

ANALYZING THE MARKETING MODEL OF KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyze the marketing activities of Krishna Consciousness as a new religious movement in Hungary. Observations and in-depth interviews were carried out in different Krishna-conscious communities in Europe concerning the means they apply to gain followers. The three-year-long qualitative research phase has revealed a two-phase model, in which Krishna-conscious villages are promoted as touristic destinations providing a cultural experience; and only in the second phase, when people already visit one of these places, are they introduced to the religion, which feels more like learning, not promotion. In the second research phase a questionnaire was used to evaluate the recognition and the efficiency of the two-phase model. In this paper the research results concerning Krisna Völgy in Hungary are introduced, which is currently the biggest village in Europe and also one of the most developed ones concerning tourism and cultural experiences.*

Keywords: *Religious Marketing, Marketing Religions, New Religious Movements.*

JEL Classification M31

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1. INTRODUCTION

When talking about religion and marketing, researchers usually have significantly different opinions. While for some it is obvious that religious groups – just like other entities – need to make efforts to attract people; many still claim it is inappropriate to talk about religion and marketing in the same context. However, the number of researches in the field has grown significantly in the past decades, especially since the emerging of new religious movements, many of which are not originally from the Western cultures, so they needed to take actions to gain followers in Europe and overseas. Krishna Consciousness is one of those movements, which are originated in the East, but managed to gain a significant number of followers in the Western world in the past decades. Krishna consciousness was one of those new religious movements, which conquered the Western world around the 1960's. Originating from India, the religious movement had reached the United States of America during the era of the Vietnamese War, spreading all over Europe as well during and after the Communist Era. After the fall of Communism in Eastern-Europe, and the consolidation of the post-World War II. situation, when practicing religions had become more free and new religious movements could also gain more place in the life of most of the European countries, Krishna consciousness was one of the first ones to spread; and soon communities started to form all over the continent (Harvey, 2000; Isvara, 2002; Kamarás, 1998; Klostermaier, 2000; Rochford, 2007).

Also, Krishna consciousness was – and still is – one of the best-known religions of their promotional activities, which were initiated by people stopping pedestrians on the streets, telling them all about the teachings of their Lord Krishna. Nowadays ISKCON (International Society for Krishna consciousness) has numerous churches, villages and visitors' centers all over the world, hosting a large number of festivals, and engaging themselves in charitable activities, while communicating actively online and using the social media. Being able to raise the attention of more and more people in countries far away from India, having barely no cultural similarities with this Eastern country and its traditions is an achievement suggesting a carefully set strategy of reaching and targeting people, which has received surprisingly small attention in the past decades. The aim of this research is to analyze the marketing activities taken by Krishna-conscious groups to gain followers, identify the strategic elements of their marketing concept and analyze the efficiency of it among the general public. (Bence, 2014; Goswami, 2001; Harvey, 2000; Isvara, 2002; Kamarás, 1998; Klostermaier, 2000; Rochford, 2007; Wuaku, 2012).

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The appearance of new religious movements and the presence of multiple religions within small geographical areas has led to a competition between the different churches and religious communities in order to keep and gain followers. The pool of potential followers is given, since the Earth has a limited – though increasing – number of inhabitants; and churches aim to win the largest possible proportion of this pool. This means both gaining new followers, who may not have been religious before, but also attracting people belonging to different religious groups previously. Many researchers have described this competition for members as a market situation similar to those studied in relation to products and services, which has created debates concerning whether or not religions may be approached this way and what kind of effects religious markets may have on the nature and development of religion (Becker, 1986; Crockett, 2016; Culliton, 1958; Einstein, 2008; Iyer, Velu & Mumit, 2014; Kedzior, 2012; Kuran, 1994; McAlexander, Dufault, Martin & Schouten 2014; Shaw & Thomson, 2011; Stark, 1997; Wijngaards & Sent, 2012).

Once the religious market theory is accepted, it raises the attention to the importance of religious marketing as well, on which numerous different approaches may be found. According to Abela (2014) marketing of religion falls into the category of social marketing. Social marketing means those forms of marketing activities, where the focus is not on selling a product or service, but on spreading certain ideas, beliefs or worldviews among the public, which ‘may involve modifications in their attitudes, values, norms, and ideas’ (Brenkert, 2002, p. 16). This definition fits religion as well, which suggests that social marketing may be applied to market religions. Fine (2009) also included religions in his book of Marketing the Public Sector, and proposed an expanded marketing model of the 7P’s of social marketing, changing three of the original 7Ps: ‘people’, ‘process’ and ‘physical evidence’ are replaced by ‘producer’, ‘purchaser’ and ‘probing’. The social marketing approach focuses on the intangible part of religion by including the human side of both parties: producer and purchaser. This model raises the attention to the importance of the churches offering religious services and the nature of people potentially receiving it; however, probing or market research is less applicable to religions than the 7P of service marketing. Another weakness of the social marketing approach is the lack of the focus on physical evidences, which play important role in characterizing religions (e.g. design of churches and sacred items). Bence, 2014; Hashim & Hamzah 2014; Iyer et al, 2014; Kuran, 1994; and Shaw & Thomson, 2013 took a different approach and focused on the resemblance of religions to services, being intangible, not measurable, perishable and heterogeneous as well, therefore pressed the applicability of the 7P of service marketing for religions. On the other hand, many have found that though religions may resemble to the categories mentioned above, they are special in many senses, which requires unique marketing strategies, rarely studied so far (Bence, 2014; Hashim & Hamzah 2014; Iyer et al, 2014; Kuran, 1994; Shaw & Thomson, 2013).

3. MARKETING MODEL OF KRISHNA-CONSCIOUS COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

This research focused on Krishna Consciousness from marketing perspective, aiming to find out what kind of marketing strategy the community applies and how efficient it can be on the religious market. As the secondary data available concerning Krishna-conscious communities and their activities in Europe is limited, I initiated my work by combining different qualitative research methods in order to gain a general overview of the situation of the religion on the continent. The most comprehensive information was provided by the official website of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and ISKCON Desire Tree, the official multimedia social network of the religion, where all the communities, farming communities, temples and other institutions are registered. The content analysis of the two sites has shown that the Krishna-conscious institutions all over the world – and also in Europe – may be categorized into four main types, which are:

Category 1: Temples or centers,

Category 2: Rural or farming communities,

Category 3: Educational centers,

Category 4: Restaurants (ISKCON, 2019, ISKCON Desire Tree, 2019).

These labels provided the basis for my further analysis, where I analyzed the presence of the religion in the European countries by the number and variety of the Krishna-conscious institutions existing within their borders. In the next research phase I carried out a content analysis on the online presence of these four categories of institutions, including websites and any forms of social media applied. Following the content analysis, the molecular model – created by Shostack (1977) and applied by Srinivasan (2012) – was used to evaluate and summarize the most impor-

tant characteristics of each country. This research applies an altered molecular model (based on the original work of Shostack) in order to distinguish and visualize the marketing activities of communities devoted to Krishna conscious and to identify the subject of each marketing activity (Shostack, 1977; Srinivasan, 2012).

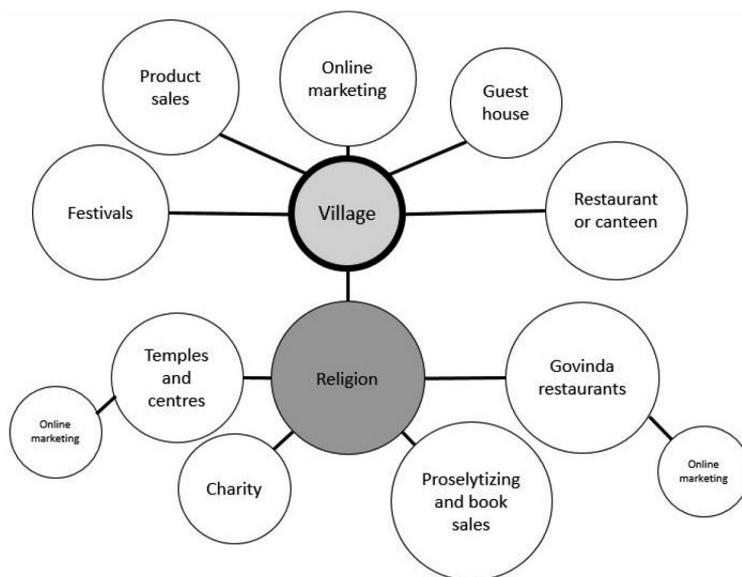


Figure 1. Molecular model of marketing Krishna-consciousness in Europe

Source: own edition, based on Shostack, 1977, and Srinivasan, 2012.

Figure 1 shows an aggregated molecular model of the marketing activities carried out by the Krishna-conscious communities in European, exhibiting the most commonly appearing features in the different countries. The molecular model shows that three out of the four main categories of institutions are present in most of the countries: temples and centres, restaurants and rural or farming communities are present in most cases, whereas educational institutions were more rarely present. However, the content analysis had shown that in those countries, where farming communities are present, the activities are more enhanced around these, than any other institutions of the religion.

The content analysis has further shown that while the communication of the temples and centres targets mostly the people already involved in the religion and the restaurants focus on those already following a vegan diet, the rural and farming communities call out to the wider public. Besides providing services for the members of the religious community, the rural communities seek to attract people unfamiliar with Krishna Consciousness as well, offering different cultural opportunities and free time activities for them. Another important feature of the online presence of the rural communities is that they approach the visitors from not religious, but a touristic perspective, putting more emphasis on the leisure activities and the experience. This has led to the next research phase of field observations in the rural communities. As Figure 1 shows, besides applying a set of marketing activities, the majority of the communities also operate a guest house and a restaurant or a canteen to facilitate overnight stays and serve the visitors. They also organize at least one huge and a couple of small festivals throughout the year, welcoming hundreds of visitors and providing a wide range of programs, enjoyable not only for the members of the religious community, and often introducing the religion itself. Some communities offer workshops

and different educational sessions too, which are open to anyone interested. In some countries, such as Hungary and Belgium the communities are so large that we can even speak about villages, hosting thousands of visitors a year. In these entities guided tours are also available, which provide visitors with a general overview on the religious beliefs, traditions and the lifestyle devotees follow. The field researches have shown that these villages and rural communities – especially the larger ones -, besides giving home to over one hundred devotees, also serve as a living exhibition of Krishna Consciousness and the Krishna-conscious lifestyle in Europe, where devotees can introduce their religion to the public.

Following the content analysis and the field researches, in-depth interviews were carried out with devotees responsible for the marketing and quest management of the communities examined. In the time period of June 2017 to June 2019 fifteen in-depth interviews took place in eight different European communities. Besides supporting the results of the content analysis and the field researches, the interviews have highlighted another important fact. Even though Krishna-conscious communities apply a wide range of marketing tools to gain more public knowledge, the traditional form of promoting the religion by devotees talking to people, proselytizing and selling books on the streets is still a common mean of promotion, in spite of the criticism this form of promotion usually generates according to the interviewees. The reason they gave for still applying this form of promotion is the tradition and the religious principles, which have always put an emphasis on proselytizing.

The results of the content analysis, the field researches and the interviews have outlined a two-phase marketing model, focused on the rural communities, where in the first phase visitors are attracted to a touristic destination offering a wide range of cultural activities; whereas the second phase is the introduction of the religion via interactive programs, which guests perceive as learning, rather than promotion.

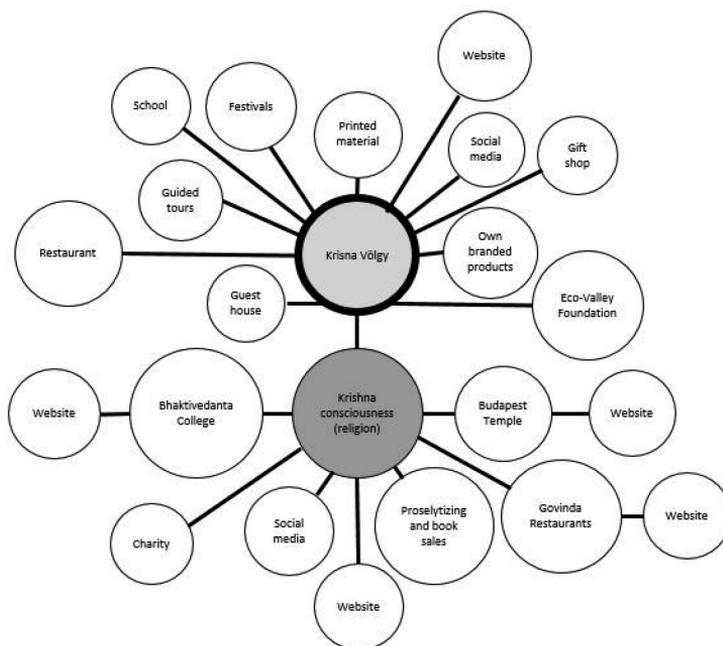


Figure 2. Molecular model of marketing Krishna-consciousness in Hungary
 Source: own edition, based on Shostack, 1977, and Srinivasan, 2012.

Figure 2 shows the molecular model of the marketing of Krishna Consciousness in Hungary drawn based on the content analysis and the field research results. We can see that in this case all the four types of institutions are present, however, as the two-phase model suggests, the activities are more dense in the case of Krishna Völgy, the local farming community, than any other institution. Krishna Völgy is one of the most active farming communities in Europe concerning tourism, offering a wide range of services and leisure activities and promoting them with the help of an elaborated and professional set of marketing tools, including touristic agencies, online and offline presence and social media. As it could be seen on the aggregated model as well, just like many others, the Hungarian community puts efforts into promoting the religion personally, through proselytizing and book sales too.

4. ANALYZING THE EFFICIENCY OF THE TWO-PHASE MARKETING MODEL

The second research phase aimed to identify, which are the most efficient marketing tools the Hungarian Krishna-conscious community applies. In this, quantitative research phase questionnaires were applied to find the means people get acquainted with Krishna Consciousness and the forms of communication they notice the most often.

The data collection happened in two phases, the first phase in July and August of 2019 and the second during the fall of 2019. Since the second phase has not been closed yet, this paper analyses the research results of the first two months of data collection, during which 280 valid responses have arrived. The inquiry happened both via online questionnaire in Google Forms and paper-and-pencil format to ensure the largest possible response rate, the only criteria for being applicable to the sample was to have heard about Krishna Consciousness before. In the first question the respondents had to say where they have heard of Krishna Consciousness for the first time. After testing the questionnaire, the opportunity of giving more than one answers had to be introduced, as many respondents emphasized being exposed to different sources of information almost at the same time, or not being able to recall the first moment of exposition clearly. Figure 3 shows the 295 responses of the 280 respondents, which make it clearly visible that the strongest mean of promoting the religion is the word of mouth. 48,41% of the responses (144 mentions) have heard of Krishna Consciousness from another person for the first time, 28,47% (84 mentions) from devotees and 20,33% (60 mentions) from friends or relatives.

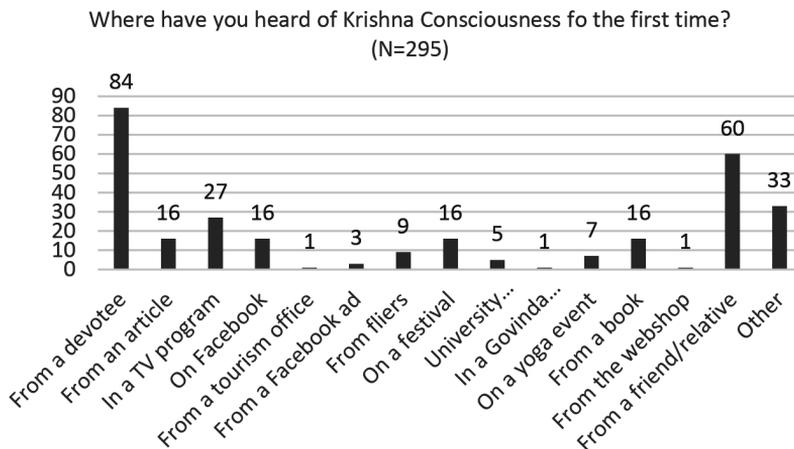


Figure 3. The most common forms of getting acquainted with Krishna Consciousness
Source: own edition

When talking about the communication tools other than word-of-mouth, television programs were mentioned most often, (9,15%, 27 mentions), followed by newspaper articles, Facebook posts, festivals and book releases, all achieving 5,42% (16 mentions). In spite of the huge focus on tourism by the community, touristic agencies and touristic advertisements on Facebook have gained the lowest percentage of mentions, while Instagram and other forms of social media achieved no mentions at all. However, 74,91% of the respondents (221 person) have already visited Krisna Völgy, which means that even though this was not the first form of getting to know the religion, most of the respondents have already participated in the touristic activities as well.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This is just the initial phase of the larger quantitative research, therefore most of the responses for the questionnaire are still to be analysed. The questions cover more detailed information about the exposure of the respondents to the different marketing tools and it also covers the topic of the general acceptance of religious communities engaging in marketing and commercial activities. The research seeks to identify, which marketing tools other than the word of mouth may be applied the most efficiently and with the least resistance of the audience.

6. CONCLUSION

The qualitative and quantitative analysis of the marketing activities of Krishna-conscious has shown that there is a two-phase model of promoting the religion, where the main focus is on the touristic aspect and attracting the visitors to a rural or farming community operating as a touristic destination. However, the quantitative research has shown, that the touristic advertisements are not the primary sources of information for getting acquainted with the religion. The largest proportion of the respondents have gained knowledge about Krishna Consciousness vis word of mouth, but this was in a significant percentage of the cases (74,91%) followed by a visit to Krisna Völgy, where they gained further knowledge of the religion. This suggests a third phase of the model created so far, where personal interactions on various locations raise the attention to the touristic destination, which then is an important part of the educational process. This is the most important result of the research so far, which requires further analysis.

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