Special Session Summary  Beyond the Sacred-Profane Dichotomy in Consumer Research

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OVERVIEW AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This session contributes to a theory of the relationship between consumer goods and what is conventionally termed “the sacred.” Discussions of the sacred in consumer research are rare. Only 10 papers in ACR proceedings devote explicit attention to this aspect of consumption and consumer goods, and most discussions of possession meaning neglect the sacred dimension. And yet, as previous consumer research demonstrates, important life transition experiences (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Belk 1992; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2000; Otnes and Lowry 1993) implicate the sacred and sacred goods.

This session contributes to consumer behavior theory about sacred consumer goods in three important ways. First, we demonstrate the limitations of the Durkheimian sacred-profane dichotomy that constitutes the received wisdom in previous consumer research. In our sample, consumers believe objects combine both sacred and profane qualities either temporally (across the life of the object) or within a single historical moment. Objects are more reasonably described in terms of contextually and relationally ascribed sacred and profane qualities, mapped over a temporal lifecycle. Second, consumers enlist marketers to help transform objects from profane to sacred or to help recover or sustain the sacred from the profane qualities immanent in an object. In contrast with previous research that casts markets into the profane domain, marketers create sacredness in a myriad of ways in cooperation with and sometimes in opposition to consumers. Third, the sacred-profane continuum is enriched with the addition of a purity-pollution continuum based on research in South Asia. Specifically, the purity-pollution continuum enhances our understanding of how consumers are transformed through strategic use of consumer goods that vary in their sacred and profane qualities.

The session draws on empirical studies of consumer and marketer practices with jewelry in both Western and South Asian contexts. Several unique features characterized the papers presented in this session proposal. First, all three papers focus on jewelry. Laden with material and symbolic, intimate and social meanings, jewelry is an apt substantive domain to explore a brew of both sacred and profane properties. Second, all the papers identify family and household as key sites for enacting sacralization processes and all papers touch on the intergenerational transfer of meanings. Third, the three papers represent a diversity of cultures, informants and qualitative methods to advance our understanding of sacred consumer goods.

The Arnould and Price paper sets the theoretical frame for the session and draws on empirical illustrations to support an amended theory of sacredness that differentiates it from modern conceptions that inform previous theory and research. The Hartman and Kiecker paper uncovers how consumers and marketers cooperate and collide to manipulate goods that combine sacred and profane meanings. Their research identifies how marketers contribute to or facilitate consumers’ aims with regard to the creation and/or intensification of sacred possession meanings. They employ a life cycle perspective to articulate underlying sacralizing processes not previously identified in the literature. Fernandez and Veer’s research reasserts the importance of an alternative, neglected explanatory model to the sacred-profane dichotomy, that of purity and pollution. Further, their paper shows, via jewelry in Indian weddings, how sacred meanings move across family and generational boundaries, linking and dividing social categories as they do so.

“The Proposal Arnould and Price make in this paper is that in postmodern consumer culture the sacred and profane no longer comprise (if they ever did) the dichotomy previous research supposes. Their approach borrows from Miller’s (1998) insistence on the infusion of the sacred into mundane shopping behaviors. They borrow from Kopytoff (1986) to suggest that the sacred and profane may be viewed as a situational or temporal continuum. Their view incorporates Campbell’s (1987) idea of imaginative longing as a key motivational force in modern consumerism. And they borrow ideas of the relational nature and mobility of object meanings from semiotic and post-modern theorists (Elliott and Wattanasuan 1998; Floch 1995; Holt 1997). They extend these perspectives in a re-consideration of the classic sacred-profane dichotomy.

Arnould and Price demonstrate the myriad ways that both sacred and profane meanings attach to special possessions and are strategically and contextually ascribed both by consumers and marketers. Their theoretical framework builds from qualitative data sets generated to identify cherished possessions and their significance to consumers. They conducted open-ended depth interviews with a broad range of consumers about a variety of topics. In these discussions, jewelry emerged as one of the items informants most frequently mentioned. Subsequent data collection focused on rings. In this paper, analysis drew upon the uses and meanings of cherished jewelry.

They outline empirical findings that contrast with prior research on sacred and profane consumer goods. First, they found cases where attributions of profane meanings to consumer goods do not endanger attributions of sacred meanings. Consumers attribute both sacred and profane meanings; the meanings attached vary with use context. For example, one family member loans another money (profane) in exchange for a ring in order to avoid pawnning the ring. The first person is motivated by the belief that the ring should become a bequest (sacred) to the second person’s daughter. In other cases, a profane meaning is covered over through narrative with a sacred meaning—an engagement ring is modified to propel a story that retains both the (profane) betrayal of a broken engagement and a subsequent (sacred) triumph and redemption.

Second, Arnould and Price identify several cases where consumers imaginatively distribute profane and sacred meanings. For example, a consumer may gift an object at a point when meanings
are profane for the owner in order to sustain the object’s sacred meanings. Thus, a divorced mother passes a now profane wedding ring to her daughter giving her custody of sacred meanings that she can no longer sustain. The converse is also found. For example, the current owner considers liquidating a pocket watch contaminated with the essence of the current owner’s late revered father since potential recipients “in the current generation” would not revere it.

Third, in contrast with research that associates the marketplace with the profane, the authors show that North American consumers may enlist the marketplace both in sacralization and in the perpetuation of sacredness. Thus, consumers may use jewelers as ritual agents (Rook 1985) to move objects imaginatively from one condition to another. Sometimes jewelers are enlisted to facilitate intergenerational transfers. For example, a grandparent’s small diamond is integrated into a new setting for a granddaughter’s wedding. A mother’s pearl necklace is remade for a daughter’s 50th birthday. Sometimes jewelers are enlisted to create items that amalgamate life transition meanings. For example, a person has a high school class ring melted down, shaped into a nugget and set with a diamond from her mother’s necklace. Or, the diamond from a small engagement ring is added to a larger setting to celebrate a 25th wedding anniversary. The enlarged ring symbolizes the rite of intensification, the anniversary celebration.

Finally, examination of consumer-to-consumer and business-to-consumer practices allows the authors to identify some sacralization and perpetuation processes not previously identified (Belk, et al. 1989). The role of narrative framing has been mentioned, for example. Arnould and Price also found people purchasing jewelry in the past in anticipation that it would become sacred in the future. Further, they bundle jewels and precious jewelry from diverse kinsfolk to multiply and intensify the sacred quality of each element. But these sets do not form a collection in the conventional sense. In a different vein is the case of jewelers who refuse or discourage clients from breaking up an aesthetically unique piece of jewelry, but instead substitute new jewels and setting. In one case, a jeweler actually bought the item and substituted another. Thus, jewelers may sometimes act as guardians of sacred objects for the “right” owner. Guardianship has been noted previously, but only in domestic possession transfer contexts.

The authors suggest that well-known postmodern social processes favor changed emphases in the constitution of the sacred. These include the erosion of spatial horizons and boundaries, the flattening of time, the premium placed on identity work, and the reconstitution of personal morality as emotional self-expression and self-definition. Three sacred outcomes can be identified. Salific moments are unscripted eruptions of the sacred in otherwise mundane contexts, such as perfect moments in sports contests during which people experience an aesthetic unity of being. Affective parishes describe spatially localized eruptions of the sacred such as the Toronto Blessing (see www.tacf.org), and gatherings of consumption tribes. Finally, spontaneous shrineing refers to the consecration of the self, often expressed through self-indexical possession meanings (Grayson and Shulman 2000), one of the differentiating elements of the sacred in post-modernity.

“The Gold that Binds: The Ritualistic Use of Jewelry in An Indian Wedding”  
Karen V. Fernandez and Ekant Veer

Fernandez and Veer use depth interviews and participant observation of a Hindu wedding to examine the bi-directional transfer of meaning between jewelry and extended family in the wedding ritual. They show the wearing of gifted and borrowed jewelry is part of a boundary crossing ritual whereby the bride is purified and crosses the threshold of the groom’s extended family. The sources (functional, indexical and spiritual) and loci of meaning (private and public) of the jewelry are used to co-create a continuum of sacred meanings that become part of the legacy of the jewelry as each successive bride wears it. The authors have published an extended version of their paper in the current volume of Advances in Consumer Research.

“Jewelry—Passing Along the Continuum of Sacred and Profane Meanings”  
Cathy L. Hartman and Pamela Kiecker

This paper examines sacred and profane meaning as a cycle evidenced in the life stages or biography of jewelry. The diverse perspectives of jewelry manufacturers, retailers, purchasers, and owners are represented, offering rich insights into the meanings associated with jewelry, which are as individual as those who create, sell, buy, possess, and/or re-fashion the pieces. The creation of meaning is viewed through Kopytoff’s (1986) process of commoditization. A jewelry piece begins its “life” with its fabrication by jewelers and other artists, passing through retail jewelry sellers, to its acquisition by consumers via purchase, gifting, inheritance, and potential re-creation and entry into a new cycle of meaning.

The study uses depth interviews with jewelry manufacturers/jewelry artists, jewelry retailers, and jewelry owners to explore the variety of meanings associated with individual pieces of jewelry that are intended for both sacred and profane purposes. Insights from the interviews suggest that the lifecycle of jewelry may contain a continuum of symbolisms, representing varying degrees of the sacred and the profane, at different times.

Interviews include (1) a “creator” of sacred pieces—an artist who sees her jewelry creations as “heritage” pieces and strives to personalize each piece to its owner to solidify its sacredness; (2) a “bridger” of sacred pieces—a retailer of vintage pieces who may or may not know the specific sacred history of jewelry but “sees” their sacredness and makes special, personal connections with her customers to ensure that the sacredness of each piece is retained; (3) owners (and the jewelers and retailers involved in their acquisition of goods) who variously create, maintain, and restore the sacred and/or profane nature of jewelry pieces, including a divorced woman who has a cocktail ring made from her wedding/engagement rings, a mother who creates identical rings from her own heritage piece to leave to her two daughters upon her death, and a young couple who “build” their future together with a ring that represents a special part of both of their pasts.

Each story traces the lifecycle of meanings running along the sacred/profane continuum and teaches us more about the power of possessions in communicating meaning throughout our lives. Analysis of the course of jewelry’s post-purchase lifecycle leads the authors to recognize several ways in which consumers’ productive behavior leads to modifications in the dichotomous portrayal of the sacred and profane. Consumers’ productive behaviors move items between the spheres of sacred and profane that in classic formulations are supposed to be insulated from each other. Consumers’ productive behaviors, or undertaken by jewelers on their behalf, may convert formally unconvertible profane items into sacred ones. Data also shows there is considerable reorganizing and reshuffling between the spheres. For example, profane items may be restored to sacred status through the intervention of jewelers. Sacred items at risk of profanation may be preserved through jewelers’ enhancements.
REFERENCES


