

How to Effectively Implement “Buddhist-Style” Marketing under the Backdrop of the “Temple Craze”

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Abstract: Amidst the prevailing “Temple craze” among young people, numerous brands are engaging in “Buddhist-style” marketing. However, given that religion is a sensitive area, such marketing campaigns entail numerous risks. From the perspective of advertising practitioners, this article employs literature research and case study methods to explore the legal boundaries of “Buddhist-style” marketing within the existing legal framework. By analyzing both positive and negative examples, this article clarifies compliant and non-compliant aspects of “Buddhist-style” marketing, arguing that it must adhere to legal bottom lines, emphasize creative expression, downplay religious elements, follow a humanistic approach, and respect and protect consumer rights. It aims to guide the industry in grasping the appropriate marketing scope, ensuring the legality and compliance of marketing activities, and promoting the healthy development of the temple economy. Simultaneously, it seeks to alleviate young people's anxieties through positive marketing and to guide their values in a correct direction.

1. Research Background

In recent years, temple tourism has become popular among young people, satisfying their spiritual needs as a unique form of tourism. Increasingly, “Buddhist-style” youths are visiting temples as a way to relax, rejuvenate, and heal. Since March 2023, ticket sales for temple-related scenic spots have increased by 367% year-on-year, with individuals born in the 1990s and 2000s accounting for nearly 50%. [1] Netizens jokingly comment that “they chose burning incense over going to work or school, and chose seeking help from Buddha over asking others or relying on themselves.” Against the backdrop of the “Temple craze,” the “Temple economy,” centered on temples, has also emerged. Temples are catering to the aesthetic preferences of younger audiences by launching a wide array of temple-themed cultural and creative products, blessed religious items (“Dharma objects”), and spiritual consumption products such as tourism routes, thereby creating a distinctive consumption pattern. Concurrently, numerous brands are capitalizing on this trend by implementing a range of ‘Buddhist-style’ marketing strategies, including temple co-branding and metaphysics-themed experiences.

However, religion has consistently been a sensitive subject in marketing. ‘Buddhist-style’ marketing poses numerous risks, including the potential to offend religious adherents, mislead consumers through superstitious beliefs, and even transgress legal boundaries. Despite existing laws providing relatively clear governance over the commercialization of religion, instances of

prominent brands experiencing setbacks with their 'Buddhist-style' marketing remain common. The practice of brands leveraging religious culture as a mere gimmick for profit largely erodes the solemnity of religion. This could potentially misguide young consumers, leading them to an excessive reliance on religious forms rather than substance. This underscores the critical importance for both brands and consumers to clearly delineate the norms and boundaries of 'Buddhist-style' marketing.

2. Significance of Research

This article aims to investigate the legal parameters governing the use of religious elements in marketing activities within the existing legal framework, from the vantage point of advertising professionals. By analyzing relevant literature, statutes, and case studies, it seeks to discern compliant versus non-compliant expressions of 'Buddhist-style' marketing, thereby differentiating between the legitimate incorporation of religious elements and the illicit commercialization of religion or promulgation of superstition. Firstly, it provides guidance to the industry on appropriately leveraging 'Buddhist-style' marketing. This involves satisfying the market trend of the 'temple craze' and the consumer demands of younger generations, while simultaneously preventing the commodification of religious beliefs. Such an approach ensures the legality and compliance of marketing endeavors, thereby fostering the healthy evolution of the temple economy. Conversely, positive 'Buddhist-style' marketing can alleviate the anxiety prevalent among contemporary young people and appropriately guide the values of young consumers.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Literature Review

This paper compiles, organizes, and analyzes existing literature pertinent to the 'temple craze' phenomenon and the commercialization of religion. It also examines relevant provisions within current laws and regulations concerning religious information, the commercialization of religion, and illegal advertising. This foundational research serves as theoretical support for a deeper understanding of the origins and legal parameters of 'Buddhist-style' marketing.

3.2 Case Study

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of representative positive and negative cases. The objective is to analyze the legal and regulatory landscape of 'Buddhist-style' marketing by examining specific marketing activities and judicial precedents. Through pertinent legal interpretations, the permissible scope and boundaries of 'Buddhist-style' marketing are further delineated, thereby enhancing the practical guidance offered by theoretical research in the realm of marketing.

4. Conceptual Elucidation

4.1 "Temple Craze" Phenomenon

Scholar Liang Henghao posits that the "temple craze" phenomenon originates from the subjective demands of young people. He states that "it approximates a cultural ritual performance that facilitates cultural exchange and identification among groups through the process of dissemination, departing from the fundamental framework of religious rituals, and connecting with

young people through a new form of cultural ritual." [2] Specifically, this phenomenon is characterized by the "desacralization" of traditional religious rituals across aspects such as identity limitations, media, and cultural structure. It is described as a "cultural 'healing' performance experienced by a group struggling with rapid and continuous internal and external pressures in urban spaces while seeking a 'spiritual haven'." Its primary function is psychological therapy, and it is further characterized by its occasional nature and the integration of online and offline elements. Research by scholars such as Mu Jiawei indicates that the unique characteristics of spatial segregation in Temple tourism, the performative display of sacred consciousness, and the spiritual consumer goods within the temple economy distinguish it from other venues [3]. They attribute the emergence of the "temple craze" phenomenon to four factors: "the disequilibrium of an accelerating society fostering decelerating practices among young people, young people seeking spiritual solace and ritualistic resistance to draw strength, the spatial perception evoked by media representation calling for a realistic sense of embodied experience, and the commercial operation of the temple economy stimulating youth consumption demands; Scholars, including Liu Yaqiong, have categorized the motivations for young people engaging in "Burning incense" at temples into three fundamental types: "traditional motivations anchored in 'sacredness'," "modern motivations centered on 'practicality'," and "postmodern motivations revolving around 'entertainment'". [4]

4.2 Advertising regulations

Advertising regulations, also termed advertising supervision, encompass, in a broad sense, the corrective measures implemented by governmental departments, industry regulatory bodies, and individual consumers—through administrative compulsion, industry standards, or civil litigation—to address illegal advertising behaviors, thereby ensuring that all entities involved in advertising operations adhere to a legalized framework [5]; From the perspective of differentiating regulatory authorities, advertising regulation can be broadly categorized into three fundamental types: administrative management regulation, social organization regulation, and industry self-regulation. Currently, advertising regulation in China is primarily evidenced by the formulation, revision, and implementation of the Advertising Law and its supporting regulations.

4.3 Illegal advertising

Illegal advertising refers to advertisements that violate the Advertising Law and its ancillary administrative measures in various forms, and it represents a concentrated indicator of the efficacy of advertising regulation [5]. Amidst the rapid expansion of the advertising industry, the pervasive issue of illegal advertising warrants significant attention. Illegal advertising not only infringes upon consumer rights but also severely impacts the advertising industry itself, disrupts the market order of the industries to which advertisers belong, and hinders the healthy development of the market economy. Scholar Chen Liping attributed the prevalence of Illegal advertising to three primary factors: an imbalanced structure within the advertising industry, the removal of stringent regulations for advertising reviewers, and the lenient penalties coupled with low costs for engaging in illegal advertising. She further proposed strategies for regulating Illegal advertising, which include: enhancing consumer discernment, establishing a credit management system for advertising enterprises, and refining the advertising review process. [6]

5. Analysis of the Legal and Regulatory Environment

While the national regulations governing advertisements with religious content are currently comprehensive, their application in specific judicial practices often encounters situations that are

difficult to definitively assess. This paper compiles and lists the pertinent legal and regulatory provisions potentially applicable to advertising and marketing activities that incorporate religious elements, primarily categorizing them into two areas: advertising and religion. The specific details are as follows:

5.1 “Advertising Law”

Article 9, Chapter 2 of the "Advertising Law" stipulates that "advertisements shall not contain content that discriminates against ethnic group, race, religion, or gender";

5.2 “Consumer Rights Protection Law”

Article 14, Chapter 2 of the "Consumer Rights Protection Law" states that "consumers, when purchasing or utilizing goods and receiving services, are entitled to have their personal dignity and ethnic customs respected";

5.3 “Regulations on Religious Affairs”

Article 53, Chapter 7 of the "Regulations on Religious Affairs" stipulates that "commercial promotion under the guise of religion is prohibited";

5.4 “Several Opinions on Further Addressing the Commercialization of Buddhism and Taoism”

“Several Opinions on Further Regulating the Commercialization of Buddhism and Taoism,” which stipulates that “no organization or individual may engage in activities or seek profit under the guise of Buddhism or Taoism.” Additionally, the “Opinions” state, “commercial promotion in the name of Buddhism and Taoism is prohibited”;

5.5 “Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services”

Article 14 of Chapter 3 of the “Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services” stipulates that internet religious information must not contain content involving commercial promotion in the name of religion; Article 29 of Chapter 4 states that violators of these regulations will be “ordered to rectify within a prescribed period by the religious affairs department; Should rectification be refused, relevant departments, including those for cybersecurity, telecommunications, public security, and national security, shall impose penalties in accordance with applicable laws and administrative regulations.

6. Case Analysis

6.1 Negative Case: HEYTEA's 'Foxi Tea' Violates Regulations on Religious Affairs Administration, Leading to an Official Summons

On November 28, 2023, HEYTEA collaborated with the Jingdezhen China Ceramic Museum to launch the 'Foxi Tea Latte' alongside three distinct co-branded cups and refrigerator magnet peripherals. This product line quickly gained widespread attention on social media and attracted a significant number of consumers, primarily due to its packaging, which featured the highly popular 'Speechless Buddha' contemplative Arhat image. However, some consumers found it inappropriate to hold an image of Buddha in their hands. Numerous religious figures have asserted that “what is

being discarded is not merely packaging, but our faith,” contending that HEYTEA's application of Buddha imagery on its external packaging contravenes religious ethics and offends the sensibilities of religious adherents. On December 1st, HEYTEA was summoned for an inquiry regarding its product, the “Foxi Tea Latte,” which was suspected of infringing upon the Regulations on Religious Affairs Administration. Consequently, HEYTEA withdrew the “Foxi” co-branded product line on December 3rd, initiated an internal review of the matter, and submitted a rectification report.

Relevant personnel contend that HEYTEA's action borders on "ambiguous" or "questionable" conduct, further complicated by the imprecise legal definition of "in the name of religion," thereby rendering the case inherently contentious. However, the judiciary should heed public opinion, prioritize consumer interests, and address the underlying issues of such controversies. Upon in-depth analysis of relevant laws and regulations, the 'Foxi Tea Latte' product series is found to have utilized religious elements as a commercial gimmick, thereby violating the 'Regulations on Religious Affairs' and the 'Several Opinions on Further Regulating the Commercialization of Buddhism and Taoism.' Furthermore, the inclusion of Buddha imagery on the product packaging, which may offend religious adherents, also demonstrates a propensity to trivialize religious beliefs and disregard consumer sensibilities.

6.2 Positive Example: Xianyu filmed a 'Buddhist-style' poster titled 'Duan She Li' in the vicinity of a temple

On August 22, 2023, Xianyu and RT-Mart collaborated on a reverse marketing campaign, leveraging the Qixi Festival to capitalize on the "Temple craze" trend. They created temple check-in posters featuring young people with "Duansheli" (letting go) tote bags. These images were captured at tea houses and coffee shops located near prominent temples such as Shanghai Ningguo Zen Temple, Hangzhou Faxi Temple, Lingyin Temple, and Fajing Zen Temple. The campaign utilized the slogan, "Live a life of letting go, sell your discarded items on Xianyu," to convey a 'Buddhist-style' philosophy that "everything that cannot be let go can be released on Xianyu." This strategy effectively forged a deep brand association with the Zen concept of "Duansheli". It is necessary to guide offline traffic to online platforms in order to cultivate demand for software usage among young consumers.

Xianyu's marketing initiatives incorporate religious elements through the concept of "Duansheli" (decluttering) and the depiction of temple scenes in its posters. This approach encourages young people to subjectively embrace a 'decluttering' lifestyle, rather than promoting superstitious functionalities like 'good luck' or 'attracting wealth,' thus mitigating the risk of consumer deception. Furthermore, the temple functions solely as a backdrop for poster photography, and the marketing collateral is devoid of information prohibited by laws and regulations, such as 'religious doctrines, rules, religious knowledge, or religious activities.' This mitigates the risk of commercial promotion exploiting religion. Such 'Buddhist-style' marketing, which judiciously integrates religious elements, is both lawful and well-received by consumers.

7. Summary and Outlook

7.1 Research Conclusions

In summary, to effectively implement legal and compliant 'Buddhist-style' marketing, the following strategies can be adopted: Firstly, it is essential to adhere to legal boundaries and conduct pre-compliance reviews. Enterprises should establish a legal risk assessment mechanism for marketing activities, clearly prohibiting the use of religious elements. A key focus should be on scrutinizing whether marketing content involves the promotion of feudal superstition, thereby

avoiding misleading consumers; Secondly, emphasis should be placed on creative expression while downplaying religious overtones. The prohibition of using religious information is not a 'one-size-fits-all' ban. Enterprises can still appropriately extract the philosophical implications and aesthetic concepts of 'Buddhist-style' culture, provided there is a clear distinction between cultural borrowing and religious propaganda. These can be presented in an artistic and symbolic manner, while avoiding the direct and concrete abuse of religious imagery and Religious knowledge; Furthermore, both legal frameworks and marketing strategies must adhere to a human-centric philosophy. 'Buddhist-style' marketing, in particular, should demonstrate respect for religious sentiments and eschew commercial exploitation. Paramount to this is upholding the beliefs and emotions of religious adherents, thereby preventing the trivialization or entertainment-oriented portrayal of religious doctrines and deities. Religious sites should not be instrumentalized for commercial traffic generation. A constant state of vigilance and sensitivity is required, with meticulous attention paid to the potential societal repercussions of marketing activities, particularly feedback emanating from religious communities. At the consumer level, enterprises are similarly obligated to reinforce positive guidance and elevate the media literacy of young individuals. Marketing content should unequivocally convey a positive and healthy approach to life, rather than employing the facade of 'Buddhist-style' to propagate notions of negativity, escapism, or superstitious dependency. Prominent brands, in particular, bear the social responsibility to assume an active guiding role, encouraging young consumers to approach the "Temple craze" and 'Buddhist-style' culture with rational discernment. Collaborative efforts with market regulatory authorities are essential to collectively foster a clear and wholesome online marketing environment.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study primarily stem from two aspects: insufficient representativeness in case selection and a lack of consideration for the dynamic evolution of laws and regulations. In terms of cases, due to the relatively recent emergence of the 'Temple craze' and the limited number of 'Buddhist-style' marketing activities, the available cases for collection were scarce. The selection of only one positive and one negative example may introduce a degree of bias into the analysis. Furthermore, given the continuous updates and revisions to laws and regulations, the conclusions of this study may possess temporal limitations, necessitating ongoing attention to subsequent dynamic developments.

7.3 Future Outlook

The current 'Temple craze' phenomenon predominantly occurs within China, with the religious elements in marketing cases primarily rooted in Buddhist and Taoist cultures. Future research could undertake cross-cultural comparisons, investigating the existence of similar cultural phenomena and marketing activities in other countries and analyzing them in conjunction with local legal frameworks. Furthermore, this study primarily focuses on theoretical research, synthesizing and analyzing existing literature, legal frameworks, and case studies. Future research could incorporate empirical components, such as in-depth interviews or surveys, to gauge the acceptance of 'Buddhist-style' marketing initiatives among consumers and religious practitioners.

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