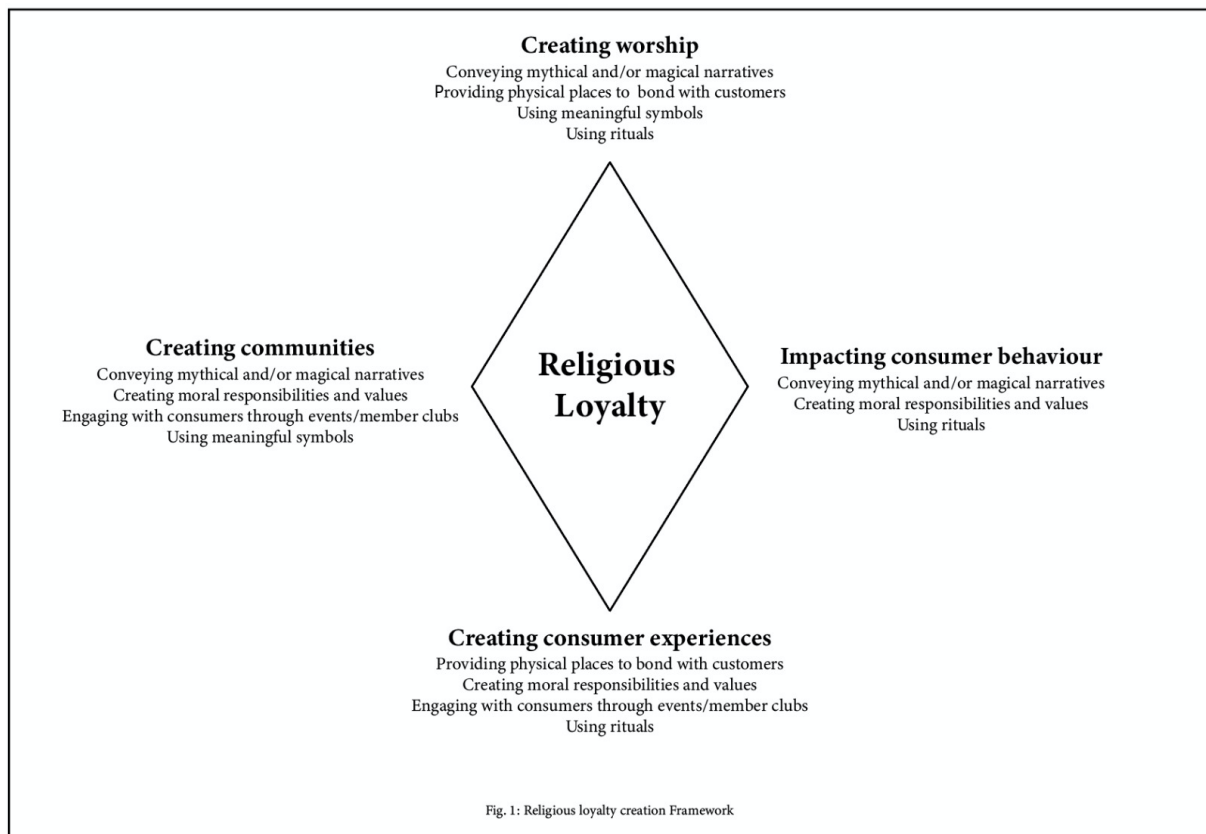
The cases illustrated that by using rituals the brand can offer valuable experiences that create a bond between the consumers and the brand. Further we argue that they can be used as a way to demonstrate favourable behaviours within the community whilst transmitting brand values to them. Similar to religious actions we would also suggest that rituals are key to worshipping behaviours.

*Creating moral responsibilities and values*

The cases portrayed how each company has set certain moral responsibilities and values for their community. However, what each company considers as moral varies. These actions and values presented by the brand community show consumers what is deemed right or wrong behaviours that they should follow to show their belonging to the community. As such we would argue that a brand communicating wishful values and actions of their followers also will have an impact on consumer behaviour and bonding.

*Engaging with consumers through events/member clubs*

Similar to rituals, events and member clubs shown in the cases create opportunities where consumers can interact and bond with both the brand, its employees and other consumers. By providing consumers with opportunities where they can get invited to events or join a community, they are provided with a feeling of belongingness. We suggest that events and member clubs enable a company to transfer



their values to consumers by allowing them, for a brief moment of time, to enter their brand's world, resulting in valuable customer experiences.

## **Framework**

Based on our discussion we identified four main elements that together represent the four religious dimensions presented by Saroglou (2011). Those elements can be combined to emotionally connect consumers to your brand and create engagement that will lead to loyalty on near-religious levels. As discussed, these four elements need to be simultaneously present in the brand to achieve near religious loyalty. Below each element a set of practices are suggested which can help achieve said element (fig. 1). By excluding one or more element a company may still achieve loyalty, however not on the level that is comparable to that of religions. Lastly, when creating and adding these elements to your brand, it is important to check that each align with your brand identity.

## **Conclusion**

According to Saroglou (2011) religions share four dimensions: believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging. By analysing three companies (Apple, Harley-Davidson, and Chanel) and comparing the elements of their brands with the four dimensions, a list of elements making up each religious dimension in the business world were found. Those elements that were shared between all three cases (creating worship, impacting consumer behaviour, creating consumer experiences, and creating communities) were chosen as the key elements.

We further argued that these elements were created and interconnected through a set of shared business practices (conveying mythical and/or magical narratives, using meaningful symbols, providing physical places to bond with consumers, using rituals, creating moral responsibilities and

values, and engaging with consumers through events/member clubs). A framework was created that shows the four elements and the suggested business practices that help create them. The suggestion made is that companies, guided by the presented business practices, can find ways to enhance their brand with all four elements and thus generate near religious loyalty from their consumers.

## **Managerial implications**

With our study we propose a set of four elements based on religious dimensions that companies can implement in their strategy to enhance their brand loyalty to a level comparable to religious organisations. Additionally, we propose various practices (or suggested actions to be taken by managers) that can be used to create these elements. A framework is presented serving as a guide for managers wishing to use our combination of elements to positively influence their brand loyalty.

## **Academical implications**

We have added to the field of research connecting religions and brands by starting a discussion on how certain brands use religious dimensions and practices to build their brands and create loyalty.

## **Limitations and further research**

With regard to the study's short time frame as well as the study aiming to investigate a relatively unexplored field within brand management, we find that a number of limitations should be highlighted. Firstly, the study is based on three case studies through secondary data. Further, our study does not include insights from company representatives or consumers, resulting in our potentially subjective assumptions. We also want to highlight that this study is only based on the dimensions presented by Saroglou (2011), which further limits the study.



Future research should include case studies with a qualitative and quantitative approach to get insight about what managers and consumers find to be of importance in regard to the religious dimensions. Future research could also benefit from including other theological research and discover new religious themes that could be applied to brand management.

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