Sacralising the Profane: Creating Meaning With Christmas Consumption in the Uk

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Although there is a substantial body of literature which has examined the celebration of Christmas from a variety of perspectives, relatively little attention has been paid in the consumer behaviour literature to understanding consumption meanings associated with this event. Apart from insights gained on consumption rituals and meanings of festivities, mainly written from a North American perspective, our knowledge of meaning creation through Christmas consumption is partial. Based on Belk et al’s (1989) examination of sacred and profane distinctions in consumer behaviour, this paper examines ways in which the British Christmas is being sacralised in the secular world of consumption.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13830/eacr/vol7/E-07

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Sacralising the Profane: Creating Meaning with Christmas Consumption in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a substantial body of literature which has examined the celebration of Christmas from a variety of perspectives, relatively little attention has been paid in the consumer behaviour literature to understanding consumption meanings associated with this event. This study examines the extent to which the sacred and profane distinctions in consumption behaviour proposed by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) serve as a template for gaining insights into the sacred meanings which consumers in a highly secular society such as the UK attach to their secular consumption of what was once widely celebrated as a religious festival.

INTRODUCTION

Christmas is one of the few annual rituals which is widely celebrated around the world, even in countries which do not have a Christian tradition. Typically, it involves family gatherings and gift giving (Miller 1993). Christmas Day is celebrated in the UK along with the following day, Boxing Day, as a public holiday and as part of a “twin-peaked festival” (Miller 1993:6) comprising the Christmas and New Year celebrations, when a further public holiday is enjoyed.

To date, developing an understanding of consumer behaviour from a culture and consumption perspective has been a key concern (Cova and Cova 2002; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Lofman 1991; Belk 1989; McCracken 1988; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). In contemporary Western society there has been a change in consumers’ values and motivations from “consuming to live” into “living to consume” (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997:5), with the result that consumption meanings are no longer viewed as being driven solely by utilitarian values, but also by secular, sacred, hedonic and social sources of meaning (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004).

This study examines the use of sacred and profane (Belk et al. 1989; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989; Hirschman 1988) metaphors in the context of Christmas consumption in order to understand the special meanings ascribed to consumption activities. This issue is important because “Christmas is a social festival having both strong sacred aspects and secular aspects” (Hirschman 1991:41). Nevertheless, in the West, Christmas is described as “the distilled essence of contemporary consumption” (Belk and Bryce 1993:277) and therefore offers an ideal opportunity to study sacred meanings of the secular consumption choices of consumers today.

Although there has been some work on consumption rituals (Belk and Costa 1998; Gainer 1995; McCracken 1988; and Rook 1985), and on the meanings of the festivities generally (Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick and Williamson 1982) and for the annual celebrations of Hallowe’en (Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez and Yeh 1992; Belk 1990), Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and Christmas ( Belk 1987, 1989; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989; and Pollay 1986) in particular, these rituals and festivities have mainly been examined in the United States. There has been little consumer behaviour work on British Christmas consumption apart from recent studies by Miller (1993), who compared Christmas across a range of cultural contexts,1 Gurau and Tinson (2003), who examined attitudes towards Christmas commercial campaigns and McKechnie & Tynan (2006) who explored social meanings in Christmas consumption.

The findings of a qualitative study are used to demonstrate how an enhanced understanding of consumption meanings associated with the UK socio-cultural context can lead to new insights into how consumers create sacred meanings through their secular consumption of the Christmas celebration. The paper proceeds first by reviewing the literature on Christmas consumption. Next, the conceptual underpinning based on the binary opposition of sacred and profane consumption is discussed, and justified as a means of capturing the nature of special sacred meanings which imbue Christmas consumption. This is followed by an explanation of the research methodology adopted. After the results of the empirical analysis are presented, key findings are discussed, and conclusions are drawn.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While the choice of the time to celebrate Christ’s birth may be traced back to the number of pagan winter festivals (Golby and Purdue 1986), the current view of a traditional Christmas is a relatively modern invention (Belk 1989). The rituals of the American Christmas, as they affect the family unit and culture at large, were first examined in Barnett’s (1954) seminal inquiry. However it took another thirty years before researchers began to examine the impact of such rituals on consumer behaviour. First, Rook (1985) considered Christmas to be a clearly defined ritual, which was widely observed in Western culture associated with gift-giving rituals and ritual symbols such as coloured lights, mistletoe, wreaths, Santa Claus and food and drink. However, concerns were raised over ritual scripts2 and role uncertainty due to the decline in church attendance and rise of single-person households and multiple marriage families. Next, Hirschman and La Barbera (1989) identified the following common themes from their overview of limited prior research on Christmas: gift giving, sociability and family togetherness, commercialism and materialism, hedonism and sensuality, and religious tradition and spirituality. From their own investigation on the meaning of Christmas, they concluded that this meaning was multidimensional, possessing both a sacred/secular dimension and a positive/negative one, commenting that “Christmas is a study in contrasts, of many dialectics which we embrace as individuals and as a society” (Hirschman and La Barbera 1989:144). Then Belk (1989) conducted his first historical analysis of the development of Christmas meaning and symbolism. He examined Christmas in terms of being a largely secularised celebration of commercialisation, materialism and hedonism and proposed the use of sacred and profane metaphors to describe Christmas consumption. The ‘paradox of Christmas’, a term coined by Pimlott (1962) to describe the co-existence of religious and secular celebrations of Christmas, was redefined to reflect the opposition of sacred and profane values in the secular world. A second historical analysis of the changing meaning of the Christmas celebration was conducted by Belk and Bryce (1993) who compared the Christmas shopping experience portrayed in two films, one from 1947 and the other from 1991, to illustrate how consumption patterns had changed over this period.

1These contexts were the USA, Japan, Britain, Sweden and Trinidad.
2An unwritten script which guides the ritual role player and identifies appropriate behaviour and artefacts.
One argument for the importance of exploring sacred meanings of consumption associated with the UK Christmas is its degree of secularisation when compared to the well researched context of the USA. Miller (1993:5) argues for a re-evaluation of the parochial Anglo-American interpretation of contemporary Christmas. Kuper (1993) acknowledges Christmas as a secular holiday in England shaped by the nostalgia and sentimentality of Charles Dickens’ (1843) book “A Christmas Carol”, and notes the attempts to recapture the secular public festival for religious purposes made by the English Protestant Churches after the First World War through the revival of the Nativity plays and carol singing, and the introduction of religious broadcasts. Today, in the increasingly secularised UK, religion has gone from being a part of everyday life to being a provider of services for special occasions like christenings, weddings and funerals, possibly before it finally fades from view according to Voas (2005). Another special occasion for a visit to church is the annual Christmas midnight service for those whom he describes as “Christmas tourists”, who like to mix a little religious ceremony into their Christmas festivities but are not regular churchgoers.

In the 2001 Census, 72% of the UK population said that their religion was Christian (Census 2001). However, a survey recently commissioned for the BBC programme “What the World Thinks of God”, which polled ten thousand people in ten countries from Africa, America, Asia and Europe in January 2004, concluded that “the UK is among the most secular nations in the world” (BBC 2004). It was found that the British exhibit the lowest levels of belief and religious activity with 67% expressing belief in God and only 21% regularly attending a religious service, compared to 91% and 54% of Americans respectively. This is important as one measure of secularisation is the reduction in religious belief and observance.

CONCEPTUALISATION

In Belk et al.’s (1989) broader examination of sacred and profane distinctions consumers make in their behaviours and uses of space, time and objects in the secular context of consumption, they presented the following properties of sacredness: hierophany or the act of manifestation of the sacred as something of a wholly different order; kratophany in which the sacred elicits both strong approach and avoidance reactions; the sacred as being in opposition to the profane, and having the power to contaminate through contact; sacrifice establishing communication with the sacred; the individual feeling a focused emotional commitment to the sacred; the sacred being concretised through representation in an object; ritual prescribing how the ordinary person should behave in the presence of the sacred; frequently repeated myths surrounding the sacred; the sacred being mysterious and unable to be understood logically; communitas freeing participants from their normal social roles and effecting status equality; and finally the ability of the sacred to produce ecstasy. The study involved establishing domains of sacred consumption, processes of sacralisation and ways of maintaining sacredness through consumption. While anything can potentially become sacred, the sacred consumer domains include places, times, tangible things, intangibles, persons and experiences. Within these domains there are a number of processes by which “consumers understand and preserve particular aspects of consumption as set apart, extraordinary and sacred” (Belk et al. 1989:12).Sacredness imbues certain aspects of consumption through seven different processes: ritual, pilgrimage, quintessence, gift giving, collecting, inheritance, and external sanction. In all but quintessence and external sanction consumers deliberately enact these sacralising consumption processes in order to create sacred meaning. Understandings from this influential work have already yielded much in the study of consumption (Holbrook and Schindler 2003; Gurau and Tinson 2003; Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; and Hirschman 1991, 1988), and so are utilised here to better comprehend the meaning of consumption associated with a sacred ritual in a secular country.

The specific focus of the present study is to gain a better understanding of meaning creation through consumption, by examining the ways in which consumers create sacred meanings through their secular consumption of the Christmas celebration. Consumption is much more than just the means consumers use to fulfil their everyday requirements. It can become an instrument of “transcendent experience” i.e. it exhibits certain aspects of the sacred. The understanding of ‘sacred and profane’ in the context of consumption can be understood in two different ways. Firstly, Belk et al.’s (1989) understandings were grounded in the fundamental distinction that what is set apart as extraordinary is regarded as special and sacred, whereas what is regarded as profane belongs to the ordinary or everyday. At another level the use of the language of the sacred and profane can be seen as a metaphor to aid our understanding. Metaphors have been widely used in marketing (Zaltman, Lemasters and Heffring 1982) although often employed unconsciously (Van den Bulte 1994). They have both limitations and drawbacks which should be borne in mind by those who employ them as a communication device. They are pervasive in that they shape our thoughts, our view of the world and therefore our actions (Kendall and Kendall 1993). By portraying something which is less familiar, in terms of something of which we have a clear understanding, the dissimilarities and differences are illuminated and vivified while paradoxically the considerable similarities are also highlighted (Weaver 1967 cited in Kendall and Kendall 1993:150). However, the inherent contradiction of the metaphor is that the meaning drawn from the comparison is provided by the receiver and not by the author, so the resulting understandings are not always predictable.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were adopted as being appropriate for exploring people’s “lived experience” and focus on “naturally occurring ordinary events in natural settings” (Miles and Huberman 1994:10). A multi-method approach was adopted because of the limited time frame of the Christmas season for data collection, severe time constraints on participants, and the need to minimise participant recall loss (Cleveland, Babin, Laroche, Ward and Bergeron 2003).

Focus groups were used for the first stage of the primary research as they offer a way of gaining a meaningful understanding of phenomena “which emerge out of sharing and discussing issues, exchanging opinions, revising perceptions and highlighting differences” (Carson, Gilmore, Perry and Gronhaug 2001:115). From an initial pool of volunteers who responded to posters, a snowballing technique was used to identify female participants, who were purposively selected to increase the likelihood of gaining insights into a range of Christmas experiences by including those with and without children, under and over 40 years old, and with or without paid employment (see profile with pseudonyms in Table 1 below). As this work focuses on the sacralisation of Christmas consumption rather than observance of the sacred, no particular religious criteria were set. Two 75 minute focus groups were conducted in an informal environment with 10 and 7 female participants respectively, three to four weeks before Christmas. In order to maintain chronological flow (Miles and Huberman 1994), a sequential approach was adopted, which addressed consumption in three phases: the anticipation of and preparation for Christmas; the experience of Christmas itself; and the clearing up after the festivities and subsequent reflection by the consumer on the whole
extended process. The participants were not sensitised to the dichotomy of secular and sacred consumption choices by either direct questioning or prompting.

The second stage of the study consisted of depth interviews, which explored the themes and categories emerging from the focus group interviews as well capturing participants’ thoughts and feelings on their experience of and reflections upon the entire consumption festival of Christmas. These interviews were of between 65 and 135 minutes’ duration and were conducted four to six weeks after Christmas with six of the focus group participants. The style of questioning was informal for both stages and involved asking semi-structured questions around themes and processes, beginning with open-ended questions and gradually focusing on actual experiences rather than allowing discussion to remain at an experience-distant, abstract level as advised by Thompson and Haytko (1997). Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim from the tape recordings. The text was analysed independently by the authors following the generalised sequence of steps including data reduction and transformation, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles and Huberman 1994:10). The researchers individually noted the patterns and themes, which were similar across scripts. This approach allowed for earlier readings of the text to inform later readings, and more pertinent in this research, to allow for later readings of the transcripts from the depth interviews to explore patterns not noted on the initial analysis of the focus group data (Thompson and Haytko 1997).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secular and sacred aspects of consumption behaviour emerged from the data. Since this paper aims to highlight how consumers create sacred meanings through their secular consumption of the Christmas celebration, the properties of sacredness proposed by Belk et al. (1989), will now be used as a framework to examine the extent to which the participants’ consumption experience of the UK Christmas fits these properties.

Christmas is seen as a reality-suspending event confirming the property of hierophany. Judy’s children look forward to it but Pam sees it as a time of assumed insularity, where individuals create their own temporary, separate world which she likened to living in a ‘bubble’.

“The children were looking forward to it from the start and we had an absolutely wonderful time. Actually… it exceeded expectation, just because it was different you know.” Judy

“…you’re all just part of this visage that they put on really. It’s like bubble mansion isn’t it? This is my bubble and this is how the world is.” Pam

The celebratory season comprises two parts: the stressful preparation period filled with tasks and obligations and the relaxing, fulfilling and indulgent family time in which notions of ‘duty-bound, committed time’ and ‘my time’ emerged. Participants struggled to remind themselves that it is the time spent with their family, which holds the true meaning of Christmas, and not their attempts to create the ‘perfect Christmas’ through excessive consumption.

“It’s nice being together with family even though I’ve got to do this and I’ve got to do that…It’s the day where you sit down, catch up and you relax…just nice…you don’t have to worry about I have to be here or there…it’s a day when everyone is always with their family and you know that you’re going to see them.” Veronica

Separate rules of behaviour exist for the whole of the Christmas holiday period. Children, even in households with limited spending power, are spoiled with lots of presents, given much more freedom than normal and also enjoy more of their parents’ and adult family members’ time than usual. Even as an adult of 24 years, but

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**TABLE 1**

Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Under 40 years</th>
<th>Over 40 years</th>
<th>With Children</th>
<th>Without Children</th>
<th>Working Full-time</th>
<th>Working Part-time</th>
<th>Not Working</th>
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* depth interviews.
still living with her parents, Charlotte regressed to a childhood perspective on Christmas in order to fully enjoy it.

“The kids get away with murder at Christmas. You never ever chastise your child on Christmas Day, just because it’s Christmas, and you don’t do that, you know, and it’s like one YAHOO! on Christmas Eve till the New Year. It’s just non-stop.” Pam

“My brother and my husband were sitting there for a while, with him sort of building that (Lord of the Rings set) and then we played Cross Fire which is like a game with bullets, you fire at people with them. What else? We did play a board game, and then my eldest daughter played the piano and we were singing and messing about and dancing, and it was very good. (We) had a really good time.” Judy

Sacred objects elicit strong approach as well as strong avoidance reactions (kratophany). Consumers are strongly attracted by the sacred and the positive while simultaneously avoiding and being repulsed by the negative or evil sacred powers. The sacred is seen as good and desirable, and responses to it range from Charlotte’s childlike enthusiasm to Marion’s more measured eagerness. The negative aspects of the sacred are associated with bereavement and family tensions.

“I was certainly looking forward to it because it’s been a while since I’ve had both boys home and attached girlfriends and in-laws and ‘outlaws’ and a bit of a gathering of the clan. So I was looking forward to it.” Marion

“I love the run up to Christmas, like the going out and the socialising part and I love Christmas Day, waking up, opening the presents, giving the presents and then spending the whole day with family.” Charlotte

Some participants showed a varying level of aversion to Christmas, ranging from mild ambivalence, through disappointment, to outright grief because of the historical family events which had occurred at Christmas. Much of the antipathy arose because of differing expectations among different parts of a family. Nicola acknowledged the impact of her husband’s ideal of a family Christmas to be spent with his own parents, on her close relationship with her stepfather with whom she was unable to spend time. To ensure a harmonious and conflict-free celebration, she adopted a façade of contentment, but privately dreaded Christmas. It is the importance of Christmas that makes these difficulties come to the surface and gives rise to the extreme efforts individuals will engage in to avoid conflict.

“I love Christmas now, because when I was little, my Dad was killed on 16th December and I always remember every Christmas my Mum and my Grandma crying and then, you know, that goes with you… So, it was always sad at Christmas.” Madge

“At the end of the day, you just have to keep on smiling… If… your family is important to you, and if my husband wants to see his family, well I don’t get the opportunity to see mine because of different circumstances… It’s no good making yourself upset, or worrying, or wittering (nagging), or causing arguments… I just put my smile on.” Nicola

A number of things stand out from the ordinary and profane at Christmas. These include the nature of the time spent with the family, also the ‘specialness’ conferred on Christmas related objects by displaying, wrapping and dressing them. Thus, differentiated from the profane, Christmas presents are symbols of love and stand apart as sacred.

“I think the main thing was just to spent time with family, friends, my boyfriend and to eat lots, drink lots and be merry, I don’t have very many expectations… that’s it, just a nice break from work and spend some quality time with the family.” Charlotte

“I either introduce a complementary colour to sparkle it (the tree) up a bit or I’ll leave things out so they are not there every year. Or I will arrange things slightly different(ly) because I like candles and things around with the foliage and this year I put like baubles on to make them like slightly different, and I put a bow round the candles.” Stella

The Christmas tree is a venerated icon of the sacred in many households; it acquires sacred meaning and has the power to contaminate through contact. It is a visible symbol to any visitors to the home and, as such, its dressing is too important to leave to the children. In spite of being reproached by her husband, Judy insisted that she alone dressed the main Christmas tree. She adopted the subterfuge of buying each of her three children a small tree for their own bedrooms, to reduce complaints and her feelings of guilt. Decorating part of the home with the ‘right’ kind of lights, fresh holly, mistletoe and candles produces a sacred area that is magical and special.

“I’d bought two new sets of lights and I’d got candles everywhere in the conservatory, very pretty… It did look quite magical.” Marion

There is a very strong commitment to the celebration of Christmas by these female participants as they establish communication with the sacred through sacrifice. The period of preparation is an intense time of planning, shopping, preparing gifts, food and the home, which takes place in addition to their normal work, family and household responsibilities. Although this sacrifice is taken for granted and not begrudged, there were wistful references to the fantasy of being away from home at Christmas and therefore “off duty”. However, it does produce worry and stress in many, and is seen as a hurdle to be overcome on the way to an enjoyable Christmas.

“I find, for me personally… I have to do everything at Christmas. I have to organise the food, the presents, the decorations, getting the Christmas tree, doing the whole bit and I have to get the presents for the whole family individually and for the children, their boyfriend or girlfriend if they’ve got one at the time, whereas the rest of the family just have to buy one present for each other… but they don’t have to worry about the food side, or the decorations side of it, or the Christmas card side of it… so there is always a lot to do… it is a very busy time.” Selma

“My ideal Christmas is not here but in another country, but having said that there is nothing I like better than to have the family round and to indulge them and go really ‘over the top’… to have food we don’t normally have … to be ‘the
hostess with the mostest’ and I mean literally just be at their beck & call…it’s as if I’m running around headless but I do love it.” Pam

The choice of the sacrified object is extremely personal and participants readily admit that their choice would not be acceptable for some others, thereby providing evidence that individuals feel a focused emotional attachment to sacred things.

“I love my angels. I’ve got three angels, and an angel to go on the tree. Some people might think that is going ‘over the top’. I have one on the mantelpiece, and she’s got like real wings, feathery wings. And she’s all like in silver. That’s really nice. And then I’ve got another angel, and this Christmas I put her on top of the hi-fi cabinet. And she’s in gold, more rusty (coloured) and she’s got Christmassy foliage. And then I’ve got one of those fibre optic angels.” Stella

When discussing sacrificed objects and events of consumption the participants evoked nostalgia for times, places and things of the past. Nostalgic bonding took place in their childhood for many of the participants, and not at the age of approximately 20 years of age as characterised by informants in Holbrook and Schindler’s study (2003). The crucial experiences associated with the ritual celebration of Christmas appear to occur as children, when Christmas was a magical event presided over by Father Christmas. Sensory experience evoked smells of Christmases past for Pam, her memories bound up with those of her childhood.

“My childhood memories of Christmas are the smell of paint and the smell of oranges because my dad worked all year round to sort of keep (the family) because I’ve told you how many are in the family (12 children)...So, my Dad would be decorating on Christmas Eve and he would always bring home like a big tray of oranges. And it was the smell of the oranges and paint because my husband says ‘What you want painting?’ because Christmas is not Christmas unless you can smell paint somewhere in this house.” Pam

Performance or competence-oriented nostalgic bonding is evident in one participant’s account of her choice of contemporary and stylish fabric to update a cherished family heirloom, the Christmas tree fairy. Her account was not an excuse for boasting, but a demonstration of her handcraft skills to enhance the object and reinforce its ‘specialness’.

“I’ve got a really old fairy. But she’s been in the family ever since I was young, that I can remember. And she always goes on top of my Christmas tree but she’s quite old. So, I’ve made some clothes and I’ve dressed her up. She’s like in silvers and blues. Like frosty. But the blue, it’s like a ‘shimmer’. It’s almost like a fish scale.” Stella

Relationships with family were reported as crucial with the significance of particular routines e.g. 6 am wake up call for Grandma and present opening in parents’ bedroom being an essential ritual for one younger participant. However, the difficulty of the present, when contrasted with the ideal of the past, evokes strong emotions.

“Over the last 10 or 14 years we’ve all got together but parents are getting older...makes it a bit stressful in that respect because it’s harder to get Joe’s mother out of the house. We get this ‘I’m not coming—I can’t come out the house’ and my Dad’s got dementia, so that is a bit upsetting for the children, grown up as they are. I’d like to turn the clock back and have everybody as they used to be.” Selma

Tangible representations of the Christmas season can make the sacred concrete. In Pam’s case this was her tree.

“I’ve got the most beautiful sparkly twig tree that I bought from B&Q (store) and I stand that on the hearth and it looks absolutely beautiful and minimalistic and anyone who walked into the house said how beautiful the tree was and that was my Christmas tree” Pam

Ritual surrounds the contact of ordinary persons with the sacred. The annual nature of the Christmas celebration means that cultural meaning in the home has to be re-established through various rituals, such as cleaning, preparation of Christmas foods and decorating the house in a festive manner, as well as the exchange of gifts and cards. Unwrapping gifts and sharing the pleasure of opening sacks, stockings, boxes and pillowcases of presents had its own sense of time and place for each family. The frequently repeated myths associated with Christmas, such as Father Christmas and his reindeer, document the status of sacred things, even though they are not always believed by the recipients of such communications. Furthermore, sacred things cannot be understood logically but are mysterious, as embodied by the conundrum of who gives the presents to children. Their mysterious arrival is explained at an early age as a gift from Father Christmas. However, as children grow older, more complicated explanations are given.

“I think we might have had a session of a carrot for the reindeer but it usually was something like a mince pie for Santa. And there would always be one left on side with a bite out of it because there was too many of them to eat, and it was proof that somebody had been here.” Pam

“…and you just have to say ‘look, you know, if every child got every single thing they wanted (from Father Christmas) it’s just not how it works’...you sort of say, ‘well if there is something big and expensive then mummy and daddy will buy it if they can afford it. Then Father Christmas will buy you something; buy each child something, but not something ridiculous!” Judy

The spirit of communitas emerges between participants in sacred consumption. Christmas is an inclusive celebration where even distant members of a family, and those with no family of their own nearby, are made welcome. Joining with other people for community events like carol singing and switching on the municipal Christmas lights are enjoyed.

“I fetched my Mother on Christmas Day because she is on her own and I can’t bear to think of someone on their own on Christmas Day.” Stella

“I like to go for carols by candlelight...that’s nice and I usually take one of the children.” Judy

Finally, Belk et al. (1989) indicated that the sacred is capable of producing ecstatic experiences but there was no indication that ecstasy, or desire, were emotions experienced by the participants.
Instead they were hardworking facilitators who took satisfaction in creating an enjoyable Christmas for all. Any great excitement or desire was felt by children looking forward to Christmas, which confirms that for a child “desire is palpable, and hope hangs as heavily as stuffed stockings on the fireplace mantle” (Belk et al. 2003:326). From Arnould et al.'s (2004) reading of Belk et al. (1989) sacred things cannot be bought and sold. The final message is that, for these participants, Christmas is something that can only be made and not bought. Only the trappings of Christmas can be bought; the real and essential meaning of Christmas has to be co-created.

“I think what I have done actually is, I have got a bit carried away. When you are setting the table you have got to have the perfect napkins and you go out and buy the candles and around the house and you’ve got to have the lights and everything has got to be just right and you’ve got to have fresh flowers. If I get it, okay, but it doesn’t actually make any difference to the enjoyment of it (Christmas). I think you have to be careful not to get too caught up in things being beautiful and perfectly presented. It is all about having a good time and relaxing, not having the perfect everything...They (the family) don’t remember what napkins you have got on the table.” Judy

CONCLUSION

The choices consumers make in the marketplace are determined by a variety of values and meanings. While utilitarian, hedonic and social meanings all yield useful insights into consumption meanings, an alternative approach is to examine sacred and secular sources of meaning. Although prior work specifically on Christmas consumption has used sacred and profane metaphors (Belk 1989; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989; Hirschman 1988) to understand the special meanings ascribed to consumption activities, Belk et al.’s (1989) broader examination of the metaphorical juxtaposition of the sacred and profane, the special and ordinary, in the secular context of consumption served as a lens for gaining deeper insights into how UK consumers create sacred meanings in their secular celebration of Christmas. By exploring each of the properties of sacredness using unprompted data from the participants, the ‘specialness’ of the Christmas season was highlighted and “ways in which the profane consumption is made sacred” (Belk et al.1989:31) documented.

While the distinction between sacred and profane values in the secular world have challenged researchers’ thinking as indicated by the substantial number of citations Belk et al.’s (1989) work has received, there is little evidence of replication or extension outside of North America. The contribution of the present study is that the highly secular and multicultural context of the UK makes the stark paradox of the metaphor particularly fruitful, for although this country shares a common language and early history with the USA, there has been a significant reduction in religious observance. By focusing on the significance of sacred aspects of consumer behaviour against a backdrop where contemporary Christmas consumption is expressed through the purchase of an ever increasing constellation of products, services and seasonal merchandise, the findings illustrate how consumers sacralise their secular consumption of an event, which used to be widely celebrated as a religious festival. In response to Belk et al.’s (1989) recognition of the dearth of work on sacred and profane values, the findings offer examples of the sacralisation of consumption objects and experiences by consumers to create transcendent meaning in their lives, quite apart from marketers’ efforts and considerations of brands which are such an important part of the secular Christmas setting. Christmas with the family belongs to a different order of reality and is the crucial heart of the experience. Evidence that the sacred stands out from the profane was found in the gift-giving process by which ordinary objects were removed from the economic orbit and infused with significance through the process of selection, wrapping and display under the Christmas tree. Other aspects of sacralisation as established by Belk et al. (1989) were identified. However, in the UK context two issues emerged: a pronounced link with nostalgia emerged and a recognition by participants that Christmas is something which can only be made and not be bought. As a consumption fest, the purchase of a vast array of products is a mere backdrop. However, the nature and form of the Christmas consumption experience with its special foods, trees, decorations, cards, gifts and play was found to be family-specific. Through habituation each consumer learns and co-creates the ‘correct’ way to celebrate Christmas, with each family having its idiosyncratic routines. How the meaning changes over time suggests directions for further work.

REFERENCES

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