

BRAND UP! – MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Over the last decades, various religious lifestyle festivals have become increasingly popular worldwide, through which indicators of religious pluralism have become more visible, and specific features of the religious market can be explored. These festivals offer their participants a primarily spiritual community-based, event-centred collective identity, and their events seek to provide messages and transformative experiences that serve to keep the visitor community together for the rest of the year (until the next festival). As part of the brand building, we can find merchandise, social marketing platforms and activities, and various spiritual trends to follow. For the last 10 years, our research team (University of Szeged, Department for Scientific Study of Religion) has been conducting quantitative and qualitative research at the Everness Festival in Hungary. This project has covered the religious background and habits of participants, their festival experiences and spiritual experiences, interviews with organisers, and content analysis of the festival's programme and communication channels. The following paper presents and analyzes the changes in these religious trends, the communication strategies and the steps in the brand building process.

Keywords

festival religion, marketing strategies, new spirituality, religious market

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Introduction

The following study summarizes the results of our research conducted since 2015 at the Everness lifestyle festival in Hungary, primarily from the perspective of the economics of religion and, more specifically, the interpretation of marketing strategies. We began this research at the Department for Scientific Study of Religion at the University of Szeged and have continued it ever since. Although most of the results of the past 10 years are empirical (and have already been published), this is not the main focus of the present study. After a brief theoretical contextualization, the festival is highlighted based on our participant observations and our conversations with the organizers, while also emphasizing the insights of our previous studies, especially in the presentation of the event's program, content, and trends. This is followed by a presentation of the related communication strategies, which cannot yet be accurately documented empirically, given that manual coding on social media platforms is still extremely difficult. Therefore, the study focuses more on trends and aligns them with statements made in a long interview (2023) with one of the event's main organizers regarding brand building.

The economic approaches of religion

Due to the work of Glock and Stark (1965) or Berger and Luckmann (1975), it is now almost a cliché in the study of religion (and in the social sciences in general) to say that there have been substantial changes in the religiosity of individuals in the 20th century. These changes have been the subject of a lively discourse in recent decades on aspects of modernity, individualisation and pluralism, with a multitude of scholars discussing the investigable domains of religion (e.g. Smart 1968, Whaling 1986, Ter-Haar – Busuttill 2004), or private religiosity, secularization and other social aspects.

In Iannaccone's (1992) claim, religion has been straightforwardly presented as an industry that is both easy to enter, competitive, and free of intellectual property rights. The recognition of all this has also given rise to a sociological and economic concept of the religious market, which speaks of a (competitive) cultural market of religious institutions that retain and attract adherents (Iannaccone – Finke – Stark 1997), in which religious diversity is presented as a demand on the individual side and as a supply on the institutional side.

The economics of religion and its critical reception have been outlined in more detail in our previous work (Szilárdi – Paizs – Feleky 2023), here I am going to summarize the main theses of this perspective. According to this theory, the religious dimension can be divided into the consumer (believers) and the producer (religious organisations) side, and the principle of profit maximisation can be assumed on both sides. That is, on the one hand, consumers weigh the potential costs and benefits and make decisions that maximize their advantages. On the

other hand, producers strive to maximize, for example, the number of members, their resources, or even government support.

The religious market is ultimately the cultural market offered and maintained by religious organisations in order to retain and attract adherents/potential adherents (Finke – Stark 2000). Like all markets, the religious market can be broken down into different segments, consisting of actual and potential 'religious buyers' with specific needs, wants, tastes and preferences.

Looking at the demand side, we are faced with the choice of optimal consumption of religious goods. However, since religious demand is considered remarkably stable over time by followers of the economic approach, changes in religiosity are largely a result of supply-side transformations. Eventually, it is really the sellers who create demand for their products and services (Iannaccone – Finke – Stark 1997, Finke – Stark 2000) or, as Say's dogma argues, it is supply conditions that determine demand (Hauck 2013)

Therefore, to examine the extent and causes of religiosity, it is not enough to start from individual preferences, i.e., one must pay attention not only to what makes people receptive to religion but also to the extent to which religious providers attract them and to the strength and nature of religious marketing.

The theory is similar with regard to exits: it is not why people leave a particular church, but why that church leaves its members (Finke – Stark 2000).

Although these theoretical considerations of religious market organisation have not necessarily been accepted in their entirety by the critical reception¹, certain aspects of the theory are still useful, especially when looking at the religious service providers. In this case, one of the objectives of the actors is to increase the number of adherents (i.e. users) and to reach the largest possible population, and the possibilities for doing so are now very varied.

Bricolage-religiousness and pluralism as a possible segment of the religious market

The following study will interpret the concept and characteristics of the religious market and the pluralism associated with it in the context of religious subjectivisation. In this case, the needs and wants of the individual come to the fore, and the attitude towards religious doctrines is based on the state of satisfaction of this individual need. This in itself has the consequence that in response to this system of expectations, "religious communities move towards service strategies" (Máté-Tóth 2012).

This is particularly true for what contemporary religious studies calls the new spirituality, which consists of a syncretic system of loosely interconnected religious teachings, yet constitutes a distinct group within religious society. Concepts of contemporary religiosity such as "esotericism", "new spirituality", "New Age" or "alternative" or "patchwork religiosity" are widespread in the vernacular, vague, have a malleable relationship with each other, and are often created by the current linguistic fashion of the moment, yet their surface meaning is obvious to the everyday speaker (Szilárdi – Sárközy 2017).

Religious subjectivisation covers the kind of individual pathfinding that courageously chooses from the religious marketplace, even from several systems of ideas according to one's own taste; one's worldview and beliefs are constantly changing and evolving accordingly - sometimes called bricolage or DIY religiosity (Saroglou 2006). Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, this extreme heterogeneity, the new spiritual interconnectedness of individual religiosity

¹ Most arguments behind this tend to be that such market approaches cannot ultimately be justified outside the US (e.g. Pollack – Rosta 2017).

nevertheless provides a sense of community experience, which the literature calls a holistic or cultic milieu (Campbell 1972), or even a shared lingua franca (Besecke 2001, Aupers – Houtman 2006).²

In the case of the new spirituality and individual religiosity, the presence of religious marketplaces can cover an extremely wide arc: from the (physical) publishing platform to the Internet sites to spiritual festivals/camps, the spiritual scene has a vast horizon of both supply and demand. In recent decades, internet resources have clearly become the primary vehicle for this market supply. Beyond that, the market nature of religion has been most physically evident in recent years in the form of various themed camps and retreats.

Lifestyle and religious festivals, which are not organised on the basis of a single tradition, are a separate category, but are characterised by the diversity of their programme. The number of multi-day events with religious content has increased worldwide. These events give visitors a choice, and their choices are always an experience. Examples of such festivals include Space of Love in Sweden, Agni Spirit in Spain, Osho in Portugal, Baltic Tantra in Latvia, Wald Healing in Germany, Burning Man in the US, Envision in Costa Rica and the multi-location Wanderlust festival.

The Everness Festival

In Hungary, this new kind of religious offering was first organised on a mass scale in 2014, when the first Everness spiritual-themed awareness and lifestyle festival was held on the shores of Lake Balaton. The event has grown to become the largest spiritual festival in Hungary and aims to function as an integrative space where holiday, work, inner development and spirituality can be experienced as a holistic experience, in which there is no need to separate the different parts of the self, where participants can be themselves and at the same time become part of a communal spiritual process that is authentic on the one hand, and on the other hand gives spiritual and intellectual sophistication and depth (Szilárdi – Heidl 2017).

The cavalcade of speakers, spiritual guides, musicians and groups on the festival programme is a wide range of topics, mostly related to mindfulness, physical, mental and spiritual health, with dance, meditation, massage and yoga sessions, as well as lectures on religion, esotericism, sexuality and health.

In the past 10 years, our research group has conducted a questionnaire survey to gain a deeper insight into the participants' lifestyles, attendance of lectures and religious issues, and the answers we received led us to conclude that one of the specific characteristics of the participants' religious self-assessment is that they prefer to use the words spirituality, esotericism and mysticism, most likely counterpointing the religious religiousness associated with the institution.

In addition to the questionnaire research, we simultaneously applied an external, descriptive perspective. We had conversations with the visitors of the event, participated in different programmes, recorded the experiences according to specific aspects of participant observation, and later conducted interviews. The detailed results of these were summarised in 2 papers (Szilárdi – Heidl 2017, Heidl – Szilárdi 2022).

² I will refrain from a detailed explanation of the concept of spirituality in religious studies here, the most important statements of the international literature on the interpretation and definition of the concept were summarized in an earlier study (Heidl – Szilárdi 2022).

The observational experience of the last few years has led to the inclusion of two other perspectives in the further development of the study: the interpretation of the changes in the religious offer behind the event as a market and marketing strategy, and the examination of the chosen tools of communication.

The supply structure

From the point of view of the religious market, three layers are distinguished in the event's offer:

(1) the festival organisers' invited guests who appear as main speakers on the main stage and in the thematic venues of the event. These thematic stages can be diverse, for example, they can function as platforms for sexuality and relationships, self-awareness or spiritual life coaching in the festival area. Applications for the thematic stages will be accepted by the organisers.

(2) Other smaller venues in the festival area will be separate; these may be rented out by various religious and other service providers, who will build up their own programme offerings, image, flyers and other advertising methods to place themselves on the mental map of festival-goers. These programmes are very diverse, there are holistic psychological trainings, shamanic drumcircles, spiritual self-awareness rituals, or ecstatic dance courses. Everness management selects the providers who apply to the festival.

(3) Separate from this there is a marketplace for the various service providers, which is indeed a kind of flea market. This marketplace offers a variety of services (e.g. reiki treatments, crystal healing, massages, spiritual journeys, etc.) or objects (semi-precious stones, sculptures, clothing, etc.). The marketplace is complemented by food and drink providers with an eye to eco-sustainability; increasingly, there is a vegetarian and vegan offer, a range of products made with zero waste technology/approach, and an assortment of organic fruit and vegetables.

The supply side thus shows a multi-level structure: the festival organisers offer the biggest performers, while the other venues are offered for rent to other players in the religious market. Visitors can choose from a range of programmes: during the day they can try treatments and services, attend lectures and occasional ceremonies, or listen to music concerts.

A daily or weekly pass is required for entry into the festival area and provides access to lectures, workshops, and a variety of free activities. On the other hand, organisations / providers who pay a rental fee for the area offer paid programmes and use a variety of advertising platforms, even if their programmes are free. The most dominant of these is the purchased advertising option in the programme brochure or attached to it as an insert, the other most common is the distribution of coupons or business cards for the venue. In recent years, the festival has continued to build the Everness experience brand by organizing new types of mid-year events. First, there is an early autumn, smaller 3-day event called Everness Indian Summer, which is intended for a more exclusive audience. For a few years now, there has also been an Everness New Year's Eve event. From January 2024, they are offering monthly sauna sessions with yoga and meditation called Everness Chill at a wellness spa in Budapest.

Communication and marketing: the creation and evolution of the Everness brand

For a deeper exploration of the supply side and the Everness brand, we conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview (2023) with a member of the management team who has been involved in a variety of tasks over the years (customer service, marketing, admission, billing, etc.), giving her a layered view of the diversity of the event series from preparation to event

completion. In the discussion, we touched on the vision of the festival, the fading of the esoteric and the strengthening of the spiritual, the target audience, the programme of events and the selection process.

As regards the vision, in defining the purpose of the festival, there is a need for distinction between the agents of the festival as an enterprise and the festival as content. On the one hand, the business objective is, of course, financial profitability, since the event is an economic enterprise, i.e. the staff are full-time organisers throughout the year (sales, marketing, programme organisation, customer service, etc.). In the case of the content, the aim of the festival is changed by the private aims of the staff, and in addition to the motto's focus on the triad of "awareness, recharging, community", the festival's vision aims to cover the widest possible spectrum of different paths and methods leading to awareness and self-development.

Another aim of the festival is to create an educational space, so in recent years environmental awareness has become increasingly prominent, and in communication to participants, selective waste collection, the use (and washing up) of reusable cups, plates and cutlery are expected.

Ultimately, the vision of the festival as a whole is for a better and more liveable world in which *"people take responsibility for their actions, have relevant self-awareness and recognise that there is another way beyond continuous consumption"* and the festival *"provides the space for this change"*.

When the event was launched in 2013, one of the keywords was "esoteric". Three years later, this term disappeared from the advertisements and was replaced by "spiritual". Our interviewee confirmed our preliminary assumptions that this was to reach a wider audience, and added that many years of work had gone into shifting the focus of the festival away from the 'esoteric' category and towards self-improvement. The term "esoteric" could initially have meant a platform to bring together all experiences beyond the physical world, but later it became a pejorative connotation (*"nowadays it tends to mean discredited content"*). The keyword "spiritual" was eventually retained as the key word for the religious theme of the event, which (also) encompasses a more open, inclusive and positive web of meanings for management.

According to our interviewee, the specific religious dimensions of the festival currently account for 40% of the programme offer (e.g. including identifiable religious content such as Buddhist or Hindu tendencies within yoga, etc.). This, although showing a downward trend compared to previous years, still permeates the whole festival experience of the 'invisible world'. The remaining 60% moves along the content horizon of psychology, self-development, consciousness.

As for the target group, the organisers expected and expect people *"who want to change their lives"* and in recent years it has become increasingly clear that the festival is for *"people who are tired of the multi, people who are starting over in the countryside, people who are fed up with the treadmill and feel there is something more than working Monday to Friday and paying their bills"*. Today, the ideal visitor is *"30-50 years old, urban or rural newcomer, with a higher education, living in good financial conditions, demanding of themselves and their environment, i.e. the stable middle class and upwards. They are people who care about sustainability and strive for indoor-outdoor harmony."*

In the first few years of our research, we mapped out three broad clusters based on participants' interests: (1) individual life path goals of inner peace and spiritual and mental development and attendance of related lectures and exercises, (2) programs that aim to improve health, healing/self-healing, and maintaining health, and (3) specific content from some religious or spiritual teachings.

The individual programme elements were quite heterogeneous, but all three thematic clusters were permeated by a variety of meditation techniques and a holistic view of the human psychic and physiological state as an inseparable whole. The approach that purification of thoughts is associated with emotional calm and physical health was behind almost all elements of the programme.

The thematic year-to-year evolution of the programmes was recorded in detail in our previously mentioned study (Szilárdi, Paizs and Feleky, 2023), and our main question was the direction of change the festival underwent in terms of the composition of the offerings.

Altogether, we noticed that despite the separation of the different venues and the heterogeneity of the content, the whole of the event's programmes showed a higher degree of homogeneity over time, and the spirit of the slogan "*a celebration of awareness*" really characterises the whole of the offer. In fact, there is no aspect of the programme that is not in some way imbued with a physical/spiritual/spiritual awareness, whether it is nutrition, sexuality, career development or child-rearing.

This illustrates the approach in the literature that spirituality is not so much a nexus or network of emergent themes, but rather a cultic milieu or lingua franca in which members, though with diverse worldviews, understand each other perfectly. In recent years, the adjective 'spiritual' has increasingly emerged as a fundamental base along which post-material values that go beyond consumerism predominate, with (psychic and environmental) awareness and lifestyle, a more harmonious world, and self-awareness and self-development being the main nodes.

As far as theoretical considerations are concerned, since it is the management team's own personal development and curiosity about the themes that essentially determines the changes in the festival, it can be interpreted in this sense as a demand-regulation of the supply of a narrower market player. The festival is currently operating at maximum capacity, which means 5,000 visitors. In other words, the increase in the number of participants, ticket sales, and service providers registering for the festival all testify to the significant demand and related thematic network created by Everness as a (religious) market actor over the last 10 years. Our observations and analysis support this conclusion.

This homogenisation is even more evident in the presentation of this year's event, 2025. As stated on the website, "*The theme of the event is PARADIGMATION, i.e. instead of old ways of thinking and believing, we are giving space to new patterns and development, so we are grouping the festival's own programmes around the key themes of awareness and self-awareness, along the lines of the less is more principle, to make it simple and transparent. This concept is also made visible by the symbols of the well separated yet closely connected venues, which carry a strong message in their simplicity.*" The three segmented theme and venue types are: the soul, the spirit and the body.

Communication strategies in social media

Everness festival management has been using the brand-building elements offered by the internet almost from the start. First of all, it is present on the web in the form of a static website³, where you can follow the current year's concept, programme, venues and performers. You can also book a weekly or day ticket and accommodation through the site, and find out more about the festival's atmosphere in previous years in the gallery. Interestingly, however, the archived programmes of previous years are not available on the site and cannot be searched back.

³ 01. 05. 2025. <https://everness.hu/fesztival>

It is somewhat more exciting to browse through Everness' social media interfaces, among other things because here we can look for the specificities of previous communication strategies. The festival's Instagram page has 1607 posts and 5505 followers as of 2017.⁴ In addition to the images, there are also short reel videos. The most popular of these are the so-called after-videos of the festival that year with between 3,000 and 5,000 views (the latter are also on YouTube with even higher views), while the other posts have a varied number of views.

On you tube, there is an Everness channel since 2014, with 12,500 subscribers, 111 videos and a total of 145,591 views.⁵

The event's Facebook page has been present since 2013 with 53,000 followers, which seems to be the most popular channel, and is an indication of the management's targeting of the 30-50 age group. The posts are varied, initially ad hoc, but as we move forward in time, the posts seem to become more systematic, more regular, the changes in the image can be traced, and in the last 2 years, the segments have become distinct in terms of content and the visuals of the different types of posts. This means that the posts for the one-week festival, the Indian summer in autumn and the monthly wellness programme have become typographically distinct. And each post type can be segmented: quotes combined with images appear in a different graphic style, image backdrops linked to performers in a different style, and content linked to the festival organisation with an insider look in another. As we get closer to the event date, there are more and more promotions of prospective performers and content that facilitates the purchase of passes (early bird passes, tickets, accommodation options). One of the latter is a video sub-genre (also on Instagram and TikTok) in which a young woman appears as the face of Everness, talking about the festival.

Related Facebook pages are the Everness community with 13 400 members,⁶ and the Everness Marketplace group with 2300 members⁷, there are also thematic groups for Everness volunteers.

The festival also has a TikTok page, which currently has 715 followers, 1787 likes and 75 videos,⁸ which shows that it is the newest channel in terms of time, but also that the age group that uses the platform the most is not yet a typical target group for the organisers.

More traditional outreach is also being used by the festival's communications team, with visitors registered on the website and those who have given their email address to the organisers, as well as season ticket and ticket buyers, receiving scheduled newsletters, which in 2023 was a database of 13,000 email addresses, and this is expected to have grown since then. It's also worth noting that 4 years ago the festival created an Everness phone app with a map of the venue, programmes and speakers.

It is important to note that the focus of these platforms is on community experiences. The marketing and communication strategy aims to emphasize this aspect. Other keywords are homeliness, relaxation, listening to each other and awareness. The image, the colours and the visual elements of the communication and PR channels are all conveying this message, and have been doing so more and more consistently over the last three years, so homogenisation and clarity are becoming increasingly dominant in this communication.

⁴ 01. 05. 2025. <https://www.instagram.com/evernessfest/>

⁵ 01. 05. 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/c/EvernessFesztiv%C3%A1l>

⁶ 01. 05. 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/everness>

⁷ 01. 05. 2025 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/everness.piacter/>

⁸ 01. 05. 2025. <https://www.tiktok.com/@evernessfest>

If we look at the last 10 years of the festival's life, we can identify the following 5 trends in messages and programming: 1) the differentiation of religious signifiers is decreasing and the spiritual signifier is becoming dominant; 2) the heterogenisation of programme elements is decreasing and moving towards homogenisation; 3) the segmentation of visual elements is becoming more visually transparent, 4) the number of short videos is increasing significantly in line with the general trends; 5) the "face" of Everness, who speaks to participants as an ideal visitor, is also appearing in the videos of events.

Summary

In the first part of the paper, the concept of the religious market, the supply-demand model of the economic approach, the effects of profit maximisation and competition were introduced, followed by a market player that provides a turbulent supply for the "religious in its own way" population in the Hungarian religious scene. To explain this, the main literature interpretations of bricolage religiosity were presented, followed by an explanation of the supply structure of the religious market in relation to the Everness Festival in Hungary. It was based on fieldwork observations, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of the programme offering and communication trends of recent years.

Of course, an in-depth analysis of the demand side cannot be ignored in interpreting the economic models of religion, the presentation of which is already found in our earlier papers referred to, on the one hand, and the presentation of the survey data over several years in a specifically demand-side manner will be discussed in another paper.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasising that the economic conception of religion is far from seeking to "desacralise" religion itself. Theorists and researchers in the economics of religion consider religion as a human, social activity rational and capable of being studied using economic tools, but far from doing so for the religious experience itself. Iannaccone himself repeatedly emphasises that religion can only be considered as a social phenomenon in the course of studies, i.e. taking account of the economic aspects in no way means that religion can be reduced to scientific causes and effects.⁹ In this sense, economic models and considerations fit into the field of force of the science of religion, which, on the one hand, accepts religious self-definition unconditionally and does not focus on religious substance or truth content, but on human religiosity itself and its mechanisms.

⁹ The audio of the interview containing the statement can be found at <http://wamu.org/programs/kn/05/01/27.php> (downloaded on 30.04.2007).

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