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Consumers' Insights About Spirituality in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

While the study of spirituality in advertising is an emerging area of scholarship, previous research tends to focus more on the spiritual message rather than on the consumer. Although some studies report on the meanings consumers derive from spiritual advertising messages, the definitions of spirituality as religion in these studies are not in alignment with the holistic approach applied here. In this article, we interview consumers and ask what meanings may emerge from their responses to spiritually dense commercials. (By spiritually dense we mean commercial messages rich with spiritual core ideas, as described in the Spirituality in Advertising Framework). Four themes have emerged from the data: *authenticity, the journey, inspiration*, and *nature*. We analyze these findings in light of both theory and practice. Consideration of ethical issues and the positive dimension of spirituality in advertising are also discussed.

Human beings seek fulfillment. They realize more and more that the source of their fulfillment can never be merely materialistic. It is the combination between the material and spiritual, the tangible and the intangible, that creates a fulfilled reality. Hence, individuals today seek to practically apply this understanding in various spheres of life—including consumption (see Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2012). Advertisers, brand managers and business owners have identified a shift towards the spiritual and understand they need "to satisfy a more spiritually inclined consumer" (Smith, 2003, p. 52), but there is a significant lack of knowledge, sensitivity and deep understanding of how to combine these two worlds in the best way possible. This article builds upon a scant but growing literature in spirituality and advertising that explores those issues precisely. While past research focused on the spiritual message in advertising, it neglected the side of the consumer. This article interviews consumers and digs into their insights about spiritually-dense commercials.

Advertising is often recognized as a system which conveys meaning in society (Holbrook, 1987; Maguire & Weatherby, 1998; McCracken, 1986). It is a type of communication where meanings are created, shared, and interpreted (Hochheimer, 2008). According to Malmelin (2009), "the core of advertising is the semiotic process of communication" (p. 118). Meaning-based approaches to the study of advertising recognize the consumer as the center of meaning-making in the process of decoding advertising, as Haley and Cunningham (2003) write, "realities do not exist within objects, but rather in human interpretations of objects" (p. 177). The world of the individual dictates the meanings and interpretations consumers make as a response to viewing ads (Eco, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987; Meline, 1996; Mick & Buhl, 1992). From a broader perspective, Fiske (1985) defines communication as a production and exchange of meanings. He claims that the media (in our case, advertising) and the consumer are equally important in the process of communication. In other words, both influences exist, from the media/advertising to the consumer (top-down approach) and from within the consumer out (within approach). Fiske (1987) relates to these two forces (media and the consumer): "Despite the power of [media] ideology to reproduce itself in its subjects …the people still manage to make their own meanings and to

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construct their own culture within, and often against, that which the industry provides them" (Fiske, 1987, p. 286, in Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Therefore, although the focus of this article is the consumer, it is also important to be aware of the influences of the advertising message in general and the spiritual message in particular. With the right intention in the minds of marketers (as opposed to using offensive, derogative messages, such as presenting women as sex objects), advertising could potentially contribute to more positive transformative values in our society.

In this article, we explore the link between spirituality and advertising messages by examining the meanings individuals derive from spiritually dense commercials. We address the question: What meanings may emerge in consumers' responses to spiritually dense commercials? By spiritually dense commercials we mean advertising messages rich with spiritual core ideas, as defined by Marmor-Lavie, Stout, and Lee (2009) and elaborated on later in the article. In the following sections we first review the concepts of spirituality and spirituality in advertising. Then, we address the qualitative methodology applied here. Next, we present the study's findings and recommendations to practitioners, followed by a summary and discussion section.

Spirituality

Emmons (2006) identifies three types of spirituality: natural, humanistic, and religious. Solomon (2002) views the concept of naturalized spirituality as a personal experience lived in our physical world and defines it as the "thoughtful love of life" (Solomon, 2002, p. xii), claiming that existential thoughts, combined with the feelings they evoke, are the core essence of spirituality. The humanistic perspective, traced back to Abraham Maslow (1965), refers to self-actualization, the human spirit, and the highest of human potential as the building blocks of spirituality (Emmons, 2006). As for religious spirituality, scholars have addressed the subtle relationship between religion and spirituality while considering whether they reside on a continuum or are clearly discrete. Naturally, overlaps do occur between the two concepts (Berger, 1970; George, 2007; James, 1902; Kale, 2004); however, researchers have found that both the public and academics do discern between spirituality and religion (see Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Rinallo et al. (2012) summarize this differentiation:

> Religion is often seen as community-oriented, formalized, organized, and consisting of an organized system of beliefs, practices, and rituals designed to facilitate closeness to God. Spirituality is instead more individualistic, less formal, and institutionalized to a reduced degree, and it is considered a subjective, personal quest to understand the ultimate questions about life, meaning, and the sacred." (p. 3)

This differentiation positions religion as an external construct and spirituality as an internal construct. Fromm (1967) and Allport (1976) refer to that typology and characterize intrinsic or "mature religion" as more experimental and deep, and one that rejects dogma and institutionalized authority; they refer to extrinsic or "nonmature religion" as rigid, dogmatic, institutionalized, and ego-driven. Fowler (1981) demonstrates a continuum; the older one gets, the more intrinsic, selfless, and reflective his/her spirituality becomes. Although spirituality focuses on the intrinsic dimension of the self (see James, 1902; Jung, 1933; Kornfield, 1993), one cannot ignore the external expressions connected with it. It is important to clarify that motivation, intention, and inspiration of spiritual growth should come from within; however, this potential must be manifested in some shape or form as an external expression such as action, changed behavior, changed relationships, meditation, prayer, dance, creative work, act of sharing, and so forth.

Another example demonstrating the importance of the internal-external dynamics in spirituality is the concept of self versus others. Authentic spiritual growth can only happen through the interaction with others. Scholars who study the self often claim that there is no definition of the self without the social experience of others (Cassell, 2002). Gould (2012) takes the internal-external duality in spirituality even further and suggests there is no significant separation between the internal and the external worlds: "after all what is it we observe when we look out on the world? It is our own mind!" (p. 237). Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) meshes with this principle and describes moments of full absorption and unity between men and the

environment. To summarize, spirituality emphasizes unity and connection over separation (Kale, 2004), above and beyond the "artificial" boundaries of what is considered internal (the self) versus external (others and the environment). It stresses interconnectedness among the person, other people, the environment, and the world. Drawing on the above discussion, we view *spirituality as a conscious path, a practice toward fulfillment that emphasizes unity (both internally and externally), interconnectedness, and human growth. It is the seed, the innate common human desire, and thus goes deeper and beyond religion*.

As for operationalization of the spirituality concept, a review of the literature reveals that the spirituality construct has been measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Most of the spirituality research conducted in media studies is self-reported (e.g., Drumheller, 2005; Loomis, 2004), qualitative, and anchored in the uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). In the fields of health and work sciences, measurements are typically quantitative (see Duchon & Ashmos, 2005; Koenig, George, & Titus, 2004; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Research on spirituality and advertising has been limited and focuses on religion per se (see Barnes, 2000; Maguire & Weatherby, 1998; McKee, 2000). Measurement has relied mostly on content analysis and the presence or absence of religious symbols in ads (Mallia, 2009; Moore, 2005).

Our point of view is different, interdisciplinary, and holistic. Accordingly, we chose to operationalize spirituality in advertising based on the Spirituality in Advertising Framework (SAF) developed by Marmor-Lavie et al. (2009), a practical, interdisciplinary, and holistic approach to study spirituality in advertising. The authors begin by defining spirituality as an experience that is 1) broader than religion, 2) anchored in our everyday life, 3) deals with our aspiration for highest of human potential, 4) provides a path or tools to relate to suffering, and 5) focuses on meaning. Based on these categories and more a framework of 16 core ideas was developed. Specifically, these core ideas constitute tools, practices, beliefs, and guidelines to promote a spiritual lifestyle. The core ideas are *the action component* whereas action speaks louder than words; seeing the *big picture* in every situation; *letting go* of old grudges and attachments; rejecting *instant gratifications* and ego-driven satisfactions; *constant examination of life* and our existence; understanding the concept of *unity of mankind; integration with others* and the importance of relationships to inner growth; viewing life as a *long-term journey* not only with ups and downs but also with a purpose; the importance of any form of *ritualism*; aspiration of *self-actualization*; believing that *anything is possible*, especially if our focus is on our authentic desires; *living in the present* and connecting to the moment; the importance of *taking responsibility* on our life and actions; *gratitude* as an essential key to maintain fulfillment; the importance of *transformation* and change; and the idea of embracing *suffering* as a concept that promotes personal growth and a sense of unity among human beings. We expand the framework by adding the concept of *sharing* as the seventeenth core idea. It is well known in the literature of spirituality and in practice that sharing completes the process of spirituality. Sharing is the platform in which a person can manifest his/her inner transformation into an external, tangible expression and thus achieve fulfillment. Giving is a natural occurrence of the human spirit and could be manifested in different shapes or forms (i.e., money, emotional support, labor, thoughts, time, praying for others). Without passing on energy to others, we experience emptiness and stagnation. The consciousness behind the act of sharing (so it is an authentic act and not solely ego-driven) is truly important and determines its sustainability on both the giver and the receiver (Frankl, 1984; Salzberg, 1997; Zohar & Marshall, 2001). In this study we have used the SAF as a guide to choose our spiritual commercials. Thus, a commercial that contains some of the above spiritual core ideas is considered a *spiritually dense commercial* (see further discussion in the methodology section). Next, we present the emerging field of spirituality in advertising.

Spirituality and Advertising

"Spirituality is sublime. It smells of incense and everything that is good in humans. Consumption [in our article reflected through advertising] is instead mundane, materialistic, and ultimately soulless" (Rinallo et al., 2012, p. 1). How can one reconcile between the notion of spirituality that naturally comes from

within (internal world) and the notion of advertising that naturally comes from without (the external-material world)? As previously discussed, spirituality has both internal and external features. The process of spirituality is not complete without its external expressions and representations. Examples of spiritual expressions can come from all walks of life, including advertising and consumption. Typically, advertising sells material objects. The "spiritual" relationship between objects and human beings has received attention in the literature. Hirschman (1985) discusses how the more spiritual cultivation is injected into the relationship between humans and their possessions, the more intangible, meaningful and spiritual these possessions become. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1982) talk about the intangibility of objects in relation to people: "the objects that people use . . . appear to be signs on a blueprint that represent the relation of man to himself, to his fellows, and to the universe" (p. 38, quoted in Hirschman, 1985). These perspectives demonstrate the blurred boundaries between the internal and external of spirituality; whoever I am, whatever I feel—all is becoming part of my external world as well, including my possessions. Although advertising is perceived in the realm of "without," it is important to recognize it holds a strong "within" component as well; a "within" component of the brand, of the people in the company, of the creatives who created the ads, and the advertisers—each adds something from their own "soul" into the final advertising message. Moreover, as a system which reflects values and sets trends in our society (Holbrook, 1987), the advertising industry cannot ignore the shift toward spirituality among the public (Stark, 1998). Furthermore, both spirituality and advertising center on the notion of meaning and meaning-making (Jhally, 1989; Twitchell, 2004). Finally, it is important to note that the building blocks of advertising such as art, metaphors, imagination, and poetry are deeply rooted in perspectives of the intangible and the spiritual (Twitchell). Thus, the connection between spirituality and advertising is less of an oxymoron than one would think.

Previous research elucidates how prevalent the blend of sacred and secular is in American culture (Moore, 2003), especially in the context of commercial culture (Moore, 1994) and media culture (Hendershot, 2004). However, this seminal work mostly discusses the realm of consumption, culture, and media in the context of religion and religious groups and sects. Conversely, our work, takes a much different, broader, and holistic point of view of spirituality and applies it to an under-explored area in that context—advertising. Past research on the topic of spirituality and advertising mostly focused conceptually on advertising in a religious context (e.g., Abelman & Hoover, 1990; Mallia, 2009; Taylor, Halstead, & Hanes, 2010) and methodologically on the spiritual message (Marmor-Lavie et al., 2009). Since both spirituality and advertising center on the notion of meaning, it is a natural development to connect advertising, spirituality, and the consumer via that common thread. In our study we address the question: What meanings may emerge in consumers' responses to spiritually dense commercials?

Methodology

In this section, we discuss the selection of the spiritually dense commercials, the study methodology, and the participants.

Spiritually Dense Commercials

Four television commercials were used in the study. The commercial messages were for two different brands of financial services (Bank of America and Liberty Mutual) and luxury goods (Louis Vuitton). Commercial messages were purposefully selected to reflect a spiritual dimension or the lack of it (as previously stated, spiritually dense messages carry the essence of some of the spiritual core ideas of the SAF, while non-spiritually dense messages are lacking any reference to these spiritual core ideas; Marmor-Lavie et al., 2009). One commercial for the Bank of America brand (30 seconds long; BOA_30) represented a straightforward message, not spiritually dense. Through numbers written on a balance sheet, it shows how Bank of America has been helping with mortgages in the first quarter of the year. The inclusion of this commercial was just for the purpose of comparison. The other three commercials are spiritually dense (one commercial each for Bank of America, Liberty Mutual, and Louis Vuitton) and are summarized below:

Bank of America (BOA_60) Commercial (60 Seconds Long)

This commercial, which was previously categorized as spiritual (see Marmor-Lavie et al., 2009), describes different people from various racial and social backgrounds who aspire to fulfill their most far-reaching dreams with the help of Bank of America. While staring at the brand's logo, individuals see themselves in the future living their own dreams. The commercial ends with a tag line: "Bank of America. Bank of Opportunity."

Liberty Mutual (LM) Commercial (60 Seconds Long)

The concept of sharing is prominently emphasized in this commercial. The commercial demonstrates how the making of little acts of sharing can affect so many people, in so many ways. It uses the concept of paying it forward to demonstrate how one act of sharing is connected to the next one in a circular manner.

Louis Vuitton (LV) Commercial (90 Seconds Long)

This commercial describes the experience of traveling in a spiritual manner. The ad presents the idea of traveling as an inner journey as much as it is a physical one. Existential questions about the meaning of life constantly appear on the screen.

Interview Methodology

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 participants from various student organizations at a university in the southwestern United States. In an attempt to seek a relatively homogenous group of participants, undergraduate students from various student organizations across the university campus were selected (see Table 1 for participants' information and pseudonyms).

Table 1. Demographic description of participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Racial/Ethnic Identification	Organization
Rachel 1	20	F	Anglo American	Sports
Britney 2	21	F	Anglo American	Sports
Louisa 3	19	F	Hispanic American	Sports
Ashley 4	21	F	Multiracial	Sports
George 5	22	M	Multiracial	Sports
David 6	22	M	Anglo American	Sports
Joshua 7	21	M	Asian American	Sports
Mark 8	20	M	Multiracial	Sports
Gregory 9	19	M	Asian American	Sports
Benjamin10	21	M	Hispanic American	Sports
Julia 11	21	F	Hispanic American	Religious
Rebecca 12	19	F	Anglo American	Sports
Karen 13	20	F	Multiracial	Religious
Audrey 14	18	F	Anglo American	Religious
Tania 15	20	F	Anglo American	Religious
Suzan 16	21	F	Anglo American	Religious
William 17	18	M	Anglo American	Religious
Martha 18	34	F	Middle Eastern	New Age
Margery 19	18	F	Asian American	Religious
Bethany 20	27	F	Hispanic American	New Age
Lea 21	22	F	Asian American	New Age
Jennifer 22	19	F	Hispanic American	New Age
Daniel 23	22	M	Anglo American	New Age
Alex 24	32	M	Anglo American	New Age
Michael 25	20	M	Hispanic American	Religious
Presley 26	19	M	Anglo American	New Age
Brad 27	21	M	Anglo American	Religious
Georgia 28	28	F	Hispanic American	New Age
Emma 29	21	F	Anglo American	Religious

Note. Participant names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

College undergraduates belong to a generation of people born between 1980 and 2000 (16–36 years old in 2016), otherwise known as millennials. From recent consumer reports we learn that this generation is nonmaterialistic, introspective, complex, and emphasizes meaning as a core value (Faw, 2014; Greenberg, 2014; Tanenhaus, 2014). Not surprisingly, the age group being investigated in this exploration is a natural fit to study the topic of spirituality and advertising. Participants were recruited via an ad placed on the website of the students' organizations or through the snowball method of sampling. Ten participants were recruited from campus religious organizations (e.g., Baptist Student Ministry, Hillel, Asian American Campus Ministry), eight were recruited from organizations that practice Eastern Philosophies (e.g., Yoga Club, Art of living, Universal Link for Inner Growth), and 11 participants were from sports-related organizations (e.g., power lifting, women's water polo team, sailing team, ballroom club, ballet club). Participants were interviewed individually and in private by one of the authors in a secure room on the campus. Each interview took about one hour and was divided into four main sections.

- The first section was an introduction to the interview and a way to learn more about the participants; questions about the participants' media consumption, campus affiliation, and activities were asked.
- In the second section, participants viewed the three commercials (two spiritually dense and one not spiritually dense) and were asked the following set of questions repeatedly, after viewing each commercial:

(1) Do you find this commercial, in any way, relevant to your own experiences or personal life? If so, how? If not, why not?

(a) How much do the ideas portrayed in the commercial speak to you?
(b) Do you feel this commercial could have any influence on your own personal life?
(c) How much do you identify with the messages portrayed in the commercial?

While answering these questions, participants were instructed to focus on the personal meanings of the commercial messages and not to focus on the brands per se. Additional questions were asked about the commercials (i.e., about themes and brands) in this section, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

- In the third section, participants were instructed to take a break from the interview and complete a short paper and pencil demographic questionnaire (see Table 1).
- In the last section, the interviewer debriefed the participants about the study and asked:

(1) How would you define spirituality?
(2) Based on your own definition of spirituality, do you see any spirituality or spiritual themes in the commercials you just saw?

In the debriefing, participants were told the purpose of the study. So that participants remained unbiased, they were not told that spiritual messages were examined prior to the debriefing session. The purpose of adding questions about spirituality at the conclusion stage was to allow exploration of any connections among the commercial messages, participants' meanings, and spirituality.

All interviews were analyzed using the theoretical constant comparative method as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as well as Miles and Huberman's (1994) coding and data preparation procedures. Data analysis comprised six stages: first, each transcript was organized in a contact summary sheet; second, researchers' notes were observed; third, transcripts were sent to several participants who validated and clarified their responses, as part of the member checks procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); fourth, Miles and Huberman's coding method was applied; fifth, a cross-case analysis method was used whereby reading and re-reading across the cases yield more meanings

and emerging themes (Drumwright, 1996; Strauss, 1987). Finally, a big memo was created containing new emerging themes and categories.

Analysis and Results

The interaction between the spiritual advertising message and the consumers interviewed in this study has yielded a set of interesting themes that contribute to a much deeper understanding of spirituality in the context of consumption. We asked: What meanings may emerge by individuals in response to spiritually dense commercials? This section offers a conceptual framework to understand those meanings.

Responses to Spiritually Dense Commercials: Four Major Themes

Four themes emerged from the data: *authenticity, the journey, inspiration*, and *nature*. Table 2 summarizes their essence and connection to spirituality in an overall conceptual framework. In this section, we discuss in length each theme and at the end draw an overall conclusion of the findings.

Authenticity

> Authenticity is ubiquitous, calling us to be true to ourselves and true to the world, real in ourselves and real in the world, when authenticity is acknowledged, we admit our foibles, mistakes and protected secrets, the parts of ourselves and society that are fearful and hide in the shadows of existence." (Terry, 1993, p. 139, in Klenke, 2007, p. 70)

Jack Kornfield (1993) describes the process of spiritual work, authenticity, and the importance and necessity "to reclaim our unspoken voice, the truth within us. Yet this is necessary to come to wholeness and true self" (p. 209). He quotes Martha Graham on the importance of being truthful:

> There is a vitality, a life force that is translated through you into action. And because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost.

Table 2. The four major themes: a conceptual framework.

Themes	Understanding the Themes…	Themes and Spirituality…
1. Authenticity	• Act as you preach • Match the product with the message • Getting to really know you • 'Hey you!' You are not alone • Yes, we are different, yet the same	"You can feel more of that deeper experience within them; they are experiencing something much deeper and spiritual…[about the characters in the commercial]" (Daniel)
2. The Journey	The process of life	"I feel like if you are a spiritual person then there is a change going on inside you." (Tania) "[The commercial] spoke to me on the personal journey; through realizing the higher power you also realize yourself." (Jennifer)
3. Inspiration	• "It pushes me to help others" • "It makes me think" • Identity and positive sense of self	"Trying to help someone out is a spiritual practice because it's selfless." (Alex) "[Liberty Mutual's commercial] really connected to my spirituality, in the fact that we are all, our spiritual being … is all connected." (Brad) "'love thy neighbor' and being kind to people and defending the weak …basic ideas are in there [in the commercial]. "(Margery)
4. Nature	The natural outdoor setting	"With the natural nature scenes … I think that's one of the major ways that I connect with my spirituality." (Bethany) "I relate to the solitude of being outside, for me that is kind of a spiritual place." (Britney)

Millennials understand these essentials: "The really hard thing with this generation is making sure these things [marketing strategies] are not seen as add-on. Any effort to put on an identity that seems forced will seem less authentic" (Faw, 2014). The data reflect a few of those themes.

Act As You Preach

Brand authenticity and message consistency are well known constructs in advertising. Although participants in the current study were instructed to focus on the message, they continuously expressed an emotional discontent (theoretically explained as a cognitive dissonance; Festinger, 1957) between the spiritual message portrayed in the commercials (especially the one of the luxury brand) and the actual brands. Participants clearly pinpointed a contradiction between the message and the brand, as explained by George:

> "As we saw, all three commercials were pretty thought-provoking and were pretty cool, but what actually happens? … anybody can put together a couple of million dollars and make a really cool looking commercial …anybody can make a message too, it's really what's happens at the end …we have these inputs but what's the output exactly, I want to see what is going to happen."

George is not satisfied with just a spiritual and thought-provoking commercial; he wants to see an action behind the message. Corresponding with the tendencies of the younger generation (Jung, 1933), everything needs to be experienced personally, first-hand, and translated into action. George provides a recommendation to practitioners:

> "If Louis Vuitton was asking the same [existential] questions [in the commercial] and at the end they would put something like: "Darfur, saving Darfur," then I would probably change my opinion a little bit more [more favorably towards the brand and the spiritual message] …"

"The search for authentic experiences pervades contemporary culture. Whether it be through the performance of risky activities, traveling to historic places or just a return to natural practices as consuming organic food, our age shows strong signs of a drive toward the experience of the real" (Thury-Cornejo, 2008, p. 5). These insights should be helpful for practitioners who attempt to create a meaningful relationship with their consumers. For example, when appealing in a commercial to the notion of reaching out to others, evidence of brand involvement in the community is essential (i.e., through children's education, donation to charity, or the nurturing of a unique working environment). Brands will need to show how the sharing attribute is part of their DNA and how they live by it.

Match the Product with the Message

In consumerism, people now request real products with a very clear affiliation; for example, they ask for hand-made products, wish to know the origin of the product, and want a clear message attached to it (Plaskitt, 2004, p. 4). Building on the concept of synchronized authenticity, participants in the current study complained about the disconnection between the spiritual message in the commercial and the characteristics and uses of the product being advertised. Most of the criticism was aimed toward the luxury goods commercial:

> "I think it is an effective modern advertising if you do it right, if you do it like Bank of America did, where you tie it into your brand, its effective, but as far as how Louis Vuitton did it, they had the spirituality but it wasn't in line with like what I had expected with the company." (William)

> "I just didn't really know how those ideas [spiritual ideas] would connect themselves with the product [Louis Vuitton, luxury good] … I would have expected it to be something like Bank of America commercial or something, "let us help you create your journey …or like at college or something" that was like a really big life decision kind of thing, whereas buying a [luxury good] to me is not a really big life decision kind of thing." (Tania)

As evident from the accounts, consumers demand compatibility between the spiritual message and the attributes of the product. If the magnitude and the characteristics of the brand/product do not fit with the spiritual message and its essence, consumers will not perceive it as real and thus be upset

with the oxymoron. The inherent characteristics of the product need to resonate with the essence of the spiritual message.

Beyond the product–message relationship, special attention should also be directed, by practitioners, towards crafting the right spiritual message. Next, we discuss the message themes that were raised by participants and marked as authentic.

Getting to Really Know You

Many participants resonated with the way human beings were portrayed in the commercials. Participants related well to the message cues that reflected a deeper outlook into the psyche of the characters:

> "As a psychology student it spoke to me on that level, that level that everyone is different and everyone has something that they want and so Bank of America points that out very well; that is, there were people just walking down the street, kind of just going along in life, everyday, but there is always something more, there is always something deeper." (Tania)

Tania was happy to discover that the commercials rose above the superficial level, usually characterized by advertisers and their appeal to consumers. She was impressed that Bank of America revealed in the commercial the dreams and aspirations of regular people walking down the street. The Para-social theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) explains that through intimacy and authenticity, the characters on the screen create a strong and relatable connection with the audience. Daniel shares his feelings about the deep, authentic spiritual experiences the characters in the commercials are going through: "You can feel more of that deeper experience within them; they are experiencing something much deeper and spiritual … [about the characters in the commercial]."

"Hey You!" You Are Not Alone

The spiritually dense commercials elicited emotions of solidarity and connection towards the entire human race:

> "Everyone … it seems like they were having a little bit of a hard time in the situation that they were in [refers to the characters in the brand Bank of America commercial]; and anyone, I don't care who it is, will have a point in their life that they go through a hard time … and so you just think about it and you are like: 'well, that person has it,' 'I have it better than that person right now,' or 'I shouldn't think that I have it bad,' or even if you are in a bad situation, it is going to get better, and so, it just kind of gives you that hope that they portray … even if you just have a bad day or something, and you can think about: 'ok, it is ok, it is going to be better tomorrow,' type of thing." (Louisa)

Neff (2003), who writes about compassion and the self, presents the concept of *common humanity* in which we understand that we are only one part of a larger humanity that experiences similar challenges. Neff stresses the importance of viewing our struggles and the struggles of others from the prism of the entire human experience. Another expression of solidarity emphasizes the positive side of the human condition: "I thought it [the commercial] was good because it really appeals to making people's dreams come true, trying to imply that Bank of America is what makes them happen, it makes you feel good, like when you watch it, you are like: yeah, go people!" (Jennifer about Bank of America). As human beings it is natural to aspire to achieve our dreams, as discussed in humanistic traditions of spirituality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Emmons, 2006; Maslow, 1965).

Yes, We Are Different, Yet the Same…

Diversity plays a large role in the commercials. The commercials presented a wide range of human beings, from various backgrounds and traditions, yet share a lot in common:

> "… the wide range of people that they portray in the ad; there is a black individual, there is an old Chinese man, there is a woman—these are questions that everybody stands to answer and that's a question that everybody faces, it is a question that everybody has." (George)

In many spiritual traditions, the idea of connection among all human beings, regardless of size, color, or religion, overrides the idea of separation (see Kale, 2004). This concept relates to the thoughts of George as well as to Karen and many others: "Yeah, I would definitely find it a little more relevant to me just because they had different people from different backgrounds and ages and everything, so there is like a random person in the streets of the city that could relate to me" (Karen). Advertisers should pay attention to the positive reactions expressed by participants and use more diversity in their messages. Karen gave advertisers a practical advice and warned them not to focus on a specific religion:

> "It [the commercial] didn't point out a specific religion or anything, it is definitely just something in general that is spiritual … and to a lot of different people that could mean a lot of different things, so I don't think that was offensive or anything like that, I think if there is any spirituality in advertising it will be along those lines, whereas it's something that can relate to everybody, lots of tolerance." (Karen)

Fairfield and Johnson (2004) support these findings: "Choosing the religious symbol or value to incorporate into an ad campaign, however, could be difficult. In a culture that supports a wide variety of religious beliefs, there is the potential to offend one set of believers while supporting another" (p. 403).

The Journey

The idea of a spiritual quest, a spiritual journey where the protagonist changes from the inside-out, is well documented in the literature (Lew, 2005; Linzer, 1996; Schmidt, 2005). The theme of "the journey," explicitly reflected in the Louis Vuitton commercial, seems to have struck a chord with many of the participants. The commercial poses questions about the journey of life while showing various geographic locations on the screen. The assumption that life is a circular journey and a long-term process with ups and downs reverberates well with the audience. Many of the participants report a connection with that message and the ability to see themselves in the situations portrayed in the commercials. Alex shares his personal experience with the "journey" concept: "My dad has this quote, he always says about a journey: 'the journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step,' and I was just thinking kind of about that too, how, you can head towards anywhere, you just have to start doing it." Other participants revealed how the journey becomes part of their spiritual experiences and practices:

> "It spoke to me on the personal journey, through realizing the higher power you also realize yourself, and like who you are and what you are doing on this planet, so for me that had a spiritual theme [about the Louis Vuitton commercial]." (Jennifer)

> "I liked the idea of your journey and like your story as a person being fluid and always developing and never really standing still … I feel like if you are a spiritual person then there is a change going on inside you, and like the way you view things there is like renewal and growth." (Tania)

One of the most common responses to the "journey" theme came from people who interpret it as a physical journey and beyond:

> "I took a year off, between high school and college to do a kind of journey work, finding myself, so I thought that was a nice message to have with it." (Rachel)

> "… a journey, it is just they are implying that it's something much deeper, it's an experience, and it 's something that shapes you, you don't necessarily shape it, which I can definitely relate to." (Daniel)

Some participants connected to the theme of the journey through the stories told by others (e.g., friends, relatives). Suzan, for example, discusses the journey of her relatives: "It (the Bank of America commercial) reminded me of my great grandparents who came from Russia through New York, so it sort of reminded me maybe of what their dreams were, when they came … I had empathy for the people in the ad, so it resonated with me, I guess as someone who is a relative of someone who has been in that situation." Moreover, participants apparently noticed those points of the journey, which indicate a decision or a life junction. Suzan explains: "As a college student I have dreams and goals of

hopefully what my life will be like after graduation, so I think that is something that is always in the back of my mind." These situations of "high involvement" play a significant role in advertising message processing. Previous research showed the more involved consumers are with the message, the better they will respond to it (Krugman, 1965; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Inspiration

Spiritual messages are meant to inspire the audience to grow, to share, to transform, and to become better persons. Inspiration was discussed by the participants and is presented in the following themes:

"It pushes me to help others."

Individuals were particularly inspired by messages that encouraged positive social behavior. The Liberty Mutual commercial is highly relevant since it promotes the idea of sharing in a very pro-active way:

> "After you watch it, you just feel good and you kind of want to go out and do something nice for someone else." (Gregory)
> "I try my hardest to really bring kindness into the world wherever I can. I think little gestures can mean a lot for a lot of people. There is the idea that you should be nice to someone because you don't know what kind of a day that person had … Like each piece of kindness can really mean a lot to the world." (Brad)

> "I guess it would push me … I am seeing people helping each other … it feels like I should be doing it more, because if other people are doing it then I should be doing it. I also feel good about myself if I do it, so I think that it helps me push myself to help other people." (Mark)

Participants also discussed the connection between sharing and their own sense of spirituality:

> "That is just a spiritual practice because it's selfless, it's a selfless act, like you don't have to do that stuff at all, you are not going to get panelized for not doing it, and there is a chance you can get and put yourself in harm's way." (Alex)

> "In the commercial was something that really connected to my spirituality … we are all, our spiritual being is all connected. For instance, like the mood of someone you are sitting next to will affect your mood." (Brad)

Furthermore, others found a connection between the message and their own religion: "'love thy neighbor' and being kind to people and defending the weak, of course, stuff like that, basic ideas are in there [in the commercial]" (Margery). Via the spiritual message in advertising, participants seemed to connect not only with their own spirituality but also to a behavioral dimension where they aspire to be proactive and do good in the world. These findings suggest that advertisers could harness the well-known knowledge of advertising effects (see Edell & Burke, 1987; Erevelles, 1998; Olney, Holbrook, & Batra, 1991; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999) in a constructive way.

"It makes me think."

Participants reported how the spiritual message triggered thoughts about the meaning of life, traveling, self-discovery, the psyche of others, and sharing with others. The thought-provoking messages took participants out of the context of advertising and promotion:

> "It would make me become very introspective for probably a few minutes." (George)

> "It kind of struck a chord with me, it made me think about my goals and moving to reach those goals … different move that I could make to reach those goals, it was something that definitely went through my head." (Brad)

> "Now [after watching the commercial] you look at people's faces, and it is not just like people anymore, walking around like ants, it is more like personal … you realize that each person has a story about them [as was portrayed in the commercial], and not just a whole bunch of crowded people going to work or something." (Louisa)

Moreover, participants report that thoughts about dreams and passions were also raised:

> "There is a lot of life to be lived … maybe I haven't done Scuba diving before but there is still time in the future to do that, and that sort of thing. I can still accomplish a lot, aside from just work." (Britney)

> "The little kid who wanted to be a doctor … I am a pre-med, I want to be a doctor and that kind of resonated with me." (Rebecca)

In this study, participants discussed various human needs, both physical and intangible/spiritual (i.e., having a home, economic stability, education, career, family, spiritual balance, and leisure). Maslow's (1965) primordial theory explains the essentials for the desire of various needs, including spiritual ones at the top of the hierarchy.

Identity and Positive Sense of Self

The connection between the brand and the identity of the consumer has been established in past research (e.g., Belk, 1988; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consumers use brands to construct their identities. Some of the phrases participants have used in the current study, especially when talking about the luxury brand, were: "it's a piece of you" (Rachael); "a part of your life" (Britney); "learning about yourself" (Rachael); and "you grow with [the brand]" (Britney). Other participants distanced themselves (and by extension, their identities) completely from the brands due to their skepticism about consumption in general and advertising in particular. Other responses did not relate to consumers' identity and brand per se but referred to the spiritual message attached to it. As reported earlier, many participants discussed how the message made them feel good about themselves (e.g., bringing kindness to the world); it pushed them to be proactive (e.g., "the message pushes me to help others"); rethink their life goals and aspirations (see "it makes me think" or "the journey" theme); and view people differently (see "'Hey You!' You Are Not Alone" subsection). Building on these positive responses and the knowledge of brand identity (e.g., Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), advertising could potentially be used and structured as a vehicle to encourage a positive sense of self among consumers. Instead of promoting distorted and distracting sense of selves (e.g., Kilbourne, 1999; Pollay, 1986; Potter, 1954), there is a potential to promote positive values among the public. Ideas of compassion and self-compassion, for example, as portrayed in the current commercials, were previously linked in the psychology literature to improving thoughts of safeness, feeling good about oneself, general well-being and pro-social behavior, without the need of comparison to others (Neff, 2003). For example, the 2013 "Dove Real Beauty Sketches" advertising campaign seems to adopt this line of thought precisely, while highlighting the issue of women's body image in a very compassionate and constructive way. Based on the assertion that one way people construct their identities is through the relationships they form with objects (e.g., Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993), this study identifies how both consumers and companies can benefit.

Nature

Portrayal of nature in the commercials elicited intense meanings and emotions among participants. The natural outdoor settings portrayed in the Louis Vuitton commercial received particular attention and a sense of relatedness. Numerous participants mentioned how nature is a big part of their spirituality:

> "The things with nature … I love nature and being outdoors and enjoying those kind of things, so I could really see myself enjoying those kind of settings. It is always for me like going back and forth—do I prefer to be in a more desolate beautiful place or the life of the city where there is pollution and all this but not so much natural beauty." (Bethany)

> "I relate to the solitude of being outside, for me that is kind of a spiritual place, as far as clearing your mind." (Britney)

> "With the natural nature scenes … I think that's one of the major ways that I connect with my spirituality." (Bethany)

Advertisers should note that nature has been previously linked to spirituality through the physical journey (Kamenetz, 1994), solitude in nature (Schmidt, 2005), the harmony of being in the outdoors (Lew, 2005), and meditation (Kamenetz; Lew; Neal, 2000; Schmidt). In light of such evidence, it is not surprising that participants made the connection to spirituality.

In conclusion of the findings, it seems that authenticity emerges as the overarching condition to the upcoming spirituality doctrine in advertising and business: consumers tell advertisers and companies—no authenticity, no spirituality; they also refer to the message of the "journey" as an authentic and acceptable framework to discuss spirituality in that setting; they see nature as a common and neutral way to connect to the authenticity of the world; and finally, they observe inspirational stories as a legitimate tool to ignite an authentic spiritual change among people.

Discussion and Future Research

In this article, we present a case where advertising is the spark of meaning-making among consumers (see also Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008; McCracken, 1986; Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritison, 2010; Scott, 1990). Spirituality in advertising is an emerging area of study which calls for further investigation. This article expands the literature in an untouched area of study, provides a perspective on "spirituality beyond religion," focuses on qualitative research, and advances a theoretical framework in the form of four major themes. These themes (authenticity, the journey, inspiration, and nature) point to the direction of how the field should be further developed and applied. A crucial finding that warrants the attention of advertisers and scholars is the authenticity theme. The research results demonstrate that our generation seeks authenticity from within. In other words, the brand's essence, especially if it carries a spiritual dimension, is expected to shine through the entire business process and dominate in the product itself, inside the company, in the advertising message and in the field, after the campaign is gone.

Subsequently, scholars and practitioners alike need to revisit some of the traditional advertising and marketing concepts, while thinking about the following questions: how should we redefine the job of the advertiser or the brand manager today? Will advertisers take upon the role of encouraging authenticity within companies and society as a whole? How different, if at all, should the company identity be from the brand? What are some of the ramifications of these findings on the relationship among the business owners, the advertiser, and society? These types of questions should set the research agenda in the field of spirituality in advertising. The other three themes found in the study (the journey, inspiration, and nature) provide a basic framework of how to craft a spiritual message in advertising. Although the current investigation presents great insights about the consumer and the spiritual message in advertising, it still lacks various aspects. For example, what are some of the additional themes that might emerge from researching other groups of participants or other product categories? Furthermore, it will be beneficial to better match product categories and the designated target audience (not just students). Also, researching different platforms of advertising, such as magazine ads or social media could provide a source of comparison to the themes found here. Finally, future research should also focus on advertisers and the motivation behind spiritually dense commercials.

Ethics and the Positive Dimension of Spirituality in Advertising

We urge that the realm of spirituality in advertising be explored under careful ethical and social considerations. Critics of advertising claim that by "exalting materialism at the expense of traditional spiritual values in American life" (Petit & Zakon, 1962, p. 15), advertising distracts us from a true spiritual quest (e.g., Pollay, 1986; Potter, 1954). Critics claim that ads reflect materialistic values such as individualism, egotism, and separation while ignoring spiritual values such as sharing and self-growth (Pollay; Petitt & Zakon; Potter). On the contrary, others assert that advertising does not shape our value system but simply reflects it (Brown, 1981) while some conclude that our social life is both shaped and reflected by advertising (Williamson, 1976). The

findings of the current study may suggest a re-examination of those perspectives in the context of the emerging field of spirituality in advertising. That advertising may emphasize or strengthen certain values over others should not be made light of. If advertisers were to use these spiritual messages merely as a new marketing technique, how might this influence the authenticity? Participants demand authenticity behind and beyond the spiritual message. In other words, if a company advertises the idea of sharing, this should be backed up in reality, and reflected in the company's DNA and actions. Otherwise, it is merely a manipulation technique that companies should strongly avoid, not only because it's unethical but also because it would create backlash. In general, the majority of the participants in this study reveal a sense of contentment by the new approach reflected in the spiritually dense commercial. Findings show how these messages push toward pro-social behavior, connection with others, and introspective thoughts. Based on our findings and in contrast to undermining self-esteem or eroding cultural values, advertising is emerging as a positive force, promoting a healthy sense of self and constructive cultural and spiritual values. Brad discusses the potential of spirituality in advertising:

> "I think it starts in advertising … advertising has been, throughout the past century, almost part of the downfall of the American culture into a consumerist, sex and money culture. I think it would be good [about spirituality in advertising] … advertising has a lot of bearing on people, and people might be able to connect to it on a deeper level … I think spirituality and advertising will be a very positive thing." (Brad)

Advertisers, who constitute the bridge between companies and consumers, could take the lead in promoting that positive approach while strengthening authenticity within companies. John Osborn, president and chief executive officer of BBDO New York, spoke about the soul of selling: "Every brand has a head, heart and soul that connect a product to its customers" (Gesualdo, 2013). In academia, previous research demonstrates how the positive shift in marketing has been used successfully in Corporate Societal Marketing (CSM) (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2006; Drumwright, 1996; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004), spirituality at the workplace (Duchon & Ashmos, 2005; Mitroff & Denton, 1999), and consumer behavior and spirituality (Ball, Hampton, Chronis, & Bunker, 2001; Hirschman, 1985; Rinallo et al., 2012). To conclude, the current study added an important element to the field of spirituality in advertising, both in theory and in practice. Participants seemed intrigued by the new spiritual approach to advertising but were very particular with their requests of how to use it and when. With participants' explanations it was plausible to connect between the advertising message, the personal meanings and spirituality. As scholars who form the trajectory of spirituality in advertising, we should listen to the voices of consumers and shape it toward its authentic core.

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