Sacred Songs, Secular Words: Discourse on the Consumption of Religious Music

Jeaney Yip, University of Sydney, Australia

This study analyses the overlap between sacred and secular through a reading of Christian music. Discourse analysis through the textual reading of song lyrics was conducted to explore meanings of a popular Australian produced contemporary and traditional Christian songs. Situated in consumer culture, the study reveals how a religious expression such as Christian music speaks a particular discourse whose meanings transcend sacredness into secular realms. Implications for sacred/secular theory are discussed.

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Jeaney Yip, University of Sydney, Australia

**Extended Abstract**

The long withstanding debates between sacred and profane have been documented (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989; Arnould and Price 2004), although the sacred in consumer research has been predominantly studied as a metaphoric stance rather than specifically about the ‘Sacred’ per se (Iacobucci 2001). Secularisation theory argues for the decline in sacredness and religion amidst the backdrop of modernity and progress (Martin 2005), while attributing its replacement with secular, material and spiritual pursuits. This theory neither concurs with the continued popularity of Pentecostal (Charismatic) churches (Anderson 2004), nor the growth of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM, Powell 2002). In an attempt to study the inter-relationships between sacred (expressed through religious music) and secular (expressed through consumer culture), a discourse analysis into Christian music is conducted in this research.

Music, like advertisement, is a cultural text which is an important medium in reading the audience (O’Donohoe 2000). Through the language of songs, music like an advertisement text informs and expresses meanings that are not only in alignment with the targeted audience but the socio-historic conditions of a society. As a religious product, it is a site where ideology circulates as well as a mirror to represent the sacred which is highly visible, audible, saleable and malleable to socio-cultural forces. Music style is never neutral, but is organically wed to the socio-cultural setting in which the music is created and developed (Romanowski 1992) to convey certain meanings to a particular audience.

Studies that relate music and discourse include a reading of Madonna, by Bradby (1992) where her songs, music video clips and news about her as reported in the media, were analysed. Through the song ‘Material Girl’, discourses of materialism and maternalism, were expressed as advancement in female liberation. Liederman (2004) in a study of ‘The Free Monks’, a Greek rock band of black-robed Orthodox monks and ordained priests was analysed against the backdrop of the social, cultural and political role of the Orthodox Church in Greece. The ‘singers’ perform in an MTV-style video, singing modern rock music accompanied by live concerts and initial albums that reached gold and platinum status in sales in Greek pop charts. This phenomenon of ‘sacred songs with a secular beat’ can be seen as one example of a mutation that has occurred in the Christian discourse as a result of alignment with changes in the macro-societal shifts, but more is needed to understand the intricacies of this alignment in another setting.

A cross section of Pentecostal and Anglican songs dating from 1990–2005 was selected, including traditional hymns. I used close reading (Scott 1994; Stern 1989) to study the lyrics and explored the meaning expressed through the language of songs. Music as an expression of worship has a visual representation in the way it is played, performed and consumed. This produces an assortment of representations and discourses which requires a marriage of visual, audio, and textual data. The visual materials included pictures of the music performance, the congregation, the architectural space, images of the people (audience, song performers, and church leaders), pictures of artefacts produced by the church, and video recordings of services and music events.

Discourse analysis of the data suggests four dominant themes or discourses: ‘Empowerment’, ‘Tradition’, ‘Today’ and ‘Individuation’. There is a theme of the empowered self in the Pentecostal songs as the ‘I’ is empowered to ‘change the world today’, to ‘move mountains’, and to believe that ‘life could be all that you want it to be’. Both the ‘can be’ and ‘can do’ attitude is an attractive appeal that aligns not only with the so-called ‘Prosperity Gospel’ Pentecostal churches tend to preach, but blues with new age spirituality that focuses on potential of the ‘self’ (Rindfleish 2005). Empowerment is also expressed in the form of blessings, favour, miracles and an answer to dreams.
The discourse on tradition is apparent in Anglican songs and hymns. Expressed in the form of worship, reverence to God, collective nature of the church family, humility, obedience, reference to sin and heaven provide the language in constructing what appears to be a traditional Christian discourse on the sacred. This is in contrast to the ‘Today’ discourse which construct sacred meanings to a present day context framed in a ‘here and now’ (as opposed to heaven/after life/eternal) timeframe situating the blessings, dreams coming true, favour and miracles to happen today. This suggests a reconciling of sacred constructions with the secular existence of people in the current world. There is no focus on ‘suffering’ in the present and reaping joy in the future but it’s about harvesting and living to the full now. The sacred gets expressed to a ‘present help in my time of need’ which clearly is situated in the secular.

The ‘individualization’ discourse express the self (I, me, my) in the songs, especially prominent in Pentecostal songs. Moreover, these words outnumbered those that feature God (Lord, God, Jesus, Father). The word ‘you’ was evident, although it is not always directed to God but the audience. This different feature of the pronoun ‘you’ to refer to the one who is being addressed illustrate a language that is couched in a personal relationship as opposed to ‘thou’ in a traditional hymn. This difference illuminates interesting points of departures between Pentecostal songs and hymns. The intimacy of ‘you and I’ introduces a spirit of closeness, warmth, and approachability that is more couched in newer forms of spirituality rather than religion. Also, this is interesting to have emerged out of this genre of music as typically hymns are about God, while this is directed to God or the audience. The notion of ownership (‘my God’, ‘my Saviour’) is also evident.

Whilst sacred discourses to do with Christianity are apparent, this is mixed with other secular discourses in the case of contemporary Pentecostal songs. If music is a mirror to meaning and audience values, self-empowerment and individualization of religion framed in the context of ‘today’ are discourses that reflect the shift in socio-cultural conditions of a modern society. This can be aligned to Inglehart’s (1997) post-materialist values which highlight self expression and self empowerment as prevalent in highly developed societies where existential security already exists. Because physical security is already adequate in highly developed societies, the discourse on the sacred appears to play a more self-serving role framed in current consumer culture. Whilst secularisation theory posits a decline in religion at the macro level, the popularity of a certain ‘version’ of religious form and products suggest at the meso level a resurgence of ‘sacred interest’. It appears that a process of appropriation (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Cova and Cova 2000) has taken place whereby religious music is able to align itself to changing socio-cultural shifts to incorporate both sacred and secular discourses into its contents and meaning. This appears to be the version that resonates with current religious consumers. Through analysing the genre, lyrics and aesthetic appeal of a religious song, layers of meaning are ‘deconstructed’ to reveal an ‘acclimatization of discourses’. Sacred songs with secular discourses offer the other face to the sacralisation process (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), which arguably implies the possible existence of sacred and secular as yin and yang.

References
An Examination of Recall Measures of Sponsorship Awareness
Michael S. Humphreys, University of Queensland, Australia
T. Bettina Cornwell, University of Queensland, Australia
Clinton S. Weeks, University of Queensland, Australia
Anna R. McAlister, University of Queensland, Australia

Extended Abstract

With growth in sponsorship-linked marketing expenditure continuing to increase each year (IEG 2003), consumers are exposed to an ever larger number of brand names in association with various events. In many cases there may be a number of brands linked with a single event, and in some cases several of these brands may be from a single brand category. In addition, many brands may be linked with multiple events. What must be considered when seeking to measure sponsorship awareness in these situations is how the method of measurement may influence results, particularly with regard to the direction of cueing in cued recall.

Due to the nature of memory associations, the associative strength from a brand to an event may not always be the same as the associative strength from an event to a brand. To illustrate, consider a situation where a brand such as Gatorade sponsors an event like the International Relay Run. Asking which brand is the sponsor of the International Relay Run as opposed to which event did Gatorade sponsor, may not produce the same proportion of correct responses. This may particularly be the case when a similar competitor brand (e.g., Powerade) is also salient in the mind of the consumer, and when the event name is given as the recall cue. Not all awareness measures provide consistent access to memory, and deciding which measure to use may depend largely on the situation, and what information is sought by the researcher.

Tripodi et al. (2003) have suggested that variation in memory prompts can affect sponsorship awareness responses. Using a telephone survey they reported that the sequence in which memory prompts (event name, brand name, category label) are given to respondents can affect overall awareness measures. Specifically, in their study respondents prompted with the event name had the highest level of initial recall, but the lowest overall recall after follow-up prompts (including a recognition-type prompt).

In four experiments we examined the nature of recall in measuring sponsorship awareness. We varied recall methods by cueing with the event name, the brand name, the brand category, and we also considered responses using a free recall method. Participants received exposure to sponsorship stimuli using Johar and Pham’s (1999) press release paradigm, where brands were real and events were fictitious. All press releases involved congruent sponsor-event relationships and all contained a statement articulating the sponsor’s reason for undertaking the sponsorship. Additionally, as a within subject variable, half of the press release statements mentioned a competitor within the same brand category while half made no such mention. Participants in each experiment were presented with 12 press releases and completed a 10 minute distracter puzzle before beginning the memory task.

Results showed recall differences depending on the cue utilized. In the first experiment, when cueing with the event name, results showed that recall of the sponsoring brand was similar both when a competitor was mentioned in the press release and when no competitor was mentioned (M=.708 and .767 respectively). Overall recall here was 73.8%. In the second experiment however, when cueing with the brand category, recall of the sponsoring brand was adversely impacted by the presence of a competitor. Here there was a marginally significant difference between the competitor present and competitor absent conditions, F (1, 19)=4.061, p=.058 (Ms=.775 and .850 respectively), with overall brand recall at 81.25%.

In the third experiment which used brand cues, we provided participants with either the sponsor or competitor name and examined event recall responses. This was done for both competitor present and competitor absent conditions. Here, as might be expected, there was a main effect of cue, F (1, 39)=72.335, p<.001, such that sponsor cues (M=.538) were more effective in eliciting the event name than were the competitor cues (M=.146). There was no overall main effect of competitor presence, but there was a significant interaction between cue and competitor presence, F (1, 39)=5.906, p=.020. Marginal means indicated that event recall was lower in the competitor present condition than in the competitor absent condition for the sponsor cue (Ms=.483 and .591 respectively), but event recall was higher in the competitor present condition than the competitor absent condition for the competitor cue (Ms=.183 and .108 respectively). This indicates that interference occurred in the competitor present condition using the sponsor cue, and that cueing with a mentioned competitor can elicit event recall. Interestingly, this result also shows that even if no competitor is mentioned, cueing with a market rival of the sponsor can nonetheless elicit memory for the event.

In contrast to the cued recall experiments, in the fourth experiment where free recall was used, a greater number of events were recalled from the competitor present as opposed to the competitor absent condition, F (1, 19)=5.431, p=.031 (Ms=.650 and .508 respectively). Similarly, a marginally greater number of sponsors were recalled from the competitor present as opposed to the competitor absent condition, F (1, 19)=4.108, p=.057 (Ms=.700 and .567 respectively). There was no significant difference between the level of recall of events as opposed to the level of recall of sponsors (Ms=.579 and .633 respectively).

With sponsorship-linked marketing expenditure rising each year, it is becoming increasingly important to have a clear understanding of whether the techniques used to measure sponsorship effectiveness are appropriate. For those interested in measuring sponsorship awareness effects, what this study shows is that knowing a brand name can prompt memory for an event, and knowing that an event name can prompt memory for a brand, are not necessarily the same thing. In attempting to assess sponsorship awareness, researchers must first consider the nature of what they want to know in order to be able to ask the right question.

References