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Evaluating the Impact of Religious Icons and Symbols on Consumer's Brand Evaluation: Context of Hindu Religion

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ABSTRACT



The influence of symbolic meanings and brand associations on consumers' buying decisions is an important area of inquiry. In this article, we use symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework for investigating the impact of the presence of religious signs in print advertisements on consumers' brand evaluation (namely, brand affect and brand trust) and purchase intention. We also study the comparative impact of two different types of religious signs—religious icons versus religious symbols—on brand evaluation and purchase intention. Three experimental studies ($N=80, 161, \text{ and } 452$) were conducted to investigate the effect of religious signs in advertisements for secular products and to compare the results for religious icons and religious symbols. Both kinds of religious signs were found to positively impact brand evaluation and purchase intention. However, religious icons were found to have a higher positive impact than religious symbols on brand evaluation and purchase intention. The results also indicate that highly religious consumers respond more favorably to advertisements containing religious cues in comparison to less-religious consumers. The theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the studies in the domains of advertising, branding, and semiotics are discussed, and research limitations are also presented.

Religion is deeply ingrained in the Indian value system and plays an important role in the lives of Indian citizens (PEW 2018, 14). Religious themes and values are equally entrenched in the Indian advertising scenario, with Hindu religious icons being used to evoke humor (e.g., Fevicol and Lenovo showing Lord Yamraja in distress) or to deliver important social messages (e.g., campaigns such as “Gods wear helmets” and “domestic violence against Hindu Goddesses”).

Symbolic interactionism theory posits that people derive their worldview from and relate to objects based on symbolic meaning given by society (Leigh and Gabel 1992). Religion is a social phenomenon that unites people (Durkheim 1995). It employs signs that can reinforce complex ideas in an emotionally powerful manner (Geertz 2000 [1973]; Jung 2014), and hence, the use of religious symbolism in advertising can be advantageous.

The use of symbolism in advertising and its contribution to the complex process of brand building is well accepted in the advertising research domain (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald 2005; Lloyd and Woodside 2013). Advertising researchers have studied brand imagery and logos (Henke 1995; Pieters and Wedel 2004), cultural symbolism (Holland and Gentry 1997; Zeybek and Ekin 2012), and even animal imagery (Lloyd and Woodside 2013; Spears, Mowen, and Chakraborty 1996). However, the study of religious signs has received comparatively less focus, even though religion is known to play an important role in consumer behavior (Agarwala, Mishra, and Singh 2019; Mokhlis 2009; Arli, Cherrier, and Tjiptono 2016; Minton 2015).

While some researchers have revealed that the presence of a religious sign engenders a positive attitude toward advertisements and brands (Henley et al. 2009; Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010; Muralidharan and

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La Ferle 2018), others have reported negative feedback and skepticism (Dotson and Hyatt 2000; Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010). Furthermore, the positive results vary across signs and religious faiths (Zehra and Minton 2020). In order to develop theory in the field of religious advertising, it is imperative to study these inconsistencies and conduct comparative studies in order to explain which kinds of signs are more appropriate for use in advertisements. For example, the Hindu Lord Shiva is worshiped in various forms: he can be Nataraj (dancing form), Rudra (enraged and wild), or Bhairav (frightful and terrible). These forms evoke different kinds of emotions, which may not necessarily lead to positive brand assessments.

Given the low level of cognizance with regard to the influence of religious signs in advertisements, we ask the following research question: Does the presence of a religious sign in an advertisement positively impact brand evaluation, specifically brand affect and brand trust? These variables are critical for brand performance and influence brand loyalty, market share, and relative price (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Which kind of signs (icons versus symbols; Peirce 1931 [1974]) have a stronger positive effect on these variables? Is there a stronger positive effect for high-religious consumers as compared to low-religious consumers?

This research builds on symbolic interactionism theory to examine the influence of religious signs in advertising on consumer behavior. It holds significance for practitioners and researchers in the fields of advertising, culture, and branding. In the following sections, we discuss the symbolic interactionism theory and review the literature on signs, religious signs, and the usage of religious signs in advertising. Next, we build the research hypotheses, present the research methodology, and examine results from three experiments. Finally, the implications and limitations of the studies are discussed.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934) has a long history in sociology (Carter and Fuller 2016) and has also been used in marketing research (Leigh and Gabel 1992; Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara 2018a). Its main premise is that individuals interact with society at large and relate to objects or events based on their symbolic meaning given by society. In consumer behavior, this theory has been shown to manifest itself in symbolic religious consumption (Bakar, Lee, and Rungie 2013), luxury fashion consumption (Zhang and Kim 2013), and sports

consumption (Armstrong 2007). Researchers in the field of brand communications suggest that marketers should engineer their brand's symbolism because consumers perceive symbolic brand values to be important (Tan and Ming 2003).

Within the symbolic-interactionism framework, religion is a major cultural phenomenon that uses symbolic associations to transfer meaning and values to believers. Its abstract nature makes the use of religious signs even more important, since they help to make religion tangible (Geertz 2000). Durkheim (1995 [1912]) considers society to be the soul of all religious belief. Religion is a collective phenomenon and social interaction with fellow members is a dominant part of it.

Literature Review

Classification of Signs

Before delving into the various kinds of signs, we would like to clarify confusion regarding the usage of the terms *signs* and *symbols*. Anthropologists and psychologists (Womack 2005; Jung 2014) claim that signs have only one possible meaning, whereas symbols convey multiple meanings at the same time. On the contrary, semioticians (Peirce 1931 [1974]; Saussure 2004 [1916]) suggest that the sign is the smallest unit of meaning and is anything that may be interpreted as signifying something. Our research follows this semiotic definition of signs. Henceforth, the term *sign* is used to denote any images, words, or cues that can signify something else and the term *symbol* is used to specify a particular classification of sign, as described below.

Peirce (1931 [1974]) delineated three categories for the classification of signs, based on their relationship with the object signified. First, an icon is a sign that has a visual resemblance to the object. For example, the icon of a trashcan on a computer depicts the Recycle Bin or Trash. Second, an index is either a part of a whole image or has a factual association with the object. For example, a pair of feathered wings signifies a bird (part of the whole) or rising smoke signifies fire (factual association). Third, a symbol is related to its object in an entirely conventional manner and does not have a visual or factual connection with it. For example, a yellow triangle with an exclamation mark is known to signal hazard. These classifications are important because they are known to impact consumer perceptions (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Oswald and Mick 2006; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Rossolatos 2018).

Religious Signs

Religious signs are representations that intend to depict a specific religion (and/or its concepts) or a supreme being. From a symbolic-interactionism perspective, their meanings are derived from interaction with fellow members of the faith. Religious signs condense vast amounts of cultural meaning without encouraging logical thought (Ortner 1973; Riis and Woodhead 2010) and also influence many socio-psychological processes (Geertz 2000 [1973]; Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Yelle 2013; Jung et al. 1968).

On the basis of our interpretation of Peirce's classification of signs, we describe religious icons, indices, and symbols as follows. Religious icons have a visual similarity with the related object and, thus, images of God (Jesus Christ, Lord Ganesha) fall in this category. The Christian cross and the Hindu trident are a part of the whole image of Jesus Christ and Lord Shiva, respectively, thus becoming religious indices. Religious symbols have no factual or visual connection with God, but have a conventional meaning for the followers of the faith (e.g., the Ichthus, Om, or the Islamic crescent moon and star). These symbols do not directly signify religious meaning because they lack a visual or factual connection.

It is important to note that these classifications are not mutually exclusive and the viewer's interpretation plays an important role in the signification process. For example, an image of a church can be interpreted as an icon or as an index, depending on how the respondent construes it.

Religious Signs and Advertising

Religious themes have been used in advertising for decades because they help break through the media clutter and command attention (see Mallia 2009 for an analysis on the changing nature of religious imagery in advertising). The majority of the literature regarding religious content in advertising is qualitative in nature. Researchers have undertaken content analyses of advertisements (Keenan and Yeni 2003; Moore 2005; Knauss 2016) or conducted comparative studies of two or more cultures (Kalliny and Gentry 2007; Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Sobh et al. 2018).

According to the symbolic-interactionism perspective, religious signs have strong behavioral power (Henley et al. 2009; Roberts 2004). Research regarding the presence of religious signs in advertisements has revealed that it creates positive attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Henley et al. 2009; Lumpkins 2010; Muralidharan and La Ferle 2018; Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara 2018b). It also leads to

greater recall (Lumpkins 2010) and an affective response, which lead to a positive evaluation of the business (Zehra and Minton 2020). Religious subjects attribute quality, honesty, credibility, and trustworthiness to marketers who employ Christian signs in their communication (Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010).

While the above studies provide evidence in support of the use of religious signs in advertising, others reveal ambivalent responses. Dotson and Hyatt (2000) show that highly religious consumers do not give greater attention or demonstrate a more positive attitude when advertisements contain a cross. In fact, in a low-involved situation, they have a significantly lower attitude and degree of intention toward such advertisements than less-religious consumers. Similar contradictory results have emerged in other studies as well, with reports of adverse reactions to the use of religious signs in advertising (Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010; Taylor, Halstead, and Moal-Ulvoas 2017). Kumra, Parthasarathy, and Anis (2016) find no significant positive response for religious-themed advertisements in comparison to neutral advertisements. Other studies report positive results for some religious signs, but not for others (Zehra and Minton 2020). We provide a detailed analysis of the research on the presence of religious signs in secular advertising in Table 1.

Table 1 reveals that the majority of the research on religious signs in advertising deals with Christianity. Further, the focus is largely on advertising-related constructs (attention, recall, and attitude) that lead to intention, and little attention has been given to brand evaluation. When classifying the signs used in these experiments, one comes across all of the three distinctions provided by Peirce: icon (Goddess Durga), index (cross), and symbols (Ichthus, crescent moon and star, and words such as *Christian*, *Hindu* and *devout*), but no comparisons have been made to explicate which kind of signs may yield more positive results. The only exception is a recent study (Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara 2018a) which reports no difference between visual and textual signs. This is important because the associations evoked by various signs, even from the same religion, are not the same (Zehra and Minton 2020). In light of these research gaps, we undertake a more thorough examination of the impact of different kinds of religious signs on brand evaluation and purchase intention.

Hypotheses Development

Brand Affect

Brand affect is defined as the "potential in a brand to elicit a positive emotional response in the average

Table 1. Research on presence of religious signs in secular advertising.

Study	Religious sign	Semiotic classification of sign used	Outcome variables	Important results
Dotson and Hyatt (2000)	A Cross	Index	-Attention to ad (Aad) -Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Attitude toward brand (Atb) -Purchase Intention (PI)	-High Religiosity (HR) subjects were not found to have greater Aad or favorable Atd. -Low involvement, HR subjects showed less favorable Atb and lower PI
Henley et al. (2009)	-The word <i>Christian</i> -A Cross	-Symbol -Index	-Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Attitude toward brand (Atb) -Purchase Intention (PI)	-Higher Atd, Atb and PI for relevant symbol-product linkage -Religiosity moderates the relationships
Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes (2010)	Christian <i>Ichthus</i> (a fish)	Symbol	-Perceived Quality (PQ) -Purchase Intention (PI) -Attitude similarity, trustworthiness, expertise, skepticism	-Religiosity moderates relation between symbol presence and PQ -Religiosity partially moderates relation between symbol presence and PI -Attitude similarity, trustworthiness, expertise, skepticism mediate the path to PQ and PI
Lumpkins (2010)	A Cross	Index	-Memory of ad -Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Attitude toward brand (Atb) -Purchase Intention (PI)	- Higher memory of ad, Atb and PI, for advertisement containing cross
Taylor, Halstead, and Moal-Ulvoas (2017)	Christian <i>Ichthus</i>	Symbol	-Perceived Quality (PQ) -Purchase Intention (PI) -Attitude similarity, trustworthiness, skepticism	-For Low Religiosity (LR), PQ will be reduced -Skepticism will mediate the path to PQ -For HR subjects, PQ will be enhanced -Attitude similarity and trustworthiness will mediate the path to PQ -No impact on PI for HR or LR subjects
Muralidharan and La Ferle (2018)	-The word <i>Christian</i> -A Cross	-Symbol -Index	-Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Intention to act	-HR subjects showed higher Atd and Intention for advert containing religious signs -LR subjects showed higher Atd and Intention for advert without religious signs
Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara (2018b)	Hindu Goddess Durga	Icon	-Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Intention to act	-HR subjects showed higher Atd and Intention for advert containing religious signs
Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara (2018a)	-Hindu Goddess Durga -The words <i>devout</i> and <i>Hindu</i>	-Icon -Symbol	-Attitude toward ad (Atd) -Intention to act	-No difference in Atd and Intention found between advertisements containing only words, only image or both words and image
Zehra and Minton (2020)	- A Cross -Crescent moon with a star	-Index -Symbol	-Affective response to ad (Afd) -Business evaluation (Attitude & Purchase Intention)	-Islamic sign lead to greater Afd -Positive affect lead to higher business evaluation -Results did not hold for Christian sign

consumer” (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, 82). Mitchell and Olson (1981) show that when an advertisement pairs a brand with an image that evokes positive feelings, the association causes these feelings to get transferred to the brand. Other consumer research studies (e.g., Kim, Allen, and Kardes 1996) have also observed that using attractive images promotes direct affect transfer. This can be explained through the process of evaluative conditioning: the change in liking which occurs due to an association with a positive or a negative stimulus (Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001; Eisend and Tarrahi 2016).

Symbolic interactionism theory confirms that religious signs can elicit strong, affective response because individuals feel an emotional attachment to things that are socially considered to be sacred (Henley et al. 2009). Further, empirical evidence suggests that

positive physiological differences occur when participants are exposed to religious versus nonreligious images (Weisbuch-Remington et al. 2005). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: The presence of a religious sign in a print advertisement has a higher positive effect on brand affect as compared to a nonreligious image.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as the “feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand, that is based on the perceptions that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer” (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen 2003, 11). There is evidence that

advertising can plant the first seeds of trust in a brand, even when consumers have no direct experience with the brand (Li and Miniard 2006). Our research investigates this initial perception of trust, which is built right at the beginning of a consumer-brand relationship. Brand trust differs from attitude toward brand in that it measures competence, not a general disposition toward the brand (Sheinin, Varki, and Ashley 2011).

Connecting religious signs to brand trust is consistent with foundational analyses of trust (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Rafaeli, Sagy, and Derfler-Rozin 2008). According to these analyses, brand trust can be evoked by the properties of a given situation or a person's physical cues (Rafaeli, Sagy, and Derfler-Rozin 2008). Similar to the manner in which we use heuristic information processing to make trust judgments, when we have little history with a trustee (Dunn and Schweitzer 2005), brand trust judgments will be made heuristically based on cues derived from the brand's advertisement. A religious sign acts as a contextual cue that evokes "swift trust" (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer 1996, 166) for a consumer.

Moreover, it has been shown that people have greater trust in religious individuals (Tan and Vogel 2008), particularly members of their own religious groups (Daniels and von der Ruhr 2010; Johansson-Stenman, Mahmud, and Martinsson 2009). This can be explained by symbolic interactionism, which not only influences consumers' worldview but also their self-identity (Solomon 1983). The same logic also indicates that consumers should have higher trust in brands that portray religiosity or membership to the consumer's religious group through the depiction of a religious sign. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: The presence of a religious sign in a print advertisement has a higher positive effect on brand trust as compared to a non-religious image.

Purchase Intention (Mediated through Brand Affect)

Affect is known to serve as an important predictor of consumer behavior (for a review, see Erevelles 1998). One of the common explanations for this is the "affect referral" hypothesis (Wright 1975, 66), which suggests that while making purchase decisions, consumers often avoid using specific attribute data and instead choose the brand with the highest affect. Consumers are motivated by a desire to be happy (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999) and thus brands that make them feel pleased or joyful prompt purchase intention

(Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Matzler, Bidmon, and Grabner-Kräuter 2006). Thus, we propose:

H3a: Brand affect will mediate the relationship between the presence of a religious sign and purchase intention.

Purchase Intention (Mediated through Brand Trust)

Brand trust is an important predictor of brand performance (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, 2002) and is known to impact consumers' value perceptions (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002), brand commitment (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán 2001), and loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen 2003; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán 2005). Further, there is ample evidence linking brand trust to purchase intention (Wu, Chan, and Lau 2008; Kim 2012). Brand trust convinces the consumer that the brand is more worthy of purchasing than the vast variety of other options that are available. Consumers perceive the brand to be more reliable, which motivates purchase intention (Herbst et al. 2012; Herbst, Hannah, and Allan 2013). Thus, we hypothesize:

H3b: Brand trust will mediate the relationship between the presence of a religious sign and purchase intention.

Religiosity

Religion is highly personal in nature and its effect on consumer behavior depends on the individual's level of religiosity (Agarwala, Mishra, and Singh 2019; Minton 2015). Religiosity is defined as "the degree to which beliefs in specific religious values and ideals are held and practiced by an individual" (Delener 1990, 27).

Since religion is a cultural phenomenon, the meaning of religious signs are culturally assigned and their interpretation is a subjective process (Alcorta and Sosis 2005). Symbolic interactionism predicts that these signs should influence consumers differently depending on their personal religiosity levels. For devout followers of their faith, relevant religious signs hold greater meaning and can summarize what they know about the way of the world (Geertz 2000; Weisbuch-Remington et al. 2005). Empirical research also reveals that highly religious consumers have positive responses to advertisements containing religious

signs (Henley et al. 2009; Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010). Thus, we hypothesize:

H4a: Religiosity acts as a moderator in the relationship between the presence of a religious sign and brand affect such that brand affect will be higher for high-religiosity consumers as compared to low-religiosity consumers.

H4b: Religiosity acts as a moderator in the relationship between the presence of a religious sign and brand trust such that brand trust will be higher for high-religiosity consumers as compared to low-religiosity consumers.

Religious Icons versus Symbols

For our next hypotheses, we explore two extreme categories of religious signs: icons and symbols. The former are visual replications of God, while the latter lack this visual connection. Because the interpretation of religious signs is very subjective, we preclude the religious index at this juncture to avoid overcomplicating matters.

Because an icon usually carries some structure of the object it signifies, it carries information (Garrod et al. 2007). On the other hand, symbols are more abstract and their information resides in the user's conventional knowledge of what they stand for. Icons are more visually obvious, depicting things that one is familiar with (Shen, Xue, and Wang 2018).

The visual complexity, meaningfulness, and semantic distance of a sign help assess its performance (McDougall, Curry, and de Bruijn 1999; Shen, Xue, and Wang 2018; McDougall and Isherwood 2009). Because icons are more visually complex than symbols, they are easier to interpret (McDougall, Curry, and de Bruijn 1999; García, Badre, and Stasko 1994). They are also more meaningful and, thus, show stronger performance than symbols (Rogers and Osborne 1987; Rogers 1989, 1986; Caire et al. 2013). Semantic distance measures the clarity of the relationship between the sign and the object it represents. By definition, this relationship is very clear in icons, which leads to stronger performance (Moyes 1993; Isherwood, McDougall, and Curry 2007).

Literature also suggests that icons have performance advantages in comparison to symbols (Green and Barnard 1990; Caire et al. 2013). In a study measuring the characteristics of various icons and symbols, McDougall, Curry, and de Bruijn (1999) used 239 signs, two of which were religious signs. They evaluated an icon of Jesus Christ (image 41, p. 499) and a symbol from Confucianism (image 52, p. 500). The

religious icon was found to be stronger in complexity, meaningfulness, and semantic distance than the religious symbol. Taking all of these into consideration, we hypothesize that a religious icon has stronger performance benefits than a religious symbol.

H5a: The presence of a religious icon will have a higher positive impact on brand affect than a religious symbol.

H5b: The presence of a religious icon will have a higher positive impact on brand trust than a religious symbol.

Methodology

Hinduism, the chosen research context, is the predominant religion in India (Venkatesh 1994) and is replete with symbolism (Swahānanda 1983). The concept of cleanliness is critical to Hinduism and the daily bath is an important ritual for its followers. The ancient Hindu text *Manusmriti* (Manu 2009) repeatedly exhorts maintaining purity of the body (2009, chap. 5, 128, 134, 135), mind and soul (2009, chap. 12, 5–7). Since it has been previously suggested that advertisers maintain a relevant linkage between the product and religious sign (Henley et al. 2009), we determined that Hindu religious signs would be congruent with the daily bath-soap product category.

In order to finalize the experimental stimuli, the meanings associated with various religious signs (e.g., Ganesha, Shiva, Om, and Swastika [Hindu symbol of well-being]) were pretested through qualitative interviews. Sufficient similarities were found between the Ganesha and Om signs, with participants using words like God, spirituality, faith, and Hinduism for both of them. The Hindu Lord Ganesha is a well-loved figure across India (Gaur and Chapnerkar 2015; Fuller 2001) and the Om sign is one of the most widely used symbols in Hinduism (Chatterjee 2001). Based on the above, these two signs were finalized as the religious icon and symbol for the experiments. An abstract painting was selected for the control image.

Pretests

Pretests were conducted to check for the congruence, valence, meaningfulness, complexity, and semantic distance of the chosen images. In the first pretest, 30 respondents were asked to rank various product categories in order of their congruence with religious signs. Bath soaps, pens, and banks were found to be more congruent than televisions, mobile phones, and soft drinks.

The aim of the second pretest ($N=45$) was to ensure that the three images elicited positive emotional responses. Participants were shown one of the three images and their response was assessed using the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988; 10 positive items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale). The results showed that the religious icon ($M=3.32$, $SD=0.40$, $t[28]=4.30$, $p < .01$) and religious symbol ($M=3.29$, $SD=0.39$, $t[28]=4.11$, $p < .01$) both evoked a higher positive affect than the abstract image ($M=2.8$, $SD=0.23$).

The third pretest ($N=30$) measured the meaningfulness, complexity, and semantic distance of the icon and symbol. We followed the same methodology as McDougall, Curry, and de Bruijn (1999, 491) for measurement and reliability testing. The constructs were first defined and examples were provided. Respondents were then shown either the Om symbol or the Ganesha icon and asked to identify the image. Next, they responded to the scales for meaningfulness, complexity, and semantic distance. All the respondents successfully identified the images. Scale reliabilities were found to be above .80 (meaningfulness = .84; complexity = .85; semantic distance = .88), indicating stability in the ratings. The results indicated that the icon ($M_{\text{meaningful}} = 4.67$, $SD=0.49$) and symbol ($M_{\text{meaningful}} = 4.53$, $SD=0.52$) were equally meaningful ($t[28]=0.73$, $p > .05$). The icon ($M_{\text{complexity}} = 4.53$, $SD=0.52$; $M_{\text{semanticdistance}} = 2.60$, $SD=0.83$) was found to be more visually complex ($t[28]=12.4$, $p < .01$) and had lower semantic distance ($t[28]=7.67$, $p < .01$) than the symbol ($M_{\text{complexity}} = 1.80$, $SD=0.68$; $M_{\text{semanticdistance}} = 4.53$, $SD=0.52$).

Research Design and Stimuli

Three experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses. The first two experiments focused on internal validity and tested hypotheses 1–3. Both study 1 (icon versus control) and study 2 (symbol versus control) had a single-factor, between-subjects design. The third experiment compared the results for the icon versus symbol versus control. It tested all the hypotheses (1–5) in an externally valid environment and helped us generalize the results of the experiments.

The experimental stimuli consisted of three print advertisements for a fictitious soap brand (see Figure 1). This is aligned with other, similar studies that have used mock advertisements and fictitious brands (Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010; Dotson and Hyatt 2000; Zehra and Minton 2020). We pre-tested different sizes, brightness, and contrast of the



Figure 1. Advertisements containing religious icon (Ganesha), symbol (Om), and control (abstract).

icon and symbol multiple times by asking respondents to recall elements from the shown advertisement. This ensured that the religious signs did not draw unwarranted attention and blended well with the overall image without being unnoticed.

Measures

Existing measures were used for the dependent and moderating variables. Brand affect and brand trust

were measured using 3-item scales developed by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001, 87) and Li and Miniard (2006, 104), respectively. For purchase intention, a 6-item scale by Bower and Landreth (2001, 8) was used. For religiosity, a four-dimensional scale by Wilkes, Burnett, and Howell (1986, 49) was adapted. The first item, “*I go to church regularly,*” was changed to “*I pray regularly.*” This change was done in order to make the item more suitable for Hindu respondents. Going to a designated place of worship is not necessary in Hinduism, and one can offer prayers from home (Lindridge 2005). In another item, “*If Americans were more religious, this would be a better country,*” the word “Americans” was replaced with “Indians.” These items were pretested using cognitive interviews (Beatty and Willis 2007; Presser et al. 2004).

Study 1

The sample ($N=80$, 70% male) consisted of urban, English-speaking participants who were enrolled in executive programs at a management college in Calcutta, India. A student sample was considered appropriate, given that the purpose of this study was to test the hypotheses in a tightly controlled, internally valid environment.

Experiment booklets containing either the advertisement with religious icon ($N=40$) or control ($N=40$) were randomly distributed among the participants. This ensured that the respondents and researchers were unaware of the cue condition of individual participants. The booklets contained a cover letter explaining that this was an advertisement testing for a new soap brand. After seeing the advertisement, participants responded to the scales on brand affect,

Table 2. Study 1 summary statistics.

Dependent variable ^a		Mean	Std. Dev.
Brand affect ($\alpha=0.87$)	Control	3.62	1.06
	Treatment	4.08	1.11
	Total	3.85	1.11
Brand trust ($\alpha=0.82$)	Control	3.36	1.13
	Treatment	3.90	1.10
	Total	3.63	1.12
Purchase intention ($\alpha=0.96$)	Control	2.93	1.41
	Treatment	3.73	1.67
	Total	3.33	1.60

^aMeasured on 7-point scales.

Table 3. Study 1 parallel mediation.

	Brand affect			Brand trust		
	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV
Coefficient	1.4	1.59	2.22	1.63	1.24	2.01
Confidence Interval	11–2.69	1.15–2.03	.28–4.47	46–2.79	76–1.72	.76–3.85

brand trust, and purchase intention. Then, they were asked what they thought the purpose of the study was in order to check for hypotheses guessing. Questions on demographics (gender, age, and religious affiliation) and an aided-recall test (for manipulation check) followed. Respondents were debriefed at the end of the session.

All the responses were found to be complete and valid. Each participant marked his/her religious affiliation as Hinduism and the manipulation check was successful ($F[1,78]=330$, $p<0.01$, $M_{\text{control}}=2.05$, $M_{\text{icon}}=4.35$, $SD_{\text{control}}=.59$, $SD_{\text{icon}}=.53$). None of the respondents correctly guessed the purpose of the experiment, ruling out the possibility of demand effects.

The scales were tested for reliability and all the resulting alphas (Cronbach 1951) were found to be sufficiently high (Peterson 1994; Nunnally 1978). Table 2 provides the summary statistics of the dependent variables.

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted for H1 and H2, with brand affect (BA) and brand trust (BT) as the dependent variables. The results indicated a significant difference between group means for BA ($F[1,78]=4.67$, $p=0.03$, partial $\eta^2=0.06$) as well as BT ($F[1,78]=7.7$, $p=0.007$, partial $\eta^2=0.09$). Thus, hypotheses H1 and H2 are accepted.

For H3 (a and b), Hayes’s SPSS PROCESS macro (version 2.15; Hayes 2013; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010) was run using 1,000 bootstrapped samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI). A parallel mediation analysis using Model 4 (Hayes 2013; Warner 2013; Field 2013) was conducted with BA and BT as mediators and purchase intention (PI) as the dependent variable. The results (Table 3) showed a significant indirect effect of manipulation on PI through BA (95% CI: 0.28–4.47) and BT (95% CI: 0.76–3.85). Thus, H3a and H3b were supported.

Study 2

This experiment illustrated the effects of employing a religious symbol in an advertisement and tested the main (H1 and H2) and mediating (H3) hypotheses. The two experimental manipulations were the religious symbol and the control image.

Participants ($N=161$, 57% male) were urban, English-speaking students and enrolled in

Table 4. Study 2 summary statistics.

Dependent variable ^a		Mean	Std. Dev.
Brand affect ($\alpha = 0.83$)	Control	3.44	1.10
	Treatment	3.77	0.93
	Total	3.60	1.03
Brand trust ($\alpha = 0.75$)	Control	3.65	1.19
	Treatment	4.05	1.08
	Total	3.85	1.14
Purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.91$)	Control	3.45	1.34
	Treatment	3.85	1.28
	Total	3.65	1.33

^aMeasured on 7-point scales.

postgraduate programs at a management college in Calcutta, India. Of the 163 responses collected, two were removed because the participants marked themselves as non-Hindus ($N_{\text{control}} = 81$, $N_{\text{symbol}} = 80$).

The same procedure as study 1 was followed, using an unchanged questionnaire. The manipulation check was successful ($F[1,159] = 399$, $p < 0.01$, $M_{\text{control}} = 2.09$, $M_{\text{symbol}} = 4.18$, $SD_{\text{control}} = .67$, $SD_{\text{symbol}} = .65$), with all respondents mentioning the presence of the Om symbol in the recall test. None of the respondents correctly guessed the purpose of the experiment. Reliability tests showed that all the scales had sufficiently high Cronbach alphas (Cronbach 1951; Peterson 1994). Table 4 provides the summary statistics of the dependent variables.

One-way ANOVA tests could not be conducted for H1 and H2 because both BA (Levene Statistic $[1,159] = 12.250$, $p = 0.001$) and BT (Levene Statistic $[1,159] = 6.014$, $p = 0.015$) failed the homoscedasticity assumption. The Welch ANOVA (Welch 1951), which is the recommended alternative to the ANOVA F -test under variance heterogeneity (Gamage and Weerahandi 1998; Jan and Shieh 2014; Beuckelaer 1996), was conducted instead. The results showed a significant difference between group mean values for BA (Welch Statistic $[1, 146.15] = 5.63$, $p = 0.019$) as well as BT (Welch Statistic $[1, 153.25] = 8.50$, $p = 0.004$). Thus, hypotheses H1 and H2 were accepted.

Parallel mediation was conducted for H3a and H3b using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013, Model 4), with 1,000 bootstrapped samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals. The results (Table 5) showed a significant indirect effect of the independent variable on PI through BA (95% CI: 0.37–2.81) and through BT (95% CI: 0.11–1.49). Hence, hypotheses H3a and H3b were supported.

Study 3

The purpose of this study was to test the main, mediating, and moderating hypotheses in a natural, real-world setting. Studies 1 and 2 provided positive results

for the usage of religious signs (icon as well as symbol) in a tightly controlled environment with high internal validity. Study 3 tested hypotheses H1, H2, H3 (a and b) in an externally valid setting with actual consumers, instead of a student sample. Further, the role of religiosity as a moderator was tested (H4 a and b) and the results of the icon and symbol were compared (H5 a and b).

Data were collected from English-speaking consumers in the Indian city of Calcutta. Participants were recruited through an Indian sampling firm, Dexter Consultancy Pvt. Ltd., using quota sampling for religious affiliation, language, gender, and age. Out of the 460 responses collected, five were incomplete or invalid. Three respondents marked themselves as followers of faiths other than Hinduism. Hence, a total of 452 responses (57% male) was available for analysis ($N_{\text{icon}} = 160$, $N_{\text{symbol}} = 147$, $N_{\text{control}} = 145$).

The measures used for BA, BT, and PI were the same as those used in the previous two studies. Religiosity was measured using Wilkes's scale (1986, 49). This scale has often been used by marketing researchers (Vitell and Paolillo 2003; Lindridge 2005; Henley et al. 2009; Moschis and Ong 2011) and is valued for its low complexity balanced with multidimensionality. We chose not to prime the respondents' religious beliefs to levels that they do not naturally belong to because to do so is considered unethical (Nielsen 2015). Our method is similar to that used in religiosity experiments in marketing (Dotson and Hyatt 2000; Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010; Zehra and Minton 2020; Muralidharan, La Ferle, and Pookulangara 2018b).

The methodology was similar to the previously mentioned two studies. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a three-way (religious sign: icon, symbol, control), between-subjects design. The cover letter on the experiment booklets explained that the study was related to advertisement testing. After viewing the advertisement, participants responded to the scales on BA, BT, and PI. Next, they responded to a section called "personality." This included the religiosity scale, which was embedded with some attitude statements like "I am a reliable worker" and "I have an assertive personality." This was done in order to reduce the possibility of hypothesis guessing. The respondents were then asked what they thought the purpose of the study was. Demographic questions were asked (gender, age, and religious affiliation) and a recall test (for manipulation check) was administered. Respondents were debriefed at the end of the session.

Table 5. Study 2—parallel mediation results.

	Brand affect			Brand trust		
	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV
Coefficient	0.99	1.52	1.51	1.21	0.52	0.63
Confidence interval	.16–1.82	1.20–1.84	.37–2.81	.39–2.03	.20–.84	.11–1.49

Table 6. Study 3 summary statistics.

Dependent variable		Mean	Std. Dev.
Brand affect ($\alpha = 0.89$)	Icon	4.06	1.23
	Symbol	3.79	1.33
	Control	3.51	1.22
	Total	3.80	1.28
Brand trust ($\alpha = 0.80$)	Icon	5.25	1.48
	Symbol	5.01	1.50
	Control	4.69	1.25
	Total	4.99	1.42
Purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.91$)	Icon	4.34	0.81
	Symbol	4.23	0.92
	Control	4.04	0.86
	Total	4.21	0.87
Religiosity ($\alpha = 0.89$)	Icon	5.16	2.54
	Symbol	4.98	2.44
	Control	5.21	2.43
	Total	5.12	2.47

^aMeasured on 7-point scales, except for religiosity, measured on a 9-point scale.

The manipulation check was successful ($F[1,450] = 627.7$, $p < 0.01$, $M_{\text{control}} = 2.24$, $M_{\text{manipulation}} = 3.99$, $SD_{\text{control}} = .67$, $SD_{\text{manipulation}} = .71$), and the respondents mentioned the Ganesha icon or the Om symbol in the recall test. None of the respondents correctly guessed the purpose of the experiment. The reliability tests showed that the resulting alphas (Cronbach 1951) were sufficiently high (Table 6).

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 5 were tested using one-way ANOVA. For the religious icon, the test was conducted with BA and BT as the dependent variables and the manipulation of sign (control versus icon) as the independent variable. The results indicated significantly higher BA ($F[1,303] = 18.6$, $p = 0.00$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$) and BT ($F[1,303] = 28.7$, $p = 0.00$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$) when the religious icon was present as compared to the control image. Similarly, in the case of the religious symbol, the ANOVA test results indicated significantly higher BA ($F[1,290] = 4.5$, $p = 0.04$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$) and BT ($F[1,290] = 7.7$, $p = 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$) for exposure to the religious symbol as compared to the control situation. When the results for icon versus symbol were compared, the ANOVA results indicated significantly higher BA ($F[1,305] = 3.9$, $p = 0.049$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) and BT ($F[1,305] = 4.65$, $p = 0.03$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.015$) when the religious icon was present in comparison to the religious symbol. Hence, hypotheses 1, 2, 5a, and 5b were accepted.

To test the mediation hypotheses (H3), Hayes's PROCESS Model 4 (2013) was run with 1,000 bootstrapped samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals. The results showed a significant indirect effect of the presence of religious icon on PI parallelly through BA (95% CI: 0.60–1.73) and BT (95% CI: 0.27–1.16). The same analysis for the religious symbol revealed a significant indirect effect of the manipulation on PI through BA (95% CI: 0.07–0.87) and BT (95% CI: 0.19–1.29). Hence, hypotheses H3a and H3b were supported for religious icons as well as symbols (Table 7).

In order to test hypotheses 4a and 4b, moderated mediation (Krishna 2016; Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) was run using Model 7 of Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013) with 1,000 bootstrapped samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals (see Table 8). In the case of the religious icon, the results showed that religiosity had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between the independent variable and BA (95% CI: 0.01–0.12) but not for BT (95% CI: –0.01 to 0.10). The same analysis was conducted for the religious symbol and the results provided evidence that religiosity had a significant moderating effect on BA (95% CI: 0.01–0.14) as well as BT (95% CI: 0.02–0.14). Hence, H4 was supported (partial support for H4b).

Discussion

Summary

This research used symbolic interactionism theory as its foundation to empirically investigate the impact of religious signs on brand evaluation and purchase intention and compare the differential effects of two types of signs. We provide evidence that employing a religious sign (preferably an icon) positively influences brand affect, brand trust, and purchase intention. Furthermore, consumer religiosity positively moderates how much religious signs influence consumers' evaluations.

We did not find any evidence of negative reactions or skepticism, as suggested by some researchers (Dotson and Hyatt 2000; Taylor, Halstead, and Haynes 2010; Taylor, Halstead, and Moal-Ulvoas 2017). One possible explanation for this is that

Table 7. Study 3—parallel mediation results.

		Brand affect			Brand trust		
		Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Indirect effect of IV on DV
Religious icon	Coefficient	1.63	0.71	1.16	1.68	0.38	0.65
	Confidence interval	.89–2.37	.53–.89	.60–1.73	1.06–2.30	.17–.60	.27–1.16
Religious symbol	Coefficient	0.84	0.48	0.40	0.97	0.76	0.74
	Confidence interval	.06–1.63	.32–.64	.07–.87	.28–1.66	.57–.95	.19–1.29

Table 8. Study 3—moderated mediation results.

		Brand affect		Brand trust		
		Effect	CI	Effect	CI	
Religious icon	Interaction effect	.06	.01 to .12	.05	-.01 to .10	
	Index of moderated mediation	.05	.02 to .08	.02	.00 to .04	
	Conditional indirect effect of IV on DV	Religiosity (mean – 1 SD)	.80	.37 to 1.4	.51	.18 to 1.0
		Religiosity (mean score)	1.2	.80 to 1.7	.66	.30 to 1.1
Religious symbol	Interaction effect	Religiosity (mean + 1 SD)	1.6	1.1 to 2.2	.82	.30 to 1.3
		Religiosity (mean score)	.08	.01 to .14	.08	.02 to .14
	Index of moderated mediation	.04	.01 to .06	.06	.03 to .10	
	Conditional indirect effect of IV on DV	Religiosity (mean – 1 SD)	.20	-.08 to .56	.35	-.21 to .89
Religiosity (mean score)		.53	.25 to .92	.90	.54 to 1.39	
Religiosity (mean + 1 SD)		.85	.43 to 1.4	1.5	.96 to 2.03	

Indians rank very high on the global religiosity index (WIN_Gallup International 2012, 10) and religious individuals tend to be more sensitive, empathetic (Essoo and Dibb 2004), and less skeptical of advertising than nonreligious individuals (Minton 2015, 2019). The studies that reported backlash and skepticism were all conducted in the United States, which ranks at least 15 places lower than India on the global religiosity index. It is likely that Indian respondents, who may be categorized as low religious, are still far more religious than their American counterparts. This could explain the more positive response from them.

The moderation effects on brand affect and brand trust were significant during the use of the Om symbol. However, it was found that while religiosity moderated the impact of the Ganesha icon on brand affect, it did not moderate the impact on brand trust. One possible explanation for this could be the choice of the icon used in the experiment. Lord Ganesha is a well-known and loved icon from the Hindu plethora of Gods and his image is very commonplace in India. Paintings and figurines of Ganesha can be found in homes, offices, restaurants, and hotels, and the term *Ganesha* is frequently applied to brands and companies (e.g., Ganesha stores or Ganesha traders). Thus, it is possible that this was perceived as being routine (Zehra and Minton 2020) and respondents were cautious in placing too much trust in it, even though it evoked positive emotions. Further, our comparison of the two types of religious signs, the icon and the

symbol, revealed that the former lead to higher brand affect and brand trust. This result is novel because such a study has not been conducted before.

Since symbolic interactionism theory posits that respondents' interpretation of signs is derived through social interaction, one should be prudent in the use of these signs. Religious icons consist of aspects like facial expressions and body language, which can alter meaning. However, religious symbols have less scope for modification due to their visual simplicity. In Figure 2, we depict two variations of religious icons. The images of a weary Jesus with a thorn crown or an angry Shiva dancing wildly would not evoke the same responses as their peaceful images would. Thus, the fact that the icon performed better than the symbol should not be taken as a one-size-fits-all remedy for advertising efficacy and the need for proper pretests cannot be emphasized enough.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on advertising, branding, and semiotics by considering how religious signs in advertisements impact brand affect, brand trust, and purchase intention. The literature in this field has so far focused on advertising evaluation but not enough attention has been given to brand evaluation. Our research not only fills this gap but also demonstrates that results can vary according to the type of religious sign used in advertisements.



Figure 2. Variations of the same religious icon—Jesus Christ and Lord Shiva.

Literature confirms that advertisements can impact brand-related outcomes such as attitude, trust, and affect (Xingyuan, Li, and Wei 2010; Monahan and Romero 2020; Folse, Netemeyer, and Burton 2012; Janiszewski 1990), and our research shows new paths to positively impact these constructs. The inclusion of cultural cues in advertising is known to enhance effectiveness (Holland and Gentry 1997; Torres and Briggs 2007; Green 1999) and symbolic interactionism theory provides a new platform for researching a variety of social and religious signs in advertising. The results also have implications for the debate on standardization versus adaptation strategies in international advertising (Okazaki, Taylor, and Zou 2006; Taylor and Okazaki 2015).

This article makes methodological contributions to the literature by operationalizing the semiotic concepts of icon and symbol in marketing experiments. While consumer research has a long history of semiotic analyses (Mick 1986; Oswald and Mick 2006), to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first studies to specifically use Peirce's (1931 [1974]) classification of signs in experiments. Existing marketing studies usually employ interviews, surveys (Grayson and Martinec 2004), content analysis (Grayson and Shulman 2000), or deconstruction through visual semiotics (Zeybek and Ekin 2012; Hopkins 1998) in order to explicate symbolic meanings, rituals, or myths. This research shows how icons and symbols can be operationalized into experimental stimuli and holds significance for researchers

exploring advertising imagery such as brand symbols (MacInnis, Shapiro, and Mani 1999; Henke 1995), logos (Salgado-Montejo et al. 2014), and cultural symbolism (Holland and Gentry 1997).

Finally, this article reinforces religion as a salient variable in marketing scholarship. Religion plays an important role in consumer behavior, given its ubiquitous nature and influence on consumers' belief systems (Arli 2017; Martin and Bateman 2014). We demonstrate that religiosity is a measurable trait and thus is a strong variable in consumer research. Further, most research regarding religion has been undertaken with Christians, Jews, and Protestants and, in recent years, with Muslims. However, Hinduism has not been examined deeply, even though Hindus are the third-largest religious group in the world (Pew Research Center 2012). This foregrounds Hinduism and its associated signs, in alignment with calls to extend research on religious signs to more religious groups (Henley et al. 2009).

Managerial Implications

Our studies have several important managerial implications. For example, managers can use subtle religious prompts in marketing communications to bolster brands, provided they are also aware of the unintended consequences of doing so. The relevance between the product and the religious sign is important to keep in mind because an irrelevant association can lead to negative evaluations. Moreover, using religious signs simply as a manipulation tool would relinquish a brand's authenticity and legitimacy. A brand's advertisements should reflect realism and be backed by its value systems and actions.

One should keep in mind that religion can evoke a wide variety of emotions, ranging from reverence and gratefulness to fear and anxiety. Moreover, the connotations that arise from religious icons are different from those of religious symbols. Therefore, it is vital to identify the associations and reactions that various religious signs evoke in order to make the correct choice with regard to the usage of such signs and to increase the evaluative efficacy of one's communications.

Since our results show that icons perform better than symbols, it is suggested that advertisers pay more attention to various religious icons that may be coopted for marketing purposes. Hinduism has a wide pantheon of gods and goddesses who personify various aspects of the one true God. For example, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati are worshiped as

goddesses of knowledge, wealth, and strength, respectively. Educational institutes, financial products, banks, and construction companies are examples of where these icons can be employed.

However, it should be noted that there are greater risks associated with working with icons as compared to symbols. Recently, an Indian cricketer faced intense hostility for appearing in an advertisement dressed as Lord Vishnu, holding a shoe in his hand (Press Trust of India 2013, 2017). Marketers should carefully choose the context in which to use religious signs instead of indiscriminately placing them in advertisements.

In putting religion under the spotlight, our research shows that business practitioners should not overlook the immense market potential of religious consumers. Using religion and religiosity for segmentation purposes may have substantial benefits. For brands venturing into new countries, it may be useful to adapt advertisements to the religious and cultural values of the targeted market. This is commonly referred to as *glocalization*: think globally and act locally (Tai and Wong 1998; Blackwell, Ajami, and Stephan 1991), and our research provides support for the advocates of this strategy.

Future Research and Limitations of the Study

Our research reveals that a religious icon can elicit higher positive brand evaluations than a religious symbol. However, further research is needed to test this proposition with a wider variety of signs in order to generalize it further.

This study focused on positive images and did not explore the impact of using negative religious cues. For example, a common representation of the Hindu icon Kali is a dark-faced, angry woman wearing a garland of skulls with her bright-red tongue sticking out. In future, researchers can investigate similar religious images that evoke fear, a sense of danger, and other negative emotions.

Our research sample included educated and urban Hindu consumers. Further testing with a more diverse sample could increase the generalizability of the study. Researchers may also theorize on how the presence of religious signs impacts non-Hindus. This research was conducted with a single product category (bath soap), which may be considered as low involvement. In the future, researchers can test whether these results hold for high-involvement purchases that require more time and cognition on the part of consumers.

We have maintained independence between brand affect and brand trust in our model, which is in accordance with marketing literature (Rampl and Kenning 2014; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2002; Sung and Kim 2010). However, researchers may choose to explore this relationship further in light of evidence that these two constructs may be related (Singh, Iglesias, and Batista-Foguet 2012).

Finally, we would like to point out some limitations from the methodological perspective. For the control group, we used an abstract painting, which does not fall in the icon or symbol categories. However, it may be argued that the religious icon (Ganesha) should have been compared with a nonreligious icon, and the religious symbol (Om) with a nonreligious symbol. Moreover, since we had pretested the manipulations on the basis of meaningfulness, visual complexity, and semantic distance, we did not check whether the respondents perceived any difference between the icon and symbol. Future researchers may deliberate on these limitations while replicating our studies.

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