Spiritual Capital and the Production of Subcultural Distinction

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This paper argues that spiritual tastes, knowledge and dispositions are valuable symbolic resources by which consumers may create for themselves cultural and social distinction within specific spiritual subcultures. The current study applies Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and his theory of tastes to explore the mechanisms and processes by which individuals define, produce, and consume spiritual capital. Further, this study seeks to understand the conditions under which spiritual capital may be converted into other valuable resources such as economic capital.

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Spiritual Capital and the Production of Subcultural Distinction
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A dazzling array of spiritual lifestyles are available to today’s consumer. This study argues that these spiritual tastes and practices can operate as valuable cultural markers, offering one means by which consumers may create cultural and social distinction for themselves in today’s increasingly saturated symbolic universe. Accordingly, the current study ethnographically explores the production, consumption, conversion, valuation and investment of spiritual capital in one particular spiritual subculture: ‘Spirituality in the Pub’.

Spirituality, or the search for connection with the divine, may take the form of either religious or non-religious beliefs and behaviours, and involves the accumulation of skills, tastes, practices, artifacts and sometimes qualifications which the individual acquires during his or her spiritual journey. Both individually and collectively within a social group, these acquisitions can provide valuable cultural resources for the social construction of meaning (Besecke 2001). As a form of valued resource, or ‘capital’, these positional spiritual goods have come to be termed ‘spiritual capital’ (Berger and Hefner 2003; Finke 2003; Lambert 1992; Lillard and Ogaki 2006; Malloch 2003; Verter 2003; Voas 2006; Woodberry 2003).

Yet, not all spiritual goods are equally valued by all believers. By adopting and translating Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital within the context of a specific spiritual subculture (reflecting Thornton’s (1996) concept of ‘subcultural capital’), this study argues that certain spiritual tastes and practices may act as valuable positional goods in the competition for symbolic power, or recognition, within a specific spiritual subculture (Stolz 2006; Verter 1997; 2003; Ward 2003). Such cultural resources may not necessarily be valued within mainstream culture, yet within the spiritual subculture they can possess powerful effects. Acting as a valuable source of symbolic capital, spiritual capital may affect the standing of the individual within a spiritual subculture just as cultural capital affects one’s standing within society as a whole (Thornton 1996).

Following Verter’s (2003) adaptation of Bourdieu, this study recognizes spiritual capital as existing in three forms: Firstly, spiritual capital is embodied in the knowledge, abilities, dispositions, and tastes an individual has amassed in the field of spirituality. Thus, within a specific subfield, a preference for chanting over prayer may be considered a form of embodied spiritual capital, as could the ability to interpret biblical passages or communicate with spirits. Secondly, spiritual capital is objectified in the material goods which carry symbolic value in the spiritual subculture (e.g. sacred texts, crystals, incense, and ritual clothing). Objectified spiritual capital enables the display of its embodied form through the public consumption of these objects in a manner which confirms the individual’s mastery of the ‘appropriate’ spiritual skills. Finally, spiritual capital can be institutionalized via the acquisition of qualifications from spiritual organisations such as churches, spiritual orders, religious colleges, and other centres of spiritual study, thus confirming and legitimizing the embodied spiritual capital of the individual.

Spirituality in the Pub
The present study is exploring spiritual capital within the subcultural context of ‘Spirituality in the Pub’. This multi-faith group of individuals come together monthly in an inner-city pub to discuss issues of spiritual relevance to their lives. In addition to members from the Anglican, Catholic, Uniting and Salvation Army churches, Muslims, Jesuits, Buddhists, and Jews are also represented, as well as those from ‘New Age’ and indigenous faith traditions. This diversity of spiritual backgrounds provides a rich symbolic context in which the production, consumption and negotiation of spiritual capital is occurring. Within this ethnographic context, the present study is exploring three main theoretical arguments. These centre on the processes of conversion, valuation, and investment of spiritual capital.

Firstly, if spiritual tastes and practices can indeed be considered ‘capital’ in the Bourdieuan sense, then it may arguably be converted into other forms of capital, including economic capital. Several theorists have sought to quantitatively measure the effect of individual and community levels of spiritual capital on the accumulation of economic capital, exploring both direct means such as employment within a church organization, and more indirect means such as the acquisition of a spiritually-inspired productive work ethic (See Iannaccone 1998 for an extensive review of related studies; see also Lillard and Ogaki 2006; Malloch 2003; Peat 2005; Weber 1976 [1905]; Woodberry 2003). Yet despite this growing interest in the economic consequences of spirituality, little is known about the actual mechanisms by which a relationship between spirituality and the market may operate (Malloch 2003). In response, this study proffers a Bourdieuan approach...
to understanding the complex systems and practices by which spiritual capital and other forms of capital may be related, depicting spirituality as an aesthetic taste which is complexly interrelated with other forms of capital within specific fields of power.

Secondly, unlike its economic counterpart, ‘spiritual capital is not a stable currency’ (Verter 2003, p.159). Due to its highly symbolic nature, the value of spiritual currency is in constant flux, subject to the fluctuations of the spiritual market and its players. This instability is particularly salient in a ‘sub-field of restricted cultural production’ (Bourdieu 1993, p.185) such as SIP, where cultural goods are produced by producers for their own consumption, rather than for consumption on the mass-market (the ‘sub-field of large-scale production’, 1993, p.186). In a sub-field of restricted production, producers develop their own criteria for the evaluation of their cultural goods. These criteria are a source of struggle for control over the right to define legitimate cultural forms. Thus, this study is exploring the processes by which members of the subcultural group identify and co-define their sources of spiritual capital.

Finally, in the same way that individuals adopt certain economic investment strategies, they also pursue both conscious and unconscious ‘investment strategies’ for other more symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, heeding Arnould and Thompson (2005, p.876), this study explores how consumers select the investment strategies that guide their accumulation of spiritual capital, allocating spiritual, economic, and cultural capital resources between competing spiritual market offerings.

As such, this study responds to calls for further research into ‘the micropolitics of consumption’ as a basis for affiliation and distinction in everyday life (Holt 1998, p.22).

References

The Interpretation of ‘Open Text’ Advertisements
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There has been a noticeable shift in print advertisements from functional to symbolic approaches as the use of rhetorical style in magazine advertisements has grown progressively more complex and elaborated over time (O’Donohoe, 2001). Thus the interpretation of brands and marketing communication has become extremely challenging, mainly due to the plethora of available cultural meanings and interpretive perspectives in combination with the instability of social categories (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Kates, 2002). The aim of this paper is to examine print advertising interpretation by different ‘interpretive communities’, in order to empirically explore how audiences interpret ‘open’ advertisements.