

Consuming *Bondieuserie*: Raising the Profile of Religious Kitsch Consumption

Dr. Leighanne Higgins (Corresponding author)
Lancaster University Management School
Department of Marketing
l.higgins@lancaster.ac.uk

Dr. Kathy Hamilton
Strathclyde Business School
Department of Marketing
Kathy.hamilton@strath.ac.uk

Abstract

Consumer research has described religious kitsch objects derogatively, perceiving them as secularizations of the Sacred. Findings from this ethnographic study into consuming Catholic pilgrimage to Lourdes contradict this derogative viewpoint. We draw on the concept of *bondieuserie* to demonstrate that religious kitsch objects can offer simultaneous symbolic and functional value.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Consumer research discussions of pilgrimage have centred on three predominant conversations; new-age pilgrimage (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989), secular/brand pilgrimage (Kozinets, 2001; Borghini et al., 2009), and religious/spiritual pilgrimage (Scott and Maclaren, 2013, Kedzior, 2013; Turley, 2013; Moufahim, 2013; Higgins and Hamilton; 2014: 2016). However, emphasis has been placed upon the intangible experience, with few investigating the symbolic value of the physical goods associated with the pilgrimage. Furthermore, currently consumer research has neglected the popularly consumed kitsch object. Within religious settings, kitsch has been discussed briefly and negatively, with researchers to date believing such items to be “offensive” (Belk et al, 1989; Turley, 2013), in bad taste (Maclaren et al. 2012) and an “inappropriate mixing of the Sacred and the Profane” (Belk et al, 1989, 25). Yet if so, why do religious marketplaces offer such goods, and why do their consumers – most often religious followers - consume these goods? Drawing on the emergent findings of a three-ethnographic study at the Catholic pilgrimage site of Lourdes, this paper aims to raise the profile of religious kitsch objects, offering insight into the symbolic and functional value consumers gain from such “material manifestations of religion” (McDannell, 1995, 4).

Religious Consumption, Kitsch and *Bondieuserie*

Consumer research discussions of religious consumption have focussed upon the consumption of religious clothing and objects as a means of communicating sense of self or religiosity (Zwick and Chelariu, 2006; Wong, 2007; Jafari and Goulding, 2008; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Rinallo et al., 2013). With Rinallo et al. (2013) finding consumption of the fashion rosary bead (traditionally used by Catholics to keep track of structured prayer) to be “both sacred and secular at the same time” (2013, 36), enabling religious consumers simultaneously to be in fashion and faith. Further research uncovered the consumption of religious objects to enable communication with Deity (Higgins and Hamilton, 2012) or with loved ones (Moufahim, 2013). Indeed Moufahim (2013, 2) asserts that material consumption is “necessary for a pilgrimage experience to be successful”. However, consumer research overlooks the role and significance of the religious kitsch good.

Within Christianity, the French word “*bondieuserie*” (McDannell, 1995, 165), refers to both “religious knickknacks” and the “notion of the conformingly banal”. However English has no translation for *bondieuserie*, subsequently alliterative, derogative terms such as “Catholic/ Christian kitsch”, “Holy hardware” and “Jesus Junk” (McDannell, 1995, 222) have become popular. Turley (2013, 169) describes Catholic Kitsch as “anachronistic, clichéd, derivative, mass-produced, populist and in poor taste”, resonating with Belk et al.’s (1989, 25) belief that religious kitsch decontextualizes, is “offensive” and an “inappropriate

mixing of the Sacred and the Profane”. This study critiques this derogative viewpoint, uncovering the religious kitsch object to encase symbolic and functional value.

Context & Methodology

Lourdes, a beacon of hope and renewal for sick and healthy pilgrims, hosts over six million consumers annually, making it, after Paris, the second biggest tourist destination in France. Lourdes is an example of a “place-directed market created by the crowds drawn to a sacred place” (Scott and Maclaren, 2013, 196). For outside the Sanctuary gates of Lourdes, exists a consumption-scape of 220 souvenir shops, equaling one shop for every 30,000 pilgrims, offering all types of products from the religious prayer card and rosary bead, to the kitsch sparkly religious statues and the popularly consumed luminous religious goods.

In keeping with standard ethnographic practice, multiple methods of data collection were employed. Fieldwork data resulted in over 200 pages of double spaced field-notes, approximately 3000 visuals (photographs and videos), and many informal and serendipitous interviews with pilgrims on site at Lourdes, which were audio-recorded when possible. Depth interviews were conducted with twenty-three respondents lasting from thirty minutes to four hours in length enabling the understanding of personal life histories. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, tallying over 1000 double spaced pages of transcription. Data was analyzed thematically with the religious kitsch good emerging as important to pilgrimage consumption.

“Big Beads for Big Prayers”: The Functional and Symbolic Nature of Kitsch objects

“...I was gifted a set of Rosary beads that you could hang at the top of the door and they could reach the ground and the beads were the size of my fists, and Melanie [friend] said to me I think maybe last year, I don’t know what was happening in her family, but she said “we need big prayers”. So I packaged them off and said to her “here’s big beads”...And they had a family rosary [prayer session] downstairs with Melanie’s mother and father – well her dad is mostly in bed all of the time – and they were laughing because he kept losing his rosary beads so she brought them in and said “well you won’t lose this one” and her little grandkids now they all use these big ones...” (Phillip, 63).

Patrick outlines the trajectory of what he initially viewed as a “tawdry” set of rosary beads, as becoming gifted, re-gifted and finally moving from symbolic to being functionally used within a family prayer setting. The functional value of the rosary beads departs from Belk et al’s (1989, 9) belief that to maintain sacredness within an object, the Sacred object must remain “beyond mundane utility”. However, this study uncovers sacred and religious goods can be both functional and symbolic. For although the above beads were initially viewed as “tacky” and “laughter provoking” (McDannell, 1995), at their core they remain known as a prayer tool aiding a Catholic to say the rosary. Consequently, with time and through sacralisation via gift giving (Belk et al., 1989), the big beads regain both sacred and functional value.

To end, we raise the profile of religious kitsch goods and draw on the notion of *bondieuserie* to demonstrate that religious goods, which have been negatively perceived in previous research, can in fact be symbolically and functionally valued. Thus, we believe and agree with McDannell (1995) that the material dimension may be one way that religion can be better understood and the meanings of religious life better “deciphered” (McDannell, 1995, 2).

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