DECODING SELF-PERSUASION IN VARIOUS PATHS OF CONNECTION IN PRAYER: AN APPROACH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MARKETING IN THE ECCLESIASTICAL FIELD

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Abstract: *In marketing, the notion of persuasion may be depicted in campaigns based on continuous flows of consumer exposure to brand attributes. We believe that these attributes are melted in the conditioned responses of consumers towards the marketing of the brand. However, it is the brand associations triggered by consumers that constitute a premise for the business value of that brand. However, should we flip the approach of value from the consumer side, we consider that the embedding of the brand attributes may be related either to actual or ideal versions of self-concept. We propose to decode this embedding process by using self-persuasion as our guide and prayer as communication for our research realm.*

Key words: *inward prayer, outward prayer, upward prayer, self-concept, self-discrepancy*

1. Introduction

One of the great myths of defining persuasion is that persuaders try to persuade others into acting the way they intend or believing things they convey for the persuadees to act or to believe things they don't want. The fundamental assumption is that persuaders overwhelm the receiver of the persuading message with a plethora or arguments, the result being a muted consent towards an undesirable action or unintended belief. This myth overlooks an important aspect: the mind can convince itself that a change in a behaviour or an attitude is justified (Perloff, 2010, p. 25). Communicators only provide the arguments, and, as D. Joel Whalen explains: "You can't force people to be persuaded—you can only activate their desire and show them the logic behind your ideas. You can't move a string by pushing it, you have to pull it. People are the same. Their devotion and total commitment to an idea come only when they fully understand and buy in with their total being" (1996, p. 5)

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2. Defining Self-Persuasion

The study of self-persuasion (Aronson, 1999) originates in the social psychology realm, specifically from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones, 2002) and, we believe, in close proximity to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1989). Leon Festinger developed the original theory of cognitive dissonance in the mid-1950s, and the first official and finalized version of the theory was made public in 1957. Festinger postulated that dissonance manifests as a state of discomfort experienced by an individual when he/she holds two or more cognitions, relevant to each other but psychologically inconsistent (Elliot and Devine, 1994) (Aronson, 1969). When the state of discomfort is experienced, the individual will try to reduce it by removing the dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions or diminish the importance of dissonant cognitions (Telci, Maden and Kantur, 2011).

The self-discrepancy theory differentiates between the current representation of self and the future representation of self, where this path between the current and the future is anchored in self-guides. In other words, the former representation defines the self-image, whereas the latter defines the self-guide towards that future self, which is to be in a certain way. According to self-discrepancy theory, there are two guiding systems (or self-guides) towards the future self: one triggered by the would-be-nice-to-be self and the other activated by the ought-to-be self. The ideal self-guide is actually a representation of those attributes that someone (either the current self or someone else) would like for the future self to ideally possess, whereas the second self-guide is a representation of the attributes that someone (either the current self or someone else) believes you should possess. In other words, the first guide may depict the hopes, aspirations or wishes, whereas the second guide may depict the sense of duty, the responsibilities and obligations. A basic assumption of this theory is that people are motivated by the possibility of reaching a condition of self where the concept of self matches their personally relevant self-guides (Higgins, Tykocinski, and Vookles, 2013)

It is also assumed that a misalignment between the concept of self and a self-guide can produce a feeling of discomfort. It is our assumption that the potential of self-persuasion becomes apparent when the arguments presented by the exterior communicator are conducive to the realization of this match.

From a marketing perspective, we may draw a parallel between self-persuasion and the self-concept theory (Sirgy, 1982) and self-image theory (Graeff, 1996). Sirgy (1982) hypothesized that product attributes involving visual cues usually trigger a self-blueprint involving the same images. Also, the author outlined the impact of self-concept theory in research concerning consumer behaviour by pointing out that consistency between actual self-concept and product image is more supportive of consumer motivation to purchase and consume that product. As such, alignment between self and product image may be of a greater impact on consumer behaviour towards that product or brand.

Should we parallel the social psychology and the marketing approaches, we may notice that even though the realms of conceptualising differ, the basic paradigm is the same: it is the cognitions of an individual that coalesce towards a path of transformative endeavours, a path which we believe has the potential to become active when someone

dwells with intention of transformation in prayer.

2. The Prayer as Communication

Essentially, a religious belief is sustained through the practice of prayer (Brown, 1994) (Heiler, 1932). In the beginning of the 1900s, most academia representatives conceptualized prayer as a multifaceted phenomenon (Calkins, 1911) (Strong, 1909). For example, Calkins (1911) theorised that prayers occurred as fellowship, contemplation, penitence and adoration, whereas James (1902) considered prayer as an act of transaction only between the thoughts of the praying person, and he believed that the transaction itself is bound by the sphere of influence within a prayer which is subjectively activated by the energy encapsulated in the very definition of prayer, namely as an active and mutual intercommunication between the self and a higher power with whom the self feels related. In the years following the 1900s, research concerning the connection between psychology and religion, especially explorations of prayer presented little interest from the community (Spilka and McIntosh, 1999), until the 1990s when newer methods employed by researchers prompted novel insights into the topic (Hood Jr, Morris, and Harvey, 1993) (Ladd and Spilka, 2002) (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, and Green, 2001).

For our research endeavour, we considered the definition of prayer proposed by Ladd and Spilka (2002) built on Foster's writings (1992), that is understanding prayer as a mechanism for building cognitive connections. The authors demonstrated that prayers contain inward, outward and upward paths of connection as theorised by Foster. Inward prayer was defined as a journey towards the depth of one's soul, in order to find that transformative action towards one-self and the connection with the self, therefore emphasizing self-examination. Upward prayer was defined as a journey towards higher levels of awareness, in order to discover the potential levels of intimacy with the Divine, therefore focusing on strengthening human-divine connections. Outward prayer was defined as a path outside one's soul, fostered in order to experience, with intention, the love towards and of God, which exists in every action and extrinsic act of the soul, focusing therefore on the human-human connections.

3. Self-persuasion and the Paths of Connection in Prayer

Because in our approach, self-persuasion is sourced in cognitive dissonance theory, the premise for our decoding of self-persuasion lies with the manifestation of an inconsistent behaviour with existing opinions on behalf of the person who prays. Furthermore, since praying is perceived and defined by the person who prays as an act happening between oneself and a Sacred instance, social cognitions are an integral and necessary element of this interaction (Spilka and Ladd, 2012).Therefore, we posit that each path of connection is derived from the awareness that a certain behaviour, at some point, can be influenced depending on the intensity of the dissonance by the cognitions produced and manifested by individuals, and it is this influence that may be decoded in prayer by trying to pinpoint self-persuasion triggers within the paths.

Let's consider the inward prayer, which entails an inward examination of the self, in other words, an examination of the justifications offered for some behaviours inconsistent with some attitude at some point. But, it is in these moments of examination that people try to understand „their own personal spiritual condition in relation to the standards to which they aspire" (Ladd, Ladd, and Sahai, 2018, p.165), that is to say with their personally relevant self-guide, and intrinsically with the chosen standard (the ideal or the ought-to-be concept of self, according to self-discrepancy theory). The focus is placed on behaviours that may or may not have manifested and whether these behaviours may have pleased or displeased the person who prays. As we may notice, the path of connection within inward prayer deals with a two-fold examination of self: the first one deals with behaviours that may have manifested and how the person assesses these behaviours in relation to the self-guide relevant for that assessment and the second one deals with possible behaviours, that may or may not have happened, and how the person deals with this possibility. In the first case, self-persuasion is manifested in the act of assessment: good behaviour triggers a request for gratitude under the form of a request for Divine blessings, whereas bad behaviour triggers a request for Divine forgiveness of sins, implying a manifestation of self-persuasion under the form of one becoming worthy of forgiveness through the request itself.

The paths of connection in upward prayer reveal other ways of praying that de-focus both self and others and place emphasis on the experience of connecting with a larger, deeper meaning, in order to seek a sense of harmony with all that is seen and unseen. In this case, self-persuasion is justified through the desired revelation of higher levels of awareness, which can only be asserted through the acknowledged presence of the Divine. This act of revelation emerges from the dialogical nature of prayer (FitzGerald, 2012), namely in the asymmetry of discourse, which is a one-way path, that unfolds in a two-way encounter. For this upward path, it is much clear that "prayer is the human side of any human-divine encounter" (FitzGerald, 2012, p.34) and it is through the acknowledgement of this aspect that the path of connection, anchored in self-care and self-constitution, begins. Self-persuasion is depicted in the actions of individuals upon their own bodies and way of being in order to transform themselves as to attain a certain state of happiness, purity and wisdom (Foucault, 1988), and it takes the form of the words used in prayer, becoming actual effect through the discourse onto the Divine.

The outward prayer focuses on a sense of connection with others or the world in some way. Experiencing prayer in this way may include a metaphorical projection of the inward journey, thus accepting that prayer is not something which is uttered only through words, so said, but also through actions, namely sent. Through the act of speech and the act of delivery, prayer brings forth relationships between its agents of communication, travelling from a self-persuasive path onto another.

4. Conclusions

Bringing together self-persuasion and paths of connection in prayer revealed the potential for individual transformative action, which happens on a dissonant background between cognitions. Our purpose here was to decode some possible proximities

between self-persuasion manifestations and their embodiment within prayer, which we were able to pinpoint to some extent for inward and upward paths within the act of prayer. Nonetheless, as part of a larger research project, this article only captions some of the conceptual possibilities emerged from decoding exercises of self-persuasion and paves the way for further associations from different realms, such as social psychology, marketing and religion.

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