

Michael Leo Ulrich

Religion – Marketing's Unwitting Godparent

A Case Study of Coffee Branding Consumer Loyalty



Nomos



Media and Religion | Medien und Religion

edited by | herausgegeben von

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Volume 3 | Band 3

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

a.t.: München, Ludwig-Maximilians-Univ., Diss., 2018

ISBN 978-3-8487-5799-2 (Print)
 978-3-8452-9881-8 (ePDF)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-8487-5799-2 (Print)
 978-3-8452-9881-8 (ePDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ulrich, Michael Leo

Religion – Marketing's Unwitting Godparent

A Case Study of Coffee Branding and Consumer Loyalty

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281 p.

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-8487-5799-2 (Print)
 978-3-8452-9881-8 (ePDF)

1st Edition 2019

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my thanks go to Prof. Dr. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, and Prof. Dr. Dr. Peter Seele, my first and second supervisors. When Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati approached me, some six years ago, asking whether I would be interested in writing a PhD thesis, I did not know what I was getting myself into. I did not realise that my work as a researcher would first make me lose the parameters of my established way of reasoning. Yet, with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati and Peter Seele's help and guidance, those parameters, enriched by a myriad of facets, formed a new set of multiple paradigms, allowing me to see and cognise the world, past and present, in an entirely new way.

Many thanks also go to the members of the research group *Medien und Religion*, foremost to Dr. des. Baldassare Scolari, Dr. Marie-Therese Mäder, and Dr. Nathalie Fritz, who reviewed my drafts, suggested possible different approaches, provided me with the needed literature if missing, and never withheld their moral or academic support. Special thanks also go to Paul Sidiropoulos. The intellectual exchange with him was a source of great inspiration and constructive criticism.

Many thanks then go to Marlen Tschudin, Elisabeth Tester, Christine Hunziker, and Michael Hecker for their continued support in conducting the socio-empirical survey in Switzerland, Germany, and China. Special thanks also go to Meng'an Ding, who translated the questionnaire to Mandarin, and conducted and documented the socio-empirical survey in Shanghai.

Finally, my thanks go to my partner and my mother. Both gave me the vital emotional support that, as any PhD student knows, is much needed to complete such a task successfully. A PhD thesis is never completed by one person alone, in isolation. Therefore, many thanks to all the persons named above, and to all of those who I did not mention here.

Preface

There are certain things you expect, and certain things you don't expect. For instance, you don't expect a car dealer, any car dealer, to be the epitome of honesty. Nor do you really expect to understand a French person speaking English. And, when on a flight to London, you should only expect tourists to drink tea; the English have long given up that habit. In my case, I did not expect Swiss professionals in their forties – lawyers and teachers, highly rational beings and deliciously indifferent to most things – to feel truly passionate about coffee brands.

What had happened? Well, I was given, as a present, an Amici coffee-machine. Amici is a coffee brand of Italian origin, founded in Switzerland by Francesco Illy, one of the sons of the founder of illycaffè, and his wife Annemarie (Amici, n.d.).¹ I already had a Nespresso coffee machine at home, so I took the Amici to the riding stable. I told my fellow riders that they would no longer have to drink that horrible coffee from the dispenser. I continued speaking, but little did I realise that my next remark would change my life – at least my life as a scholar: I mentioned that, when faced with the choice to either bring the Amici or the Nespresso machine, I had chosen the Amici because I believed it made better coffee than Nespresso. This innocent statement provoked an unexpected response from two women (both professionals). They simultaneously gasped: “Oh!?!” I responded with “Oh what?” which, admittedly, was not the most polite way to answer. Regardless, a heated proclamation of Nespresso's supremacy over all rival coffee brands ensued. And it sadly ended with hard feelings. I was amazed. I enjoy coffee very much, but after all, it's just coffee.

Several weeks later, I made a slightly critical remark about Nespresso in the presence of one of my mother's friends (who passed on shortly thereafter and could no longer participate in my Nespresso interviews) who immediately rushed to Nespresso's defence. It was in that moment that I, for the first time, began to think of Nespresso drinkers not just as coffee consumers, but as *adherents*. After she had finished proselytising, there was no doubt that Nespresso had ended this woman's lifelong search for the best coffee. The answer was found, the journey ended. She sounded not unlike my evangelical aunt, who had also found what she was looking for. In a

1 For a website in English, see Illycupscollection (n.d.).

somewhat bizarre, totally unexpected, but astonishingly homological way, my mother's friend and my aunt seemed to share the same experience. This basically counterintuitive explanation of a coffee drinker's behaviour with a concept, so to speak a mini-theory, that would be attributed more to the field of the study of religion, and one which reminded me of the common adage - that progress in science is often triggered by, at first sight, counterintuitive results.

That got me started. What is it about Nespresso that turns consumers into adherents, at least the ones that crossed my path? I began to read about brands in general and to study the financial statements documenting their sustained contribution to their owners' business success. The question then began to arise in me, whether a theoretical concept pertaining to the field of the study of religion, and not, as one would expect, to the field of marketing, would perhaps be better suited to explain Nespresso's outstanding success, both, in the commercial sense and more specifically, in the sense of its clients' unswerving loyalty.

Abstract

Situated at the intersection of the study of religion and marketing, this study focuses on one of the most successful marketing campaigns in recent history. Approaching marketing campaigns within a theoretical framework pertaining to the study of religion, this investigation aims to discover whether the meaning-making mechanisms of that exemplary, extremely powerful and successful marketing campaign can be compared to, or are even analogous to, the way religious symbolism functions. Based on visual semiotics, this investigation explores precisely how Nespresso's campaign of the successful charging of an ostensibly profane commodity with symbolic attributes is effectuated. Because conventional marketing theories fail to provide an in-depth explanation of Nespresso's dazzling success, this study seeks fresh answers. Taking a perhaps unorthodox approach, it proposes an explanation of a to-date largely unexplained phenomenon.

The methodological framework for this study, outlining the procedure followed by the analysis, is developed along the lines of James M. Buchanan's theory of economic clubs, which introduces the insider-outsider pattern as a prerequisite for the construction of scarcity and exclusivity. The relevant parts of Buchanan's findings are then combined with the tenets of Stuart Hall's cultural theory, as well as the contributions from visual culture theory, as advocated by Brent Plate, Daria Pezzoli-Olgati, and Gillian Rose. Furthermore, the circuit of culture described by Hall is used to structure the analysis and its results. Based on this synthesised methodological framework, Nespresso's medial representation is then analysed according to Clifford Geertz's approach to religion.

To substantiate the findings of the visual analysis, a socio-empirical quantitative consumer survey is carried out using interviews based on questionnaires to compile the required data. On the grounds of that body of data, selected statistical hypotheses are tested and rejected, demonstrating the validity of the proposed theoretical explanation of the observed phenomenon – that is, the more than exceptionally high operating profit margins. The quantitative survey is followed by a qualitative survey with focus groups. The aim of the qualitative survey is to further substantiate the findings of the quantitative survey. Finally, based on the characteristics of the data compilation, it is shown to what degree the findings can be generalised.

Abstract

As a closing remark, it is worth noting that by examining the high performativity of symbolism, so widely practised in religion, this study sheds light on the potential appropriation by the business community. Identifying, on the theoretical level, structural and functional analogies between religion and marketing, this interdisciplinary study outlines the often-overlooked economical dimension within the study of religion.

1 Introduction

1.1 *An unexplained business phenomenon*

Nespresso's global market share of 27% in 2011, successfully built and maintained, with an operating profit margin² beyond 30% (Revill, 2012), and Apple's global market share of 25% in 2012 (Elveren, 2013), combined with operating profit margins well in excess of 30% (Stock Analysis on Net, 2014) are, in comparison to their industries' average performances, truly exceptional. For instance, in May 2015, the average operating profit margin in the US food and beverage industry was 5.2% (Investopedia, 2015).

In the case of Apple, this picture of outstanding commercial success is further amplified when its worldwide profit share is taken into consideration.

Apple has a relatively tiny slice of the smartphone market, measured by phones shipped to consumers. According to the latest data from IDC [International Data Corporation], iPhones were 17.6% of smartphones shipped last quarter. Android-based phones were 78.1% of the phones shipped. But if you measure the smartphone market by profits, Apple has practically a monopoly. Analyst Tavis McCourt at Raymond James estimates Apple has 87.4% [sic!] of smartphone profits. The next closest is Samsung, with 32.2% of smartphone profits. Yes, those numbers add up to over 100%. That's because everyone else is losing mon-

2 The "operating profit margin", or simply the "operating margin" is a key accounting figure used to capture the commercial success of a firm. It gives analysts an idea, as a percentage figure of total sales, of how much profit a firm makes. The operating profit margin measures a firm's profit before interest payments and taxes are deducted. Therefore, it also illustrates a firm's capacity to service its debt and pay taxes that are due. Evaluation means comparison; therefore, the absolute figure in itself is to some degree less significant than a comparison to the corresponding figure of a competitor or another industry. To that end, it can be useful to compare the quarterly or yearly change in the operating profit margin to determine whether a firm is becoming more or less profitable. Naturally, in a commercial context, the higher the margin, the better.

ey, and so McCourt gives the rest of the world's phone makers negative profit share. (Yarrow, 2014)

Nespresso has been similarly successful with the introduction of new coffee flavours, packaged into easy-to-handle capsules. As Bloomberg reported in February 2013:

Nestlé SA (NESN) has found something even better than single-serve coffee costing twice as much as ground java: a version that costs eight times [sic!] as much. While consumers worldwide rein in spending, the Swiss company in October [2012] introduced Hawaii Kona Special Reserve, a limited-edition coffee for its Nespresso machines. At \$2 a shot, it cost four times the price of regular Nespresso. It sold out within weeks, and the company says more such offerings are in the works. (Doherty, 2013)

Considering, that a regular Nespresso capsule already costs roughly twice as much as a non-brand coffee capsule, such a phenomenon is truly exceptional and calls for an explanation that goes beyond the standard analysis of marketing,³ budget and brand identification, or consumer loyalty.

A branded good is not like any other good – for producers, it is special, often a source of great revenue and profit. This maxim has been known within the study of marketing for quite some time. Forbes regularly publishes a list of the world's most valuable brand names (Forbes, 2014). In November 2013, Apple ranked first, with an operating profit margin of 29% in 2013 (Stock Analysis on Net, 2014). Nespresso's results were equally impressive. According to an analyst at the Zurich Kantonalbank, in 2012, Nespresso's operating profit margin was in excess of 30%, with a global market share of 27% (Revill, 2012). In 2012, Nestlé SA, the company owning Nespresso, generated an overall profit margin of 15.2%. The biggest contribution came from powdered and liquid beverages (i.e., including Nespresso) with an operating profit margin of 22.5% (Nestlé Media Press Releases, 2013). That figure is an average for the whole of all powdered and liquid beverages, including Nespresso, Nescafé, Nestea and Nesquik (Nestlé Asset Library, 2011) suggesting that Nespresso, with an operating profit margin in excess of 30%, is one of the largest, if not the

3 The term “marketing” is used according to the definition of the American Marketing Association (AMA): “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA online dictionary, n.d. a).

largest contributor within that group.⁴ The magnitude of those figures is, from a commercial standpoint, indeed awesome and, so far, theoretically unaccounted for. The explanatory power of the theoretical body prevailing in marketing is insufficient to explain in greater depth *why* anybody would pay roughly €0.40 (the equivalent of US\$ 0.55⁵) for a cup of coffee brewed at home, given that a regular cup of filter coffee can cost as little as €0.04 (Czycholl, 2013). Similarly, in the case of Apple's iPhone, the question arises as to why anybody would spend several days and nights in a queue just to be among the first to own a new mobile telephone (Prigg, Parsons, & Margolis, 2012).

Seen from the perspective of a firm, these questions can be rephrased with reference to the firm's marketing campaign: What lies at the root of a marketing campaign so successful that it enables a firm to build and defend, over a sustained period of time, a global market share of 20% and more, while simultaneously generating an operating profit margin which is, as in the case of Nespresso, a multiple of the industry's average (CSI Market, 2014; Eurostat, 2017)? As outlined below, these considerations lead to the question this study proposes to answer. Yet, this study's focus does not include Apple's noteworthy success. The scrutiny of more than one marketing campaign would lie beyond its scope. This study's focus lies exclusively on Nespresso's successful celebrity marketing campaign for its highly profitable capsule coffee business, in which it collaborated, in the campaign for European markets, with Hollywood actor George Clooney (Nestlé FAQs, 2014). The focus lies on the time span from 2006 to 2014. From a marketing point of view, this study adopts a thus far, unexplored, new perspective: Nespresso's marketing campaign will be examined within a theoretical context pertaining to the study of religion, with the aim of discovering whether its success can possibly be attributed to a structural and functional analogy between religion on the one hand and the marketing campaign on the other – a structural and functional analogy that can be described in the mechanisms put to work by the marketing campaign, which are also inherent in, and characteristic of, religious symbolism, with commensurate impacts and analogous effects.

An analysis of Nespresso's campaign, according to the hermeneutics of the study of religion, raises the question to which degree a presence of a

4 If the group average is 22.5%, then a figure in excess of 30% (for Nespresso), which is at least 7.5% above the average, indicates that Nespresso's individual contribution to the group is way better than the group's average.

5 Prices and the exchange rate refer to June 2013.

religious, sacred quality within something as profane as a mere commodity, has already been addressed by scholars of the humanities. As will be expanded upon below, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Norbert Bolz have all shown that there is another dimension adhering to a commodity beyond its purely profane or secular surface, or use-value – a dimension, that can possibly be captured, made visible, and be explained with the help of this study's theoretical framework. In a manner of speaking, this study addresses the *reverse* of the question of how religion morphs into a brand – a question, as will be discussed below, that Mara Einstein, Jörg Stolz, Jean-Claude Usunier and others have so brilliantly addressed. The question addressed by this study, instead, is the question of precisely how a profane, secular commodity is successfully turned into a brand of quasi-religious content in the sense that the product is turned into a brand, with respect to rivalling products, establishing an order of seemingly ontological nature with itself at the top – an order, which is accompanied by a commensurate consumer-ethos issuing in the continued consumption of the advertised commodity. In this context, finally, it must be mentioned explicitly, in order to prevent any misunderstanding, that it is not the aim of this study to show, or allege, that drinking Nespresso *is* a religion. The study's aim, as will be demonstrated below, is solely to show, on a theoretical level, that a structural and a functional analogy exists between Nespresso's marketing campaign on one hand, and religion on the other.

1.2 Structure and design of the study

As stated above, this study aims to explain Nespresso's outstanding commercial success with an approach based on a potential structural and functional analogy between religion and marketing. The analysis of the corpus, three Nespresso commercials, released in 2006, 2012 and 2013 as well as the collection of primary⁶ data through a socio-empirical survey, is carried

6 Whether data collected through questionnaires are indeed, in the strictest sense of the word, of a "primary" nature shall not be addressed in the context of this study. Some of the questions in the questionnaire are based on the interviewee's memory, his or her recalling of moods, for instance – moods he or she had in connection to the consumption of Nespresso. In that sense, that data could also be regarded as being of a "secondary" nature as, in the strictest sense, primary data would refer to the information that was generated literally in the moment of consumption. Yet, in the context of this study, data collected through questionnaires and in focus groups, are referred to as primary data.

out using categories of analysis based on Clifford Geertz's definition of religion. The methodology, followed by the analysis, is theoretically substantiated by the contributions made by Stuart Hall, which have also been widely-used in the field of the study of religion, in particular in the contributions made by Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Brent Plate and Gillian Rose, as well as by James Buchanan's economic theory of clubs. In that sense, the analysis of the production of meaning through the process of encoding and decoding will be structured according to the circuit of culture, first introduced by du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus (1997).

As already stated, the analysis focuses on the performativity of the audio-visual corpus in the representation of a narrative, scrutinising the co-involvement of the commercials' viewer, resulting in meaning-making as well as in identity-formation and, finally, in the implicit instigation of the viewer to act like the principal characters in the commercials' narrative. These elements form a pattern in both religion and marketing. The analysis of this pattern, or structure, is then followed by the analysis of the primary consumer data that was collected in a quantitative and qualitative mixed-method survey. This second analysis uses the statistical method of hypothesis - testing to support the findings of the audio-visual analysis. In this sense, the socio-empirical data helps to substantiate the results of the audio-visual analysis based on theory. As the audio-visual analysis, the analysis of the socio-empirical data also uses the categories from Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as they constitute an effective heuristic tool of analysis allowing to capture, on the theoretical level, both the structural and functional characteristics of a system of symbols, irrespective of whether or not such a system is of an explicitly religious nature. A discussion of the findings, the cogency and validity of the conclusions and implications, and their limitations, leads to the final conceptual output/offering, and to the contribution this study hopes to make - to expand the theoretical reach of the study of religion.

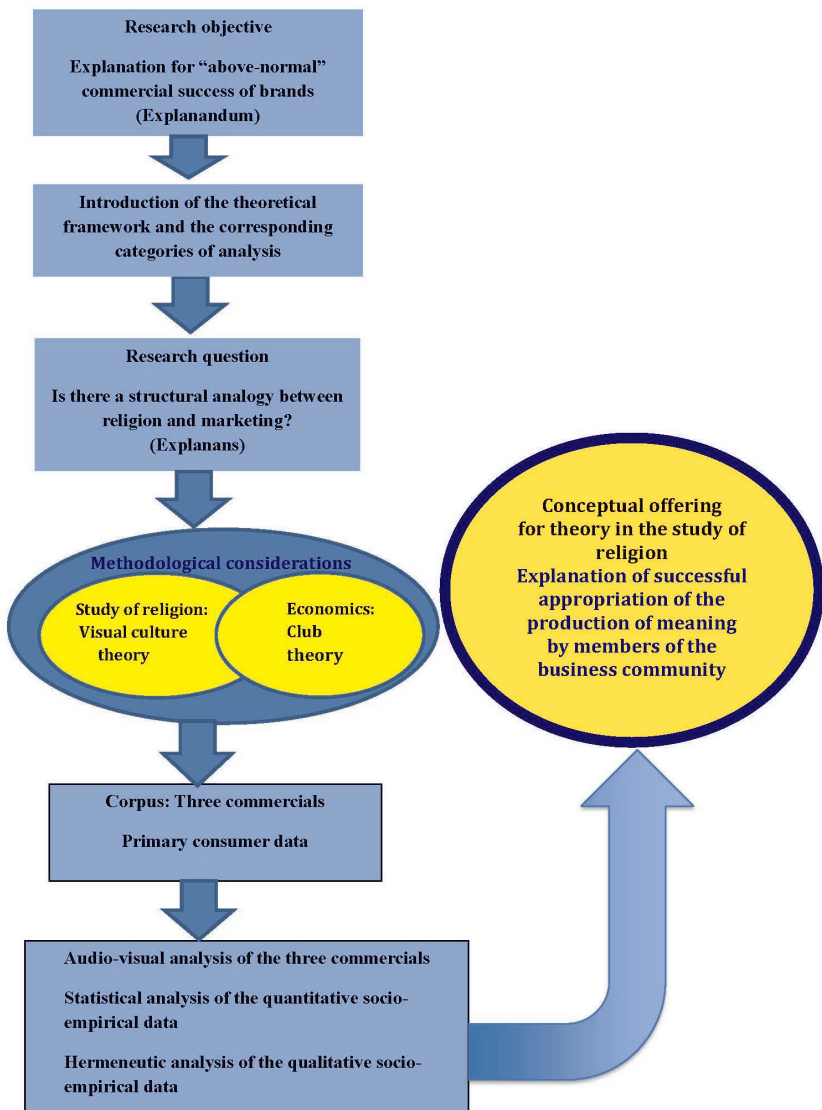


Figure 1: Research design (generated by the author with Word, 2013)

1.3 Aims of this study

The aim of this study is to determine precisely *how* outstandingly successful marketing campaigns generate their power, and whether such power is garnered through mechanisms that, when viewed through the lens of the study of religion, possibly owe their effectiveness to a structural and functional analogy between religion and marketing. This study is thus located at the intersection of traditionally separate academic disciplines, exploring a so far little-understood, and therefore also largely unexplained commercial phenomenon. In its search for understanding, and its attempt to find an explanation, this study then uses terms, concepts, methods and theories that have become well established within the study of religion.

To date, a possible structural and functional analogy between religion and marketing that could explain the phenomenon under scrutiny has not yet been addressed by research. Aiming to rectify this omission is where this study comes in and is precisely the contribution it hopes to make. At this point, it is worth mentioning again that this investigation limits itself to the scrutiny of the Nespresso marketing campaign centring on Hollywood actor George Clooney. Moreover, it must be stressed again that this study does not intend to prove or even allege that the consumption of Nespresso, or, by the same token, Nespresso's successful capsule *is*, or *has become* a religion. It aims to theoretically demonstrate that a potentially existing structural and functional analogy between religion and marketing can be employed to explain the phenomenon under scrutiny. This study is therefore also clearly demarcated from the remit of the psychology of religion, as it does not, at any point, allege or infer that the regular or occasional consumption of Nespresso is a religious act or equivalent to such an act.

To date, in-depth research examining why certain marketing campaigns function so well, or, along the same line of reasoning, research examining according to which possible structural and functional logic a marketing campaign turns a plain, everyday commodity with seemingly limited use-value into a firm's cash cow, is still missing. With respect to marketing's failure to produce a theoretical body with satisfactory explanatory power, Stephen Brown speaks of the *myopia of marketing* (Brown, 1993, p. 25). Such myopia is naturally pernicious to an in-depth scrutiny of marketing-related phenomena. Consequently, the question whether some marketing campaigns, geared perhaps in the most indiscernible way, to invest the marketed commodity with an elevated exchange-value, is based on structures and mechanisms traditionally observed in the context of religion, has

not been addressed. Nor has the question been raised whether, in a marketing context, a categorical transformation of the commodity's perceived value can deliberately be constructed, and if so, what it takes to accomplish such a feat. Perhaps answers to those questions could be found if it were argued that a seemingly profane commodity is potentially much more than just that: that there could be, perhaps, other, far-reaching dimensions invoked, dimensions that can transform a commodity into a meaning-producing symbol – and render consumers willing to pay almost any price. In a search for fresh answers, this study expands the scope of its analysis beyond the realm of the purely marketing-based study of how a commodity's use-value can be increased by refined product placement, or by presenting it as the choice of the rich and famous. This study aims to find out whether what is at work, is not a continuous increase in a commodity's use-value, as perceived by consumers to the effect that it fetches a very high unit-price, but a categorical transformation of a commodity's character, dramatically opening a gap between its apparent use- and exchange-value. By going beyond the scholarly discipline of marketing into the remit of the study of religion, this study examines if, and how such a categorical commodity transformation, moving it from the commercially profane to the symbolically charged, is brought about. And because, on that trajectory axis, semiotics plays a crucial and decisive role, the contribution of semiotics thereto is also discussed in detail.

It needs to be mentioned that even though this study, placed at the intersection of the study of religion and economics, is, amongst other things, about marketing, consumers and consumer behaviour, the approach taken is not consonant with the well-established concepts of economic anthropology, as captured by the term “*homo economicus*”, in which humans, for analytical purposes, are axiomatically assumed to act rationally. Instead, a currently observed academic discussion, with possibly far-reaching implications, provides an important premise of this study: Landmark studies have begun to question the validity of the economic anthropology of the *homo economicus*. While that designation was minted in the early 20th century, the concept itself was forged earlier, primarily in the 18th century. Adam Smith's contribution here, was perhaps crucial.⁷ Today, however, this anthropological theorem is beginning to waver. Even though most economists would agree that the concept captured by the term *homo economicus* has primarily served, and continues to serve, as an analytical tool

7 For further reading on this topic, please see Manstetten (2000/2004), Binswanger (2011), and Hirschman (1977/2013).

that helps, on a theoretical level, to understand certain economic phenomena without pretending that humans are purely and exclusively rational beings, peer researchers such as Jochen Hörisch (2011) and Christoph Binswanger (2011) have pointed out, that the *homo economicus* no longer seems to provide a sufficiently adequate model to explain the phenomena observed in reality. Moreover, whilst Binswanger's findings also shed light on Adam Smith's affiliation to stoic philosophy by illustrating that stoic philosophers and their anthropology were an inspiration for Smith, Martha Nussbaum (1994/2009) has demonstrated how stoic philosophy advocated for the total excision of passion and desire.⁸

These genealogical considerations cast doubt on that still, largely prevailing economic anthropology as a hegemonic concept, and in this sense, the findings of the above-cited scholars lead to a key premise of the present study: the current understanding in economic anthropology fails to fully explain certain patterns of consumer behaviour because its primary theory has a fundamental flaw, namely the exclusion of the passionate and desire-driven, and by implication, the imaginary side of human nature. It is, of course, not the aim of this study to establish a new theory of economic anthropology or even to continue in a critique thereof. Simply, the concept of the *homo economicus* has been excluded from this study on account of its relative weaknesses. Moreover, non-consideration of conventional economic anthropology leaves room for an in-depth exploration of the determinants of consumer behaviour in addition to the traditionally conceived, and well-known rational motivators.

Adopting as it does, an interdisciplinary approach, this study also hopes to advance the current discussion, as to whether a theory pertaining to the field of economics can make a vital contribution to the explanation of a religion-related phenomenon. In the context, for example, of the scholarly discussion on whether the theory of rational choice can be used to explain the core issues of religion that concern sociologists, Steve Bruce (2014) has argued that this only seems to apply if there has been a notable decline in levels of religious belief and practice in a given society, as can be observed in the modern, industrial liberal democracies of the West. In his critique of Laurence Iannaccone's contribution, Bruce (1999) concluded that economistic theories can only be sensibly applied to the field of religion after some degree of secularisation has set in: "The grand irony is that it is only when attitudes to religion change in ways most of us are happy to call

8 As will be explained subsequently, advertising also works with consumers' desire.

‘secularization’⁹ that it becomes possible to apply the principles of economics to religious behaviour. [...] Only in largely secular societies [...] is it possible for ordinary people to treat religion in a utility-maximising manner and hence for analysts to explain their behaviour in terms of economic rational choice ideas” (1999, p. 203).

Regarding the issue of secularisation, it needs to be emphasised that this study neither addresses nor wants to contribute to the scholarly discussion as to which degree or whether secularisation has or has not taken place in liberal Western societies. The term “secularisation” is used with the implication of a “decline in obedience to divine authority and the decline in the use of social power to enforce religious conformity” (Bruce, 2014, p. 198) as well as a “decline in levels of religious belief and practice” (p. 199).¹⁰ Further implications are “the differentiation of the secular sphere from religious institutions and norms [and] the marginalisation of religion to the private sphere [...]” (Bruce, 2014, paraphrasing Casanova, 1994).

A breakdown of religious norms, as well as the possibly connected increased individual freedom to choose in all matters important to individuals, are two of many characteristics of a process which Stolz and Usunier refer to as a “modernisation process” (Stolz & Usunier, 2014, p. 5), a perhaps less controversial term than “secularisation”. Suffice to say, many scholars appear to prefer the term “modernisation process” to “secularisation” (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Dawson 2011; Gauthier, Martikainen, & Woodhead, 2013). In this study then, as already mentioned, the term “secularisation” is understood as a decline in the moral authority of religious institutions, leaning towards the notion of a “modernisation process”, without the implication of a generic decline in religiousness.

As previously stated, this study does not address the issue of the rationality of human behaviour as, for example, stipulated by the theory of rational choice. It does, however, consistent with Bruce’s line of argument, use, for methodological purposes, James M. Buchanan’s economic theory of clubs. Moreover, as is addressed below, this study is, again consistent with Bruce’s argument, carried out against the backdrop of a postmodern, largely secularised society.

With respect to placing this study in a postmodern frame, a brief excursion is warranted here to clarify this study’s use of the notion of “postmodernism”. It is important to notice that this study does not aim to contribute

9 All the quotations are given in exactly their original form with no emphasis, quotation marks or brackets added or omitted.

10 For a discussion of the secularisation theory, please see Pollack (2011).

to the discussion regarding “modernism” and “postmodernism”, their notional content and, with respect to time, their correct historic positioning. Its reference to postmodernism only serves an analytical purpose to provide a hermeneutical framework for a meaningful analysis. With respect to epochs and the notions used to describe them, Peter Seele writes:

Epochs are – it seems necessary to spell this out clearly – interim notions. The discussion regarding “modernism”, “postmodernism”, and “postpostmodernism” confirms this thesis of interims. Epochs are proposed construals regarding the past, proving their worth and perpetuating themselves by conveying, in their presence, a reference to the past.¹¹ (Seele, 2008, p. 74)

In view of this, this study uses a construal of the term postmodernism in accordance with Fredric Jameson’s interpretation, who sees in postmodernism a cultural dominant, a so-called “force field” affecting all types of cultural productions (Jameson, 1991). The main feature of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is depthlessness: “The first and most evident [significant difference between the high-modernist and the postmodern moment] is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense [...]” (Jameson, 1991, p. 9). With respect to the prominent, perhaps all-pervasive role of markets in our day-to-day lives, Jameson puts forth an argument which is valid for both, markets as well as the products traded and sold therein:

[...][T]he excitement of the once tire-some old fifties representation of the free market derives from its illicit metaphorical association with a very different kind of representation; namely, the media itself in its largest contemporary and global sense. The operation is [...] [a] postmodern one [...], in which two systems of codes are identified in such a way as to allow the libidinal energies of the one to suffuse the other [...]. Horkheimer and Adorno observed long ago [...] the peculiarity of the structure of a commercial “culture industry” [...]. The media offers free programs in whose content and assortment the consumer has no choice whatsoever but whose selection is then rebaptised “free choice.” In the [...] tendential identification of the commodity with its image (or brand name or logo), another, more intimate, symbiosis between the market and the media is effectuated, in which boundaries are

11 Translation by the author, 2016.

washed over (in ways profoundly characteristic of the postmodern) and an indifferentiation of levels gradually takes the place of an older separation between thing and concept (or indeed, economics and culture, base and superstructure). For one thing, the products sold in the market become the very content of the media image, so that, as it were, the same referent seems to maintain in both domains. (Jameson, 1991, pp. 274-275)¹²

What Jameson describes here is the emergence, as a consequence of the annulment of the separation of thing and concept, of a contingent super-elevation of the commodity. And this, in turn, opens a wide range of new marketing and advertising¹³ possibilities. With respect to the notion of postmodernism as it is used in this study, this annulment of the separation of thing and concept and its implications for marketing are its main features.

Addressing this very issue, Venkatesh, Sherry, and Firat (1993) maintain that postmodernism “treats our conceptualisations of the individual subjectivity (e.g., the consumer). It is also concerned with social formation (e.g., markets)” (Venkatesh, Sherry, & Firat, 1993, p. 216). As a conclusion, they state that “marketing research need no longer be confined to the presentation of tables, equations and figures [...]. Its presentational forms could range from poetry to scientific discourse, from narratives, descriptions, story-telling to visual and symbolic representations” (Venkatesh, Sherry, & Firat, 1993, p. 218). With respect to this study, the enquiry into one of those narratives, is precisely the contribution this study hopes to make: An in-depth analysis of the system of symbols present in Nespresso’s representation, aiming to shed light on the structural, and functional characteristics of Nespresso’s postmodern marketing-success story.

12 For a further in-depth discussion of marketing in the context of postmodernism, see Venkatesh, Sherry and Firat (1993), Brown (1993), Firat and Venkatesh (1993), Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh (1995), Cova (1996), Firat and Shultz (1997.).

13 In this study, the term “advertising” is used according to the definition of the American Marketing association (AMA): “The placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any of the mass media by business firms, nonprofit organisations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organisations, or ideas” (AMA online dictionary, n.d. b).

In the next chapter, the proximity of religion on one hand, and marketing on the other is considered, examining whether a possibly existing analogy, or overlap actually warrants this study's general line of argument.

2 Religion's Overlap with Advertising and Marketing

Narratives and storytelling are an integral part, not only of marketing strategies, yet of most, if not all, religious traditions as well. Irrespective of whether the stories are told, and whether their messages are conveyed by words, images, and/or sounds, or by any combination of those, the messages carried by the stories tend to imply a worldview and a corresponding ethos, irrespective of the context of the narrative – religious or related to marketing. This contiguity – or overlap even – of religion with advertising and marketing will be scrutinised more closely in the following chapter.

2.1 *Advertising and marketing*

Corporations are, under law, legal persons. They are, so to speak, our fellow citizens. However, contrary to most people, they only have one objective: to earn, on a legal basis, sustained maximum profits¹⁴ for the corporation's owners. It is important to keep that in mind for a good understanding of the role played by both, advertising and marketing, in the context of a firm's objectives: A possible myriad of objectives only serves that one particular prime objective: profit. By stating this, no criticism is implied. A successful scrutiny of marketing, and advertising for that matter¹⁵, in the context of this study simply presupposes a clear, concise, and matter-of-fact understanding of a firm's objective. Firms tend to function along utilitarian lines, dividing the world they operate in into two spheres: pleasure and pain. Everything with a positive impact on a firm's profit is part of the former sphere, and everything with a negative impact is part of the latter. And, in this respect, marketing and advertising, are parts of a firm's toolbox in its endeavour to generate maximum profit for shareholders. From a

14 The experienced accountant might want to add, that some companies might aim to minimise profits for tax reasons, and that companies aim, instead, to earn as much cash as possible. This study does not make this technical difference. Indeed, large profits might be hidden for tax purposes, however, in the context of this study, this is of no concern.

15 The relationship between advertising and marketing is explained below.