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A Perspective on the Use of Advertising Tools in the Catholic Church in Poland

ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of the article is to explore the use of commercial advertising by the Catholic Church in Poland to attract the faithful and build her own brand.

Methodology: The use of advertising by religions provokes resistance due to skeptical attitudes toward marketing and criticism of advertising which employ ethically questionable strategies. The study applied quantitative methods, including descriptive statistics of a gender- and age-weighted sample, as well as parametric and non-parametric statistical tests.

Findings: More than 55% of the respondents believe that the Church should advertise her activities. Catholic advertising should focus on charitable and social goals. Nearly half of those surveyed think that the Church advertising can help improve her image; however, opinions prevail that advertising activities undertaken by the Catholic Church will not translate into an increase in the number of believers.

Value Added: The results of the research contained in the article may serve to develop new strategies for communication of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Recommendations: The literature recognizes considerable gaps associated with the possibilities of using advertising in the life of religious communities. Wishing to positively mark their presence in the life of society, churches should consider the possibilities of using advertising in their activities. A theological reflection is necessary in this regard, which would support the postulates derived from the marketing approach to the issue.

Key words: advertising tools in the Catholic Church, marketing, Catholic Church

JEL codes: M31



Introduction

Advertising is an important influence factor for companies and organizations. It is a one-way and paid form of communication used to disseminate information about products or services (De Keyzer, 2022). It fulfils marketing, communication, educational, economic, and social functions. Advertising also raises ethical issues such as the overuse of women and children, subliminal perception, and the use of unfair argumentation (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007). This is one of the reasons why it is not held in high esteem by churches. A study conducted many years ago shows that the impact of advertising on members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was no different from the overall impact of advertising on other people, which may show that religious affiliation does not matter much when it comes to the impact of advertising (Webster, 1985). Of course, churches still benefited from advertising, using church billboards and signs to inform people about religious practices and events (Percy, 2000). As early as the nineteenth century, advertising was used in the Catholic press to promote church vestments, devotional items, and church furnishings (Godson, 2016).

Some studies show that advertising can contribute to a church's image and to its growth (Ukah, 2008; Waller & Casidy, 2021). Churches today are opening up to advertising as a result of an increasingly positive approach to marketing and the activity of non-profit organizations using marketing tools (Anyasor, 2018). Church marketing efforts should target diverse audiences, such as young people, the elderly, families, and many others, which does not change the fact that traditional and proven evangelistic activities are still relevant (Gralczyk, 2020). In addition, the Catholic Church is present in social life through charitable, educational, and cultural activities, as well as through interreligious and ecumenical dialogue which offers her another opportunity to communicate extensively with her faithful. Still, however, catholic media and online portals perform an important role in evangelization.

Paying attention to advertising and marketing activities is all the more important as we are constantly witnessing declining support for churches and the number of church members. This is dictated by socio-cultural conditions as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Naturally, churches made more extensive use

of traditional and modern social media during the pandemic (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). According to a biennial survey conducted by the Institute of Church Statistics in Poland, as many as 45% of organizations existing at parishes stopped their activities due to the pandemic. Of course, a significant number of organizations undertook tasks related to the pandemic, such as material support for the needy and financial support (Presentation of the 2021 Report on the situation of the Catholic Church in Poland; *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae in Polonia*, 2020). With all this in mind, it is worth drawing attention to contemporary forms of advertising that could contribute to improving church's image and attracting new believers or retaining existing ones. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore the possibility of using commercial advertising in the activities of the Catholic Church in Poland.

The article presents the results of a study that addresses the potential use of commercial advertising in the activities of the Catholic Church in Poland. In order to achieve the stated goal, quantitative research methods were considered. As part of the application of the quantitative method, the results of the survey, which was conducted on a sample of 364 people, were analyzed.

Literature review

Among the most essential tasks of the churches is evangelization. It cannot be accomplished without personal and group communication, as this is what has always determined the development of Christianity (Losky et al., 2002; Joint Working Group, 2022). Evangelism itself, on the other hand, as Joy Ngozi Okoroafor and Barigbon Gbara Nseraka (2021) note, can be considered a form of advertising. If this were the case, then like any other advertising campaign, a campaign of a religious nature would also require planning, budgeting, and even evaluation. The lack of planning of religious messages and campaigns through interpersonal communication makes it difficult to decide what type of communication to use in a given situation and what effects their message will have (Ignatowski et al., 2020). William R. King (2015) noted that we can

categorize commercial advertising as church marketing. Despite the fact that marketing is gaining prominence in the life of churches, there is little mention of advertising in works devoted to this area. In general, religions exercise restraint toward advertising. On the one hand, they accept its existence and even its use in their activities, while on the other hand, they approach it with some skepticism (Ignatowski, 2013).

Of course, notwithstanding the above, there is scientific research on the intersection between commercial advertising and religious activism in three main areas (Knaus, 2016; Naseri & Tamam, 2012). Firstly, scholars have explored the importance of religious identity on the perception of advertising containing religious symbols or using religious language (Naseri & Taman, 2012). Secondly, researchers have analyzed the impact and use of religious symbols and themes on non-religious services and products. Research in this area also includes the impact of religious symbols on audience behavior and attitudes toward branding and advertising (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Kalliny et al., 2007). A final, third area of research focuses on how and what religious organizations advertise (Percy, 2000; Morehouse & Saffer, 2021).

Of course, there are other possible divisions of research conducted on the relationship that exists between advertising and religion. In general, approaches to commercial advertising were discussed from the perspectives of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism in the work of Peggy Morgan and Clive A. Lawton (2007). Concerning the followers of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, as well as non-religious people, Kim et al. (2004) investigated whether religion and intensity of religious belief influences attitudes toward advertised products likely to cause controversy. Products dedicated to gender, institutions involved in political activities, products related to health and healthcare, and addictive drugs were analyzed. It should be noted that residents of Taiwan, Malaysia, China, Turkey, the UK, and New Zealand were taken into account. The studies showed that Muslims were the least favorable toward the advertised products, and acceptance of the products increased with decreasing religiosity (Kim et al., 2004). Similar results were achieved in a study from Malaysia, which considered Buddhists, followers of Islam, Christians, and Hindus (Mohammad et al., 2015). Nevertheless, this does not change the fact

that the issue of Islamic followers' approach to advertising has been the subject of numerous studies. Bar and Abbas (2011); Bin Nooh et al. (2014); Shafiq et al. (2017); Yahya and Rasit (2019) found that there were large differences between advertisements created by Islamic followers and Christians. The way women are presented in relation to Islamic religious holidays was studied by Keenan and Yeni (2003) and Naseri and Tamam (2012).

In the literature, we also encounter analyses of commercial advertisements that used sacred iconography, e.g., motifs taken from Christian imagery, symbols and attitudes rehabilitated within contemporary visual culture. Cătălin Soreanu (2016) writes in this context of a critical discourse, sometimes ironic, which makes this a reference to religious iconography without an insightful respect for Christian values. The issue of spirituality in advertising as such, and even its impact on various aspects of consumer attitudes, was also investigated.

The attitude of followers of different religions toward commercial advertising is a completely different issue than the question of advertising per se. A survey of Hong Kong residents found that promoting the church through advertising aroused some skepticism and could lead to a distortion of its essence (Au, 2000; Dobocan, 2015). Surveys of Nigerian residents show that advertising is seen by clergy as a tool to attract new members and reactivate those who have lost contact with the church, which does not make it an effective evangelistic tool. Furthermore, advertising does not have an impact on the growth of spirituality, but only contributes to the growth of church finances (Ukah, 2008; Anyasor, 2018). A study among American students in the South found that religious messages appearing on advertisements did not influence greater religious engagement (Spurlock, 2014). Commercial advertising of a religious nature was carried out by charismatic churches in Ghana. They recognized that it was not having the desired effect (Quenin, 2016).

Individual churches, through their prominent committees, published documents dedicated to or referring to commercial advertising. This situation was particularly evident in the late 20th century. A certain skepticism toward commercial advertising emerges from these documents. The Pontifical Council For Social Communications (1997), in a document entitled "Ethics in Advertising", points out the benefits of advertising and, on the other hand, emphatically points



out the dangers of commercial advertising messages. The Catholic document highlights three key principles on which any advertising should be based. These include truthfulness, the dignity of the human person, and social responsibility (Murphy, 1998; Laczniak, 1998). Ethical dilemmas were also raised in the Church of England report (Church of England Report, 1994; Percy, 2000, p. 98). They are not absent from the study document produced by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism WCC (1999), and from the document produced by a joint working group of the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church (Joint Working Group, 2022).

Methodology

This research addresses the question of the potential use of commercial advertising in the activities of the Catholic Church in Poland. Quantitative research methods were taken into account in order to achieve the objective. As part of the application of the quantitative method, the results of a questionnaire survey, which was conducted on a sample of 364 people, were analyzed. The sample was standardized (weighted) by gender and age, adjusting its structure to the general population of Poles (as of December 31, 2022). The sample population meets the conditions of a representative sample; its size allows conclusions to be drawn about the general population at the 95% confidence level, with a maximum estimation error of 5%.

In terms of basic demographic characteristics, the sample (after weighting) was characterized as follows:

- women accounted for 52.4% of the respondents;
- almost one-fifth of the sample was made up of 19–30 year olds, 40.6% of 31–40 year olds, 15.6% of 41–64 year olds, and almost ¼ of those over 64;
- more than 35% of the respondents were residents of large cities (more than 100,000 inhabitants), 28.3% people from cities with 20,000–100,000 inhabitants, 12.7% residents of small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants), and 23.2% residents of rural areas;

- slightly more than half of the respondents (50.4%) had a secondary or vocational education, those with a tertiary education accounted for 48.3%, and the remaining 1.3% had primary education.

More than 70% of the respondents were Catholics (practicing and non-practicing in almost equal proportions), 2.6% Christians of other denominations, 0.3% followers of non-Christian religions, 13.5% non-believers, 12% of respondents refused to answer the question on religion.

Using statistical methods, i.e., descriptive statistics of the sample and parametric and non-parametric statistical tests (chi-square independence tests, Spearman correlation coefficient significance tests, tests of significance of difference of means and proportions), the following research hypotheses were verified:

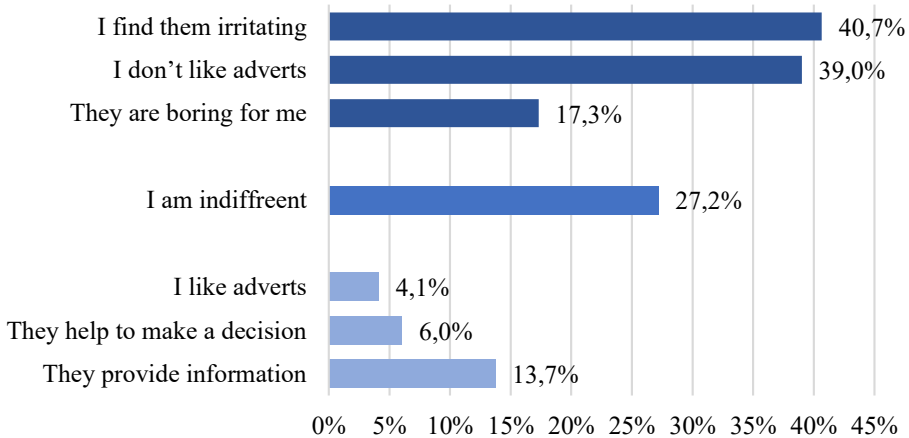
- H1.** *The Catholic Church should advertise her activities, while this opinion is more often expressed by those who have a positive view of the role of advertising.*
- H2.** *The use of advertising by the Catholic Church should focus on the promotion of her current activities.*
- H3.** *The Catholic Church, following market trends, will carry out advertising activities.*
- H4.** *The advertising activities carried out by the Catholic Church help to increase the number of believers.*
- H5.** *The advertising activities carried out by the Catholic Church contribute to improving her image in Poland.*

Findings and discussion

The results of the survey indicate that attitudes to advertising are more often negative than positive. More than 40% of the respondents said that they find adverts irritating and 39% said that they do not like adverts. More than one in four respondents has an indifferent attitude toward advertising. Only one in

eight respondents treats advertising as a source of information; other responses indicating a positive attitude toward advertising were even rarer (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Attitudes toward advertising



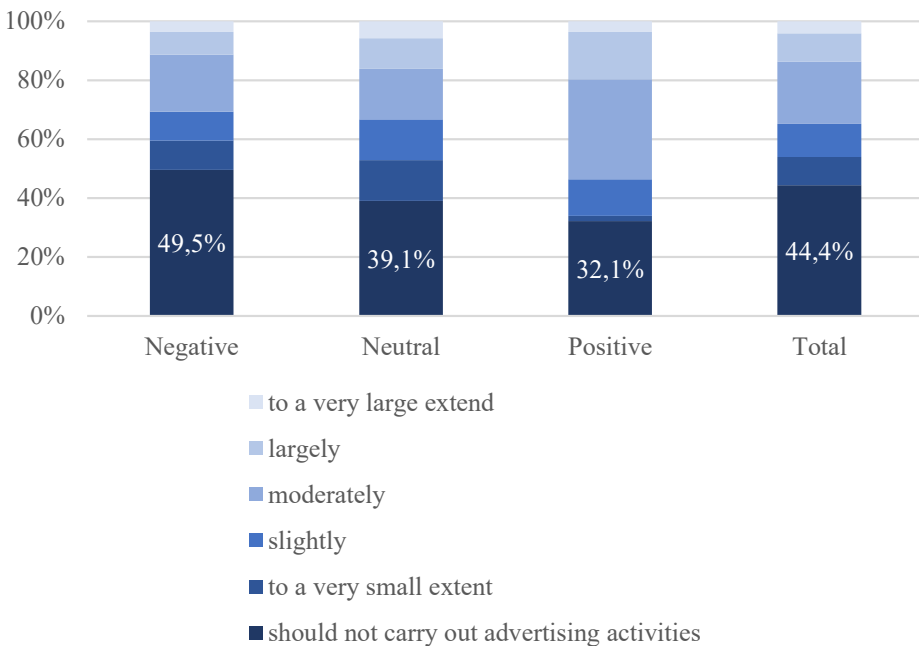
Source: own elaboration.

Respondents were offered the opportunity to mark several answers to the question on their attitude toward advertising. Each negative answer was assigned -1 point, each positive answer +1 point, and the number of points was summed to create a quasi-measurable variable, which could take values from the range [-3;3]. Those who received a total score of less than 0 points were included in the group of people with a negative attitude toward advertising, those who received more than 0 points were included in the group of people with a positive attitude toward advertising, a total of 0 qualified the respondents in the group of people with a neutral attitude toward advertising. Among the respondents, those with a negative attitude toward advertisements clearly dominated, accounting for more than 60% of the sample, almost 24% had a neutral attitude and only 15% had a positive attitude. The study shows that attitudes toward advertising do not depend on age, gender, or education ($p = 0.105$, $p = 0.272$, and $p = 0.220$, respectively, in chi-square independence tests).

The variable reflecting general attitudes toward advertising was contrasted with opinions on the conduct of advertising activities by the Catholic Church (see Figure 2).

In the sample surveyed, more than 44% believe that the church should not carry out advertising activities, with this percentage being significantly higher in the subsample of those with negative attitudes toward advertising ($p = 0.007$ in the Wald test for proportions in independent samples). At the same time, the hypothesis of independence of opinion on advertising and opinion on the church’s advertising activity should be rejected ($p = 0.037$ in the chi-square test of independence), and the hypothesis of the existence of a positive linear correlation between the two quasi-measurable variables assessing attitude toward advertising on a scale of $[-3;3]$ and to what extent, in the opinion of the respondents, the church should carry out advertising activity should be accepted ($p = 0.042$ in the Spearman coefficient significance test).

Figure 2. Results of opinion poll on the conduct of advertising activities by the Catholic Church



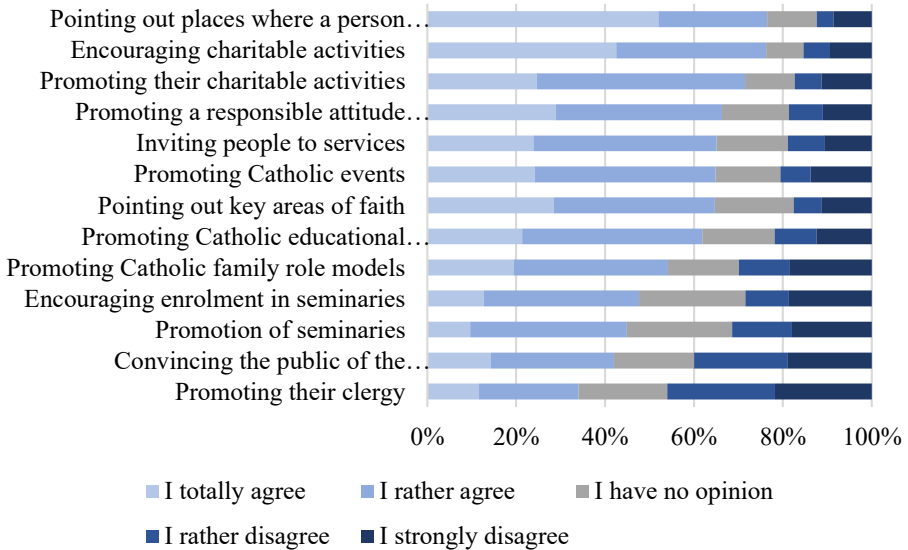
Source: own elaboration.

Opinion on the Catholic Church's advertising activity does not depend on gender or education level ($p = 0.788$ and $p = 0.075$, respectively, in chi-square independence tests). The results of the survey indicate that it does depend on age and religion ($p < 0.001$ in chi-square independence tests), furthermore, significance tests for proportions indicate that those aged 65 and over (as high as 90.9%) and practicing Catholics (76.5%) are significantly more likely to believe that the Catholic Church should carry out advertising activities.

According to the respondents' opinions, advertising activities should be carried out primarily via social media (an advertising tool indicated by 49.3% of the respondents) and specialized online forums (31.9%). Opinions on the use of these specific tools depend on age ($p < 0.001$ in the test of independence between age and opinion on the use of social media and $p = 0.006$ in the test of independence between age and opinion on the use of specialized online forums). Perhaps surprisingly, the use of these tools is significantly more frequently suggested by those aged 41–64 and 65 and over.

The respondents were asked for their opinions on the areas of use of advertising tools by the Catholic Church and the purpose of advertising activities (see Figure 3). The largest number of the respondents (more than 75%) believe that the Catholic Church should use advertising tools to point out places where a person affected by church abuse can get help, more than 70% emphasize encouraging charity and promoting the church's charitable activities, as well as promoting responsible attitudes toward the world (66.1%). These are not statutory areas of church activity. According to the respondents, advertising tools should be used to invite people to services (65.1%), promote Catholic events (64.3%). The respondents were least likely to indicate promoting clergy (only 34.0%), promoting seminaries (44.9%), and encouraging people to join (47.6%) there. The respondents relatively rarely agreed that advertising should be used to convince the public of the tenets of their faith (41.9%).

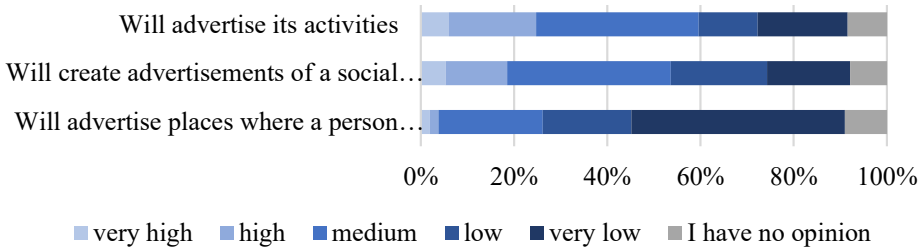
Figure 3. Opinions on areas of use of advertising tools by the Catholic Church and purpose of advertising activity



Source: own elaboration.

An assessment of the prospects for the use of advertising tools in the Catholic Church on the basis of the survey indicates that almost 25% of respondents believe that the chances of the Catholic Church advertising her activities are high or very high, with a total of around 60% rating the chances as at least medium (see Figure 4). Slightly fewer, 18.5%, think that the chances are high that the Catholic Church will create advertisements of a social nature (53.6% rate the chances as at least medium). At the lowest level is the estimated chance that the Catholic Church will advertise places where a person affected by church abuse can get help, and this direction of using advertising tools was most frequently suggested by the respondents (see Figure 3).

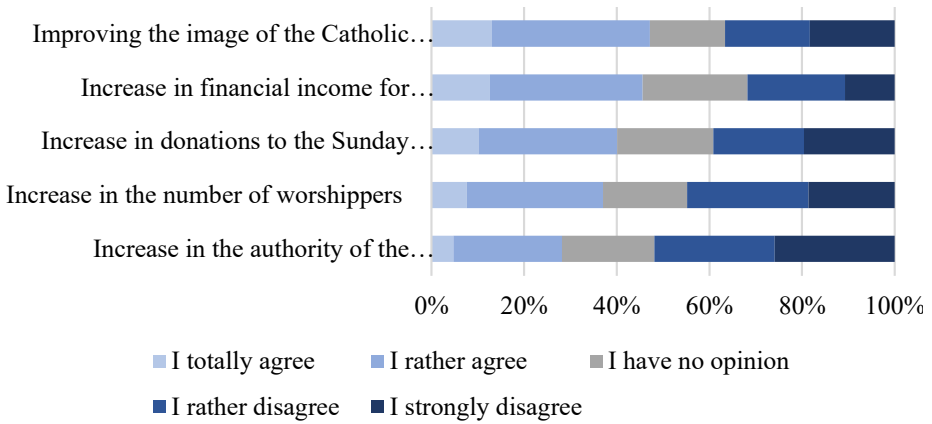
Figure 4. Opinions on the prospects for the use of advertising tools in the Catholic Church



Source: own elaboration.

The respondents were asked to express their views on the possible effects of the Catholic Church undertaking advertising activities (see Figure 5). The advertising activity in the Catholic Church may contribute to improving her image, 47.1% of the respondents believe so (a significantly smaller proportion of the respondents – 36.7% – hold the opposite view). The possibility of increasing the number of worshippers as a potential benefit of advertising in the Catholic Church is agreed with by only 37.0% of the respondents, with as many as 44.8% holding the opposite view. Opinions on this topic are significantly dependent on age ($p < 0.001$ in 4 chi-square independence tests, only in the case of an increase in the authority of the Catholic Church as a result of her advertising activities $p = 0.045$). Furthermore, tests for proportions show that older people (aged 64+) are more likely than others to believe that advertising can have an effect in the areas mentioned.

Figure 5. Opinions on the possible impact of the Catholic Church undertaking advertising activities



Source: own elaboration.

Summary of the results of the quantitative survey

- Re.H1.** *Over 55% of the respondents believe that the Catholic Church should advertise her activities (those positive about this clearly dominate among the retired and practicing Catholics), with this opinion more often expressed by those positive about the role of advertising.*
- Re.H2.** *In the opinion of the respondents, the advertising activities of the Catholic Church should focus on activities of a universal nature, i.e., such as charitable activities or shaping social responsibility in society. At the same time, more than half of the respondents emphasize the need to promote activities directly related to the mission of the Catholic Church.*
- Re.H3.** *More than half of the respondents rate the chances that the Catholic Church will advertise her activities and that she will create advertisements of a social nature as at least medium.*
- Re.H4.** *There is a preponderance of opinion among the respondents that the advertising activities undertaken by the Catholic Church will not translate into an increase in the number of believers.*

Re.H5. *Nearly half of the respondents believe that advertising activities in the Catholic Church can help to improve her image.*

In view of the results obtained, it is worth noting that a study conducted among the people of Nigeria found that the use of television and radio, billboards and posters are not a significant tool in evangelism, which does not change the fact that they are rated higher than activities at wedding or funeral ceremonies (Anyasor, 2018). Of course, religious advertising strategies should vary according to the country and region in which the audience is located (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000).

The respondents' attention to charitable advertising is linked to the marketing activities of non-profit organizations, which began to use marketing tools in the 1970s in the United States. We must also not forget the volunteers working within the ministry of churches and carrying out charitable activities (Wymer, 1998; DiGuseppi et al., 2014). Of course, Christian charities are not secular non-profit organizations. Nevertheless, the activities they carry out, reaching out to marketing means, have always been positively received by a wide range of communities (Kotler & Levy, 1969; Sargeant & Mei-Na, 2002; Lumpkins, 2016; Abreu, 2006). Church institutions are closer to non-profit organizations than strictly business activities (Merwe et al., 2012).

The literature on the subject makes it clear that churches need to adapt their activities to contemporary trends and use various forms of marketing to reach a wide audience. Marketing, however, must not be seen as a means to influence an increase in the number of believers, but rather as a tool to get the message across to as many people as possible. Through advertising, the church can attract the attention of people who otherwise would not have the opportunity to learn about values and the religious message. Advertising can also help promote events such as masses, retreats, or parish meetings, which may, although it does not have to, increase their attendance (Okoroafor & Nsereka, 2021). According to a study in the United States, church advertising can be effective, but only if it is well-targeted and in line with the values of the community. In addition, any theory on advertising topics must take into account the ways in which religious organizations use religious terms and symbols in their promotional messages (Morehouse & Saffer, 2021). The results of this research coincide with

the definition of religious advertising, which aims to provide information, and promote values, ideas, and services of a religious nature, as well as to shape attitudes and behaviors relevant to a particular religion. Religious advertising, however, faces serious challenges. The cost that churches have to bear in running religious advertising campaigns makes it infeasible for some churches (Okoroafor & Nsereka, 2021).

It is noteworthy that secular advertising quite effectively takes over and uses religious images and symbols belonging to churches (Percy, 2000). By using sacred iconography, they can show disrespect for Christian values. It is because of such circumstances that advertisements may discourage churches from using them. In addition, this form of promotion can introduce confusion into religious messages and distract the faithful. Advertisements can be seen as a violation of the principle of freedom of conscience and religion (Lozano, 2021).

The research conducted for this study concludes that the advertising activities undertaken by the church will not translate into increased numbers of believers. From a survey of 321 Nigerian clergymen, it appears that human image and dignity are considered an evangelical motive for advertising to a little degree. To a large extent, advertising is seen as a tool to attract new members and reactivate dormant ones. The effect of advertising on churches has not been a sufficiently meaningful competition, nor has it led to spiritual growth. Instead, it was supposed to influence the growth of church finances (Anyasor, 2018). Besides, in some Nigerian church literature, the congregation is described similarly to the commercial world, explicitly as “customers and consumers of churches”. For example, a new church member fills out a card with information on “customer data” (Ukah, 2008; Ukah, 2014). A study among American students in the South found that the majority of participants considered religion to be important in their lives. However, outdoor advertisements displaying religious messages did not increase the intention to attend church services or habits and engagement in prayer (Spurlock, 2014). In Ghana, two charismatic churches (Action Chapel International and Central Gospel Church) ran evangelistic advertising on television and billboards. The results obtained were not satisfactory and the second church abandoned TV advertising and focused its activities on billboards (Quenin, 2016).

Since advertising activities do not translate into an increase in the number of worshippers, then, according to the survey, nearly half of the respondents felt that advertising could help improve the image of the church. The results obtained are in line with those obtained in Nigeria. These showed that advertising can perform a significant evangelistic role in building the image of the church (Anyasor, 2018).

In summary, according to the research and literature, churches that want and need to use modern technology and thus seek ways to reach a wide audience with their message should take into account the fact that advertising may, although it does not have to be, just one of the ways to achieve their intended goals.

Conclusions and limitations

As noted by William R. King (2015), religious advertising does not make sinners convert. Nevertheless, it is one of the tools that can help people to be open to the Gospel message. So, why should Christians not use it? It should be noted that in order to make its presence felt in public life, the church is constantly turning to new media and specific forms of communication (posters, street banners, websites, or interactive mobile structures). Furthermore, there are consistent forms of information advertising in which church institutions firmly rooted in the realities of everyday life do not hesitate to use contemporary media (Sulkowski et al., 2022).

From the research results obtained, an ambivalent approach to the issue at hand emerges. The research was carried out in a large urbanized city where religion has a diminishing influence on religious life. It would then be appropriate to conduct the research in a more diverse environment. A qualitative study with multi-denominational decision-making bodies would have been beneficial in order to get a confessional perspective on the possibilities of church advertising. Regardless, it is worth noting that there is a need for theological reflection on advertising and the possibilities of its use in religious life (Nooh, 2012).

Perhaps an important reason for the restrained approach to church advertising lies in the very essence of Christianity. It is first and foremost a religion of the word, not of images precisely. It must be emphasized that it is from the preached word that faith is born, not from the posted image (Percy, 2000). Nevertheless, Christianity, especially Orthodoxy and Catholicism, but also many Protestant denominations, have never shied away from using images in their activities (Ignatowski, 2013). In turn, from here it is a straight path to using advertising in their activities.

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