

Ads from HELL: Complaining about the use of religion in advertising

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ABSTRACT

HELL Pizza's advertising is characterized by its provocative art, audacious copy and bold tactics that relishes in its hellish reputation. Rather than merely relying on attention-grabbing stunts, the brand employs strategies that tap into the deep-seated cultural norms of its audience. Often deemed controversial, HELL's advertising elicits strong public reactions, serving as a mirror reflecting the evolving cultural and moral sensitivities and the place of Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article critically examines the official complaints about the use of religious references in HELL's advertising to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Using thematic analysis, we analyse how 'offense' and references to Christianity are navigated by the public complainant, the ASA and the brand, in 79 rulings between 2005 and 2021. We conclude that while the brand consistently negotiates a fine line between edgy humour and potential offense, the ASA rulings suggest a societal trend leaning towards freedom of artistic expression, even when intertwined with religious undertones, particularly when a brand has a well-established identity.

Keywords

complaints, offensive, controversial, shockvertising, Christianity, Aotearoa New Zealand, brand, marketing

Introduction

This article examines the interplay between societal perceptions of Christianity and its appropriation by the advertising industry. Specifically, it analyses the HELL Pizza brand (HELL) which provides an iconic representation of religion in advertisements. HELL is the devilish brainchild of Callum Davis and was spawned in 1996. It now employs over 1200 people and has 77 outlet stores across the country, and international stores in United Kingdom, Australia and India amongst others. HELL 'uses the sustained metaphor that controversially links sin and damnation with fast food' (**Gould 2008**: 22) and embodies a hellish brand in its advertisements, branding, product naming, specials and promotions. For instance, their original pizzas are named after the seven deadly sins; the stores are called 'Hell Holes'; and their phone number is 0800 666 111 (a combination of the devil's number '666' and Aotearoa New Zealand's emergency number '111').

Interrogating the use of Christianity as a promotional tool to sell pizza provides a valuable lens into understanding the religious and cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. This is seen in Johnstone's research as he writes,

The fact that a pizza franchise can build a successful business branded on the imagery of hell suggests that there has been a change in people's belief in hell. [HELL] no doubt plays a part in shifting the public imagination of hell from a real place of eternal condemnation and fire to a place where you pick up pizza on a Friday night. [HELL] outlets visually represent the underworld and thus fictionalize hell. One could argue that such a belief makes it more tolerable for people to enter a ... place and order pizza compared to those for whom hell is still very much a reality and not a place to buy pizza from. Some, however, continue to boycott [HELL] on religious grounds. The imagery is not inviting.

(2016: 119)

This resonates with the motivation of our article, to delineate how HELL's advertising not only reflects the changing societal norms and values in Aotearoa New Zealand but also challenges and reshapes them, especially in terms of what is considered acceptable or taboo in mainstream advertising. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the broader discourse on the interrelationship between religion, advertising and societal change.

Religion, popular culture and advertising

The study of religion and popular culture brings together religious studies and cultural studies in what Clark describes as an 'seemingly inexhaustible and ever-evolving subject matter' (**2012: 2**). Hoover argues that the examination and understanding of when religion and media 'occupy the same conceptual and practical spaces' (**2003: 10**) offers learnings about both religion and media because, as Clark notes, religion and media 'find meaning in relation to the other' (**2012: 8**).

It is in the intersection of media and religion that this research is focused. While some believe that sacred topics should be kept separate from popular culture, especially when it is their own faith and when it is used by people outside of their faith (**Forbes and Mahan 2017**), others acknowledge the similarities between religion and media. Mahan, for example, points out that religion and media are both 'complex phenomenon [that] [unite] diverse practices and beliefs' (2012: 15). Religions are often treated as a brand, marketed and sold to a loyal audience, competing against other religions, and creating spectacles as moments of self-promotion (**Twitchell 2007; Einstein 2007**). As Gould suggests, 'religious belief, once a deeply personal and private matter, seems ... to have

been repackaged for the world of celebrity, image and performance' (**2008**: 14). This supports Forbes and Mahan's acknowledgement that religion plays an important role in popular culture and in the symbolic system through which 'people think about the world, explore models of identity, present and challenge ethical systems, and articulate deeply held values' (**2017**: 28). Therefore, to have a thorough understanding of religion in a society, we must look to its presence in popular culture.

Advertising and audiences

Advertisements are cultural texts (**Gould 2016**) that negotiate the freedom and limitations of creativity and rhetoric by drawing on, and appropriating, themes and concepts in society. This is complimented by religion which provides 'a system of symbols' (**Geertz 2002**: 63) to 'comprehend the world' (**Geertz 2002**: 71). The secular appropriation of religious symbols in popular culture operates and nurtures their cultural freight as icons loaded with meaning. In 1998, Maguire and Weatherby suggested that the seldom use of religion in American television commercials was due to: (1) a perception that religion is 'irrelevant to everyday life' (**Maguire and Weatherby 1998**: 175); (2) advertisers observing a 'separation between church and state' (**Maguire and Weatherby 1998**: 176); (3) a perception that religion cannot 'capture or hold audience attention' (**Maguire and Weatherby 1998**: 176); (4) a need for a product and its messaging to be linked which religion does not often afford and (5) a perception that religion is off bounds.

The use of religion, an inherently sacred and therefore taboo subject in advertising is largely contingent on the perceived reaction of its audience and the goals and motivations of a brand. The study of advertising perception suggests that there is a complex interplay of factors. The examination by **Kadic-Maglajlic et al. (2017)** of ethical judgements on interpreting controversial advertisements is complimented by **Wang (2018)**, amongst others, who acknowledge that an individual's religious identity plays a significant role in shaping responses to advertising. This is complicated by other identity factors, both individual and cultural (**Vernerová 2012**). For example, generational variances in attitudes towards controversial advertising indicate differing sensitivities across age groups (**Ting 2012**).

Whether an advertisement is perceived to be entertaining or amusing, offensive or controversial or anything in between, is also determined by the relationship between the audience and the brand and the nature of the content in a specific advertisement. **Beard (2008)** comments that there is a delicate balance between humour and offense in advertisements, noting how humour can sometimes lead to negative reactions. **Keller (1993)** and **Aaker (1996)** suggest that consumer familiarity

with a brand can lead to higher acceptance to bold advertising. **McStay's (2010)** assessment of how creativity impacts audience perceptions emphasizes the importance of relevance and subtlety of messaging.

The use of religion in advertisements has increased (**Maguire et al. 1999; Weatherby and Pugh 2008**) and the nature of religion within commercials has changed from 'relatively unnoticed', 'infrequent' and 'beguilingly innocent' in the 1950s and 1960s (**Mallia 2009: 172**), to 'more frequent, more daring and more controversial' (**Mallia 2009: 173**) by the early 2000s. Mallia suggests that this is because religion and shock value can 'serve as cues that transport a world of meaning, [be a] shortcut to persuasion, [and pack] a powerhouse of emotion' (**2009: 176**). This is increasingly important in commercially saturated societies. Additionally, **Nardella (2012)** notes that the representations of religious themes are now more creative, which **Carrette and King (2005)** suggests includes a repackaging of religion as spirituality. Such a position is supported by **Moore's (2005)** suggestion that eastern religions and spirituality appear to be more appealing to advertisers as it is more commonly used than Christianity to sell to contemporary audiences.

Depicting the afterlife in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand presents a unique case study for the examination of religion and media. Located in the South Pacific Ocean, Aotearoa New Zealand is made up of two main islands and is estimated to have a population of just over 5.2 million people (**Stats NZ: Tatauranga Aotearoa 2023**). It is a multi-cultural and multi-religious population that, according to 2018 census data (**NZ Census 2018**), is predominately made up of Europeans (70%), Asians (15.1%), Pasifika (8.1%), Middle Eastern/Latin American/African (1.5%) and Māori (16.5%).

Aotearoa New Zealand can be described as having a 'de facto' relationship with Christianity (**Gould 2016**). While never officially being a religious state with an established church, Christianity has played a significant role in the historical development of the country and the identity of its people dating back to the British missionaries working to bring Māori to Christianity during the late nineteenth century. There has, however, been a gradual decline in the number of those self-identifying as 'Christian' (from 60.6% in 2001 to 37.37% in 2018) and a gradual increase in people self-identifying as 'non-religious' (from 29.6% in 2001 to 48.59% in 2018) (**Stats NZ 2019**).

With roots in Christianity, the nation's religious landscape is becoming more diverse and pluralist while also accompanied by a growing non-religious population, and local news media describing Aotearoa New Zealand as 'one of the world's most secular

societies' (**Levine 2012: 3; Singh and Tan 2015**) with a 'godless capital' (**Tan and Singh 2015: n.pag.**). This provides an assumed basic level of understanding of stereotypical representations of Christianity by New Zealanders that advertisers can exploit. Such a perception is supported by Nardella's claim that when advertisers objectify religion, they acknowledge that religious ideas are no longer restricted to sacred spaces 'as part of "secret" knowledge that requires expert interpretation' (**2012: 238**), and by Johnstone who states that HELL's marketing 'assume[s] some religious knowledge or imagination, be that positive or negative' (**2016: 118–19**).

The incorporation of religion, let alone the afterlife, in advertisements in Aotearoa New Zealand is a lightly researched field. A content analysis of the incorporation of Christian references by non-religious companies in television commercials over a one-week period in 2008 captured 53 texts. Two of these texts reference the Christian afterlife concepts of heaven and hell as a 'destination', four texts depict angels and two texts portray the devil (**Gould 2008**). Of note, Australian beer brand Pure Blonde uses the slogan 'Heaven Sent' to amplify the 'sacredness' and purity of the product. While Green & Black's Organic Chocolate references both heaven and hell to 'imply that their product's "completely natural ingredients"' come from a heavenly source, and its "'indulgent taste experience" is sinful', thus being 'a fusion between the best of both worlds' (**Gould 2008: 39**).

Gould (2016) expanded the study to over 630 hours of programming from 28 days in 2012 and captured 307 texts that referenced Christianity (including texts for Christian companies). The study captured eighteen texts that referenced the afterlife as a destination: heaven (n = 4) or hell (n = 13). Eight promos for television programmes and movies included the word 'Hell' within the language of the programme as a casual expletive, fairly removed from its religious connotations when used. Three promotions (*Hell's Kitchen*, *HellBoy*, *Little Nicky*) depict Hell as a place and is central to the genesis media text, and therefore its reference is inevitable. Devils or demonic characters were portrayed in ten texts. Interestingly, the only television commercials that referenced Hell as a place or through the devil was HELL which had three texts from the campaign including 'Roulette', which appears at **Figure 2** in this study.

Despite Christian iconography being present in both studies (**Gould 2008, 2016**), the afterlife is seldom used, and when the afterlife is incorporated it is often part of a genesis text and favours heaven over hell. It is against this backdrop that HELL's unapologetic embodiment of the afterlife (and particularly hell over heaven) is particularly risky as there is not a precedent for the nature or extent to which the afterlife can or should be incorporated in advertisements in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Method

This study follows **Braun and Clarke's (2012)** six phase thematic analysis process through an inductive approach, as described by **Strauss and Corbin (1998)**, to derive emergent patterns, themes and categories from official complaints made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Thematic analysis navigates 'the complexities of meaning' (**Guest et al. 2012: 10**) to 'make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences' (**Braun and Clarke 2012: 57**).

We analysed 79 rulings¹ made by the ASA, a self-regulatory body 'dedicated to ensuring that advertising is truthful and not misleading or deceptive, and that it is socially responsible' (**Magill 2023: n.pag.**), following complaints about HELL's advertisements between 2005 and 2021. The data encapsulates the audiences' identification of what they perceive as offensive and a consolidated view of the deliberations and rationales from media, advertising agencies and other representatives. This enables a multidimensional analysis rooted in diversified viewpoints.

The data does have limitations. The data is confined to complaints lodged to the ASA and is restricted to advertising content. This means that offense that is not officially documented as an ASA complaint, and complaints against other forms of media content, such as merchandise or user-generated content, fall outside the scope of this research. The ASA complaints do, however, serve as a crucial foundation for exploring and understanding the complex interplay of religion, advertising and society in Aotearoa New Zealand because it serves as the official record of public complaints.

HELL Pizza: Official complaints and widespread offense

This study analyses the ASA's 79 rulings in response to complaint/s about HELL Pizza advertisements from 2005 to 2021. While each advertisement might have received any number of complaints, only one ruling is made for each individual advertisement. While 58 per cent of the rulings were deemed to *not* violate the existing standards or guidelines and were therefore ruled as having no grounds to proceed, 10.12 per cent of the rulings were upheld ($n = 6$) or upheld in part ($n = 2$). This shows that the advertising content mostly follows established guidelines, with only a few cases seen as 'crossing a line'.

The upheld complaints (see **Table 1** below) are all classified under ASA's codes that address social responsibility, decency and offensiveness (**ASA 2023**). Principle 1 states that '[a]dvertisements must be prepared and placed with a due sense of social responsibility to consumers and to society', Rule 1(c) states '[a]dvertisements must not

contain anything that is indecent, or exploitative, or degrading, or likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence, or give rise to hostility, contempt, abuse or ridicule'. This aligns with the broader pattern observed in the dataset, where 47 out of 79 of the complaints concerning HELL cited offensiveness.

Table 1:

Upheld complaints against HELL Pizza by the ASA (2005–21).

Year	Advertisement	Medium	Complaint.summary
2006	'Kids are evil'	Mailer	Negative attitude of children.
2006	'Lust condoms'	Mailer	Delivery of unsolicited condoms.
2007	'George Bush'	Billboard	Use of 'bastard' in public
2009	'Our brownie won't eat your dog'	Billboard	Racial slur 'brownies'.
2009	'Mafia - Blood'	TVC	A bloody death scene
2015	'Certificate of Mutha f*cking awesomeness'	Flyer	Implies 'mother fucking'.
2015	'Candyman'	TVC	A man's head exploding.
2017	'Sweet F'all'	Radio	Implies 'sweet fuck all'.

Several rules from the ASA guidelines emerged as recurrently cited: The Code of Ethics Principle 4, which stresses the importance of social responsibility in advertising, was referenced in 57 deliberations. Within this principle, Rule 5 about Offensiveness dominated (n = 47), followed by Rule 4 on Decency (n = 13), Rule 2 on Truthful Presentation (n = 7) and Rule 6 on Fear (n = 4). The use of humour and satire, as emphasized by Principle 6 from the Code for People in Advertising, was a notable point in fifteen deliberations. These references illustrate that while the ASA has a spectrum of guidelines, the public's concerns consistently revolve around offensiveness, decency, truthfulness and the limits of humour and satire. For brands which rely on dark humour and provocative content, the threshold between acceptability and offensiveness is delicate but crucial. While humour, satire and creative liberties are acknowledged, they are also bounded by societal expectations of decency, truthfulness and broader social responsibility.

The data points to three predominant areas of offense within the advertisements: (1) *art*, which encompasses the visual components present in advertisements – ranging from objects incorporated or the aesthetic techniques employed, to the scenes portrayed; (2) *copy*, which pertains to the linguistic content – whether written or spoken; (3) *tactics* which refers to the medium-specific factors – such as the delivery method, placement and scheduling of an advertisement.

The reaction to Christian art in HELL's advertisements

Thirteen advertisements for HELL were flagged for the inclusion of artwork that references Christianity, specifically, religious people (n = 8), symbols (n = 4) and non-Christian (n = 2), as summarized in **Table 2** below.

Table 2:

'Not-Upheld' complaints against 'Christian' art in HELL's advertisements (2005–21).

Theme	Art	Advertisement	Year
People	Devil child with horns	'Kids are evil' mailer	2006
	Devil horn and fangs drawn over Queen Elizabeth II	'Defaced Queen' mailer	2006
	Devil and fire	HELL website	2006
	Leader of the Anglican Church (The Queen) defaced with devil features	'Defaced Queen' mailer	2006
	Devil's face	HELL sign	2009
	Depiction of a half angel half demon	'Reusable Bags' TVC	2010
	Jesus (painting of <i>The Sacred Heart</i>)	'Meet your new neighbours from HELL'	2009
	Jesus	'Meet the family from HELL' Mailer	2010

Theme	Art	Advertisement	Year
	Angel	‘Welcome to HELL Bethlehem’ Flyer	2010
Symbols	Christian cross	Job vacancy ad	2005
	Pentagram	‘Hell crossed bun’ billboard	2011
	Star of David	‘Hell crossed bun’ billboard	2011
	Inverted cross	‘Pizza Roulette’ TVC	2012
Other religious symbols (non-Christian)	A simulated séance scene	Séance TVC	2010
	Grim reaper	‘Welcome to Hell Bethlehem’ Flyer	2010

According to the ASA data, portrayals of religious ‘people’ were a common cause for offence. Depictions of the devil, demons and Satan were the most sighted. A cartoon of a ‘child-like’ devil character elicited a complainant who ‘objected to the caricature’ (Complaint 06/355). Images of demons were described as ‘frightening’ (Complaint 10/038) – the ‘hideous devil’s face with the truly evil grin and eyes’ (Complaint 09/726). The style of visual portrayal was observed to influence the level of reaction. While cartoonish caricatures of the devil were simply ‘objected to’ (Complaint 06/355), darker, graphic depictions were seen as ‘frightening’ (Complaint 10/038) or ‘horrific’ (Complaint 10/202). Interestingly, although the advertisement in **Figure 1** (below) in which the devil is played by a middle-aged European male in a smart dark suit did receive a complaint, the objection pertained to the ‘incidental and fleeting’ inverted cross – there was no objections to the ‘devil’ (Complaint 12/183). This supports **McStay’s (2010)** finding that creativity and subtle messaging plays an important role in influencing audience reactions, and **Moraru’s (2013)** study on Romanian Christmas advertisements which highlights how cultural synthesis and evolving audience perceptions of symbolic figures can impact interpretations and reactions in advertising.

Figure 1: Screenshots from the ‘Pizza Roulette’ television advertisement by HELL, aired in 2012. Left: Inverted cross depiction. Right: Devil character portrayal. Courtesy of HELL.



Conversely, audiences frequently identified the use of Jesus' image as offensive. One complainant said, 'the usage of a well-known picture of Jesus Christ in this form, is totally wrong and an affront to myself and other Christians, for whom Jesus is both Saviour and Lord' (Complaint 10/260). An image of Queen Elizabeth II with devil horns and fangs drawn on it was found offensive because 'it defaces the leader of the Anglican Church with a devil caricature' (Complaint 06/057).

Like the complaints about the depiction of Jesus and Queen Elizabeth II, there were some complaints about Christian symbols, describing them inclusion of Christian 'symbols' as 'disrespectful', 'insulting' and 'blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222). Complainants noted that their concern was because they identified as Christian or was on behalf of religious audiences. One individual explains, 'to a Christian the cross is an essential part of our Christianity and I take *strong* objection to it being used in context with Hell and the nature of the advertisement' (Complaint 05/425, original emphasis). Another said, '[t]he picture of "The Sacred Heart" was offensive to many Catholics and Christians and was not necessary in the advertisement' (Complaint 09/747). These comments question the use of a religious symbols, suggesting their inclusion lacks a clear link to pizza and may be seen as a personal attack on Christians. This reinforces **Weinberger and Gulas (1992)** finding that the perceived relevance of controversial elements in advertisements to the product or service being advertised significantly influences the perception of the advertisements.

The incorporation of 'other religious symbols' was considered 'blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222), 'frightening' (Complaint 10/038) and 'offensive' (Complaint 12/379). In response to the billboard in **Figure 2** below, one individual said a pentagram was 'extremely offensive', another said the 'use of the Satanic symbols as well as the wording is blasphemous' (Complaint 11/222). In response to the television commercial in **Figure 1** above, an inverted cross for a 'Pizza Roulette' promotion was believed to have 'crossed a line in terms of becoming religiously offensive' (Complaint 12/183). One complaint claimed that a simulated séance scene 'could case children to have nightmares' (Complaint 10/655). These instances highlight the complex space advertisers must navigate. Subtle religious symbols and potentially frightening themes of the afterlife can evoke strong reactions from viewers, and the breadth of sensitivity and range of interpretations within the audience must be carefully managed. This

compliments **Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017)** who suggest that as an individual's religious commitment heightens their perception of controversy in advertisements intensifies.

Figure 2: 'Hell Cross Bun' billboard advertisement by HELL, displayed in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2011. Courtesy of HELL.



Despite many complaints raised regarding religious art, none were upheld on this basis, with the ASA frequently citing HELL's reputation as a factor. When responding to a complaint referring to the use of an inverted cross (see **Figure 1**), the ASA said that 'the laid-back humour in the advertisements was part of the "Hell Pizza" branding' (Complaint 05/425). This indicates that HELL's established identity often provides a cushion against rulings of wrongdoing. In other words, because HELL has a well-known reputation it sets an expectation with its audience to produce controversial advertisements using dark humour. This aligns with concepts developed by **Keller (1993)** and **Aaker (1996)** that a brand's established reputation not only sets audience expectations but also fosters societal acceptance of its provocative advertising approach. Social acceptance is perhaps summed up in this complaint (10/260): 'While I am not happy with the devilish characters shown on the form, they are probably relative to the unpleasant business name "[HELL]"'. Overall, while some individuals might find the use of religious art in advertising objectionable, it is not inevitable that it will breach the collective threshold of what is deemed 'widespread offence' in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The reaction to Christian references in the copy of HELL's advertisements

HELL's Christian-themed copy in its advertising has been a source of public contention, as detailed in **Table 3**. When analysing the themes within the complaints, a pattern of

offense becomes apparent, particularly within the representations of ‘Destination’, ‘People’, ‘Symbols’ and ‘Other’.

Table 3:

‘Not-Upheld’ complaints against ‘Christian’ copy in HELL’s advertisements (2005–21).

Theme	Copy	Advertisements	Year
Destination	‘Go to Hell’.	Go to HELL radio	2012
	‘Hell. Too good for some evil bastards’.	George Bush billboard	2013
People	‘Feed your little devils’.	Feed your little devils mailer	2006
	‘For a limited time. A bit like Jesus’.	‘Hell crossed buns’ billboard	2011
Symbols	‘666’ used in HELL’s phone number (0800 666 111).	Defaced Queen mailer	2006
Other	‘Deliverance’.	HELL’s website	2006
	‘Putting the vice in service’.	HELL’s website	2006
	‘Can you be saved?’.	HELL’s website	2006
	‘How do you know he’s even listening? At least we deliver’ questions beliefs.	The guy from HELL billboard	2006

Under the ‘Destination’ theme, the slogan ‘Go to Hell’ was met with public disapproval, as it was seen to conflict with Christian values, indicative of a broader societal unease with the interplay of religious terminology and commercial branding (Complaint 12/179).

The portrayal of religious ‘People’ in advertising copy has also drawn criticism. This includes the controversial use of the phrase ‘For a limited time. A bit like Jesus’, in **Figure 2** above, which elicited objections for its perceived irreverence towards the sanctity of Jesus’ resurrection, a cornerstone of Christian faith (Complaint 11/222). Similarly, the phrasing ‘Feed your little devils’ was challenged for its potential to offend,

reflecting a societal sensitivity to the depiction of children in the context of religious rhetoric (Complaint 06/396).

In the realm of 'Symbols', the inclusion of '666' in the company's contact number sparked disapproval for its association with negative biblical connotations, highlighting the complex interplay between numerology and religious sentiment (Complaint 06/057).

The category of 'Other' encompasses a range of complaints, such as reactions to the statements 'Deliverance', 'Can you be saved?' and 'Putting the vice in service' on HELL's website, which were considered to trivialize religious teachings and were opposed for undermining family values (Complaint 06/396). Moreover, the billboard statement 'How do you know He is listening? At least I deliver – The Guy from Hell' was noted for its provocative insinuation regarding the efficacy of prayer, a subject deeply woven into the fabric of religious practice (Complaint 06/050).

This analysis reinforces the significance of context when interpreting the appropriateness of religious references in advertising copy. The absence of religious references in upheld complaints suggests that the ASA affords a measure of leniency towards religious references, focusing instead on the intent and broader context of the advertising copy.

HELL's established identity, which incorporates religious references, is acknowledged by the ASA and appears to inform societal expectations regarding the brand's thematic direction. This recognition, articulated by the ASA, implies an expectation that HELL's advertisements would naturally weave religious puns and references into their narrative (Complaint 06/050). This societal concession to HELL's branding strategy is emblematic of a broader cultural tolerance for satirical religious statements within Aotearoa New Zealand, as evidenced by the adjudication of complaints against the 'For a limited time. A bit like Jesus' billboard, which was ultimately deemed to align within the boundaries of acceptable humour and satire in a tolerant society (Complaint 11/222).

The use of religious motifs and language by HELL, while provocative and at times contentious, has not been judged by the ASA to exceed the bounds of 'widespread offence'. This reflects a level of societal tolerance in Aotearoa New Zealand towards religious-themed humorous or satirical content, particularly when presented as part of a well-established brand narrative.

Media tactics and religious beliefs

The use of media tactics in HELL's advertising, which has included concerns about scheduling, placement and delivery methods, has been deliberated in 29 instances.

These tactics have been scrutinized for their potential inappropriateness, with a particular focus on the exposure to children. Within these deliberations, religious beliefs have prompted concerns on nine occasions, as detailed in **Table 4** below.

Table 4:

‘Not-Upheld’ complaints against media tactics involving Christianity in HELL’s advertisement (2005–21).

Theme	Tactic	Advertisement	Year
Scheduling	A simulated séance scene outside an AO timeslot.	‘Séance’ TVC	2010
	‘Hell crossed buns’ billboard offensive to Christian audiences leading up to Easter.	‘For a limited time. A bit like Jesus’ cinema advertisement.	2011
	Children exposed to inverted cross.	Thin base pizza TVC	2012
	Incentivising phrase ‘go to hell’ while children listening.	‘Go to HELL’ radio	2012
	Offensive to Christians leading up to Easter.	‘Rabbit’ billboard	2014
Placement	Children exposed to disturbing devil image.	HELL signage	2009
	A cartoon woman with devil horns and tail next to a primary school.	Unholy Doughnuts roadside sign	2020
Delivery method	‘Feed your little devils’ phrase used could be psychologically hurtful to children exposed.	‘Feed your little devils’ mailer	2006
	Possible exposure of children to free contraception.	LUST Condom mailer	2006

‘Scheduling’ complaints have centred on the timing of advertisements in relation to religious events and audiences. The placement of a billboard advertising a rabbit pizza covered in rabbit pelts during Easter (see **Figure 3** below) was condemned for being visible to young people around a significant religious holiday, described as ‘highly

disrespectful to vegan and religious groups' (Complaint 14/207). Additionally, the timing of the 'Hell Crossed buns' billboard (see **Figure 2**) leading up to Easter was labelled 'deliberately inflammatory and akin to blasphemy' (Complaint 11/222). In these instances, the ASA referred to the advertiser's history of socially provocative and confrontational advertisements, indicating a societal tolerance for a certain level of deliberate provocation in advertising scheduling.

Figure 3: 'Rabbit' billboard by HELL, adorned with rabbit pelts, displayed in 2014 leading into Easter in Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of HELL.



'Placement' issues have arisen from the location of advertisements and their visibility to specific groups. For example, the 'Rabbit' billboard by HELL was criticized for its placement 'in plain sight of young people', sparking concerns from vegan and religious groups (Complaint 14/207). Another contentious placement involved the Unholy Doughnuts roadside sign depicting a cartoon woman with horns and a devil's tail, located 'right next to a primary school' and considered inappropriate due to its proximity to young children (Complaint 20/186).

'Delivery Method' complaints have related to how certain advertising mediums and their delivery might inadvertently expose audiences, especially children, to offensive content. For instance, a mailer incentivizing the phrase 'go to Hell' was seen as sending an improper message to youth culture (Complaint 06/057). This aligns with the argument that offensive content in more intrusive media forms, such as direct mail, is more likely to offend (**Beard 2008**).

HELL's promotional tactic of mailing condoms to promote their 'Meat lovers' pizza was met with public outcry, primarily from those concerned with religious and family values. This delivery method was criticized for its potential to clash with Christian teachings on sexuality, which caution against sexual indulgence (**Francoeur 2001**). Complainants labelled the campaign as 'An Inappropriate Use of the Mail System', fearing it could lead to children engaging with the adult-themed products (Complaint 06/417). HELL's advertising agency argued that the objections were driven by a 'motivated and vocal minority', challenging what they perceived as a tolerant secular society's views (Complaint 06/417). However, the ASA recognized the campaign could elicit 'serious and widespread offence' among communities with such religious convictions (Complaint 06/417), acknowledging the complex interplay between advertising freedom and religious sensitivities in the community.

Conclusion

HELL Pizza can be used as a barometer of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural and moral sensitivities, specifically, the acceptance of provocative advertising which includes themes of the afterlife and Christianity. The 'art' utilized in HELL advertisements often teeters on the edges of good taste. But, while, for example, the depiction of religious people in a potentially derogatory manner elicited complaints, the ASA's rulings suggest a more liberal stance than the general populace, suggesting a society that, at its core, leans towards freedom of artistic expression even when it intersects with religious imagery. This study also reveals a discernible pattern of boundary-pushing in the use of religious copy in HELL's advertisements. Employing dark humour and sometimes treading on the delicate grounds of religious sensibilities, the 'copy' consistently straddled the line between audacious and offensive, a balancing act that manifested through blasphemous undertones and controversial phrases. Lastly, the 'tactics' employed by HELL reveal a trend of inappropriate content delivery, particularly concerning the young audience. The ASA's upheld rulings consistently emphasized the protection of vulnerable groups, including children, from exposure to materials deemed inappropriate. Thus, while society might be more forgiving in terms of the themes explored in 'copy' and 'art', there exists a firm stance against tactics that put inappropriate content within easy reach of young viewers.

When we compare all the complaints to those upheld rulings by the ASA, the data supports Gould's (**2008, 2016**) observation that the lines between the sacred and the secular in mainstream promotional material is blurring. Specifically, the data highlights a leniency towards controversial 'art' and 'copy' from a religious angle, hinting at a society more tolerant of religious satire than might be assumed based on the number of

complaints received. It is imperative to note the crucial role HELL's established brand plays here. A brand synonymous with dark, edgy humour, seems to afford it a greater room to manoeuvre within the realms of provocative art. This supports **Keller's (1993)** and **Aaker's (1996)** assertions that audiences may be more accepting of bold advertising if they are familiar with the brand.

For advertisers, the insights garnered from HELL's advertising journey are invaluable. It showcases a society that, while open to dark humour and controversial art and copy, demands responsibility in the delivery tactics, emphasizing the protection of young people. The takeaways are clear: while 'copy' and 'art' may exist in the grey area of moral and ethical boundaries, 'tactics' must adhere to a stricter code, respecting the vulnerability of specific demographics. Religious imagery, given its deeply personal and emotional nature, needs to be navigated with care. And while HELL benefits from its established reputation allowing for more provocative advertising, newer or lesser-known brands may struggle to secure audience acceptance and potentially lead to stricter scrutiny by the ASA board. It is also crucial for advertisers to remember that while the general public's moral and cultural compass can change over time, regulatory bodies like the ASA are often mindful that they reflect and consider the 'widespread level of offense'. So, while the ASA fosters creative freedom for advertisers, they must also advocate for responsible advertising for the broader community.

HELL's advertising serves as a compelling case study on the intersection of branding, societal sentiment and regulatory oversight. It is a delicate negotiation between pushing boundaries and understanding where those boundaries lie, all the while remembering that at the core of every advertisement is an individual viewer with their own set of beliefs and values.

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