Sacred and Profane Consumption Revisited: the Case of Fair Trade Consumers

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Short abstract: The intent is to revisit Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry’s seminal work on sacred and profane consumption with a view to exploring the extent to which their conceptualisation holds for Fair Trade. A short history and definition of Fair Trade is given, prompting the query: “People readily understand what Fair Trade does for producers, but what does it do for consumers?” Responses to this prompt suggest the terms sacred and profane can be meaningfully invoked. Methodological issues concerned with the investigation are discussed. Initial findings indicate the need to adjust existing conceptualisation of the sacred and profane in consumption.

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In this working paper we attempt to bring greater clarity to our understanding of voluntary simplicity by examining the values, attitudes and marketplace behaviors of those adopting the lifestyle. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were administered with self-proclaimed voluntary simplifiers. Initial results provide insight into many dimensions of voluntary simplicity. In particular, the data reveal an interesting pattern among participants with regards to motivations for choosing this lifestyle. The stated motivations varied from individual to individual and included environmental concern, desire for financial independence and time freedom. However, the concept of community, both local and global, entwined many of their reflections. The local community aspect dealt with the face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and community members, whereas the global community referred to all living things on the planet, including plants, animals, and humans. Along with the discussion of community arose the desire to feel “connected” with nature, people and their inner self. This indicates that perhaps the most basic underlying motivation for choosing voluntary simplicity is the desire to feel connected to one’s inner, external and global community.

The need for connectivity is universal. The means by which voluntary simplifiers satisfy this need suggests that past consumer behavior research, which draws a direct link between identity and material items (Belk 1988), may need to be refined. The findings also suggest that marketers seeking to increase consumer well-being must decrease their focus on material possessions and emphasize experiences that facilitate connectivity.

References

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Conceptualisation
Two main responses to globalisation prevail. Protagonists committed to programmes of industrial and economic modernisation emphasise the role of world trade in attaining universal peace, prosperity and well-being. Antagonistic to the consumer culture driven by marketing and neo-liberalist activity, a ‘rainbow coalition’ points to a long list of the ills of globalisation ranging from habitat destruction through ‘air miles’ issues to child labour.

‘Third Way’ approaches to globalisation attempt a measured response based on the reality of the current propensity to consume. Accepting the dominance of consumerism, strategic solutions to the ‘dark side’ of globalisation are understood in terms of responsible and ethical practices by producers and consumers alike. The Fair Trade movement represents a case in point.

Whilst recording the positive effects of Fair Trade on producers in developing countries, this paper proposes to concentrate on its benefits to consumers. A definition of Fair Trade is given:

“Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers–especially in the South. Fair Trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.” (European Fair Trade Association 2002)
This generates a discussion of the relational dynamics between consumers and Fair Trade producers. Given the Christian or humanist foundings of some Fair Trade companies, this discussion leads canonically to issues of the sacred and profane.

Russell Belk and his colleagues assert that anything may become sacred (or profane) as a result of a process of the investment of meaning by an individual or group. ‘Sacred’ consumption refers to that which is “more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self”. The ‘profane’ is “ordinary and lacks the ability to induce ecstatic, self-transcending, extraordinary experience.” (all quotes, Belk et al 1989, p.13). Experiences of Fair Trade suggest that this notion of profanity needs adjustment. It is precisely in the mundane, everyday world of making coffee, washing clothes and dusting ornaments that we find the magical reality of our humanity. When the objects of our domestic actions are already ‘pre-sacralised’ through being fairly traded, then those actions serve to intensify that sacredness.

Design and Method

The central aim of the research is an inquiry:

“To what extent is Belk et al’s conceptualisation of the ‘sacred and profane in consumer behavior’ consistent with the experiences and understandings of Fair Trade consumers?”

There are methodological challenges in addressing the sacred and profane. The terms are complex. For example, Belk et al list twelve ‘properties of sacredness’. They are also open to considerable personal interpretation. Further, initial informal discussion between the researcher and informants suggested a degree of perplexity in relating the sacred and profane to consumption. The researcher was also aware of the twin pitfalls of reification and the ‘double hermeneutic’ (Giddens 1976)—the phenomenon of respondents adopting the researcher’s terminology in formulating their responses.

With these challenges in mind, the researcher drafted a semi-structured interview schedule that would progressively create a framework for the discussion of the sacred and profane. The schedule has four sections:

I) Details of respondent’s Fair Trade purchase and use.
II) An exploration of interviewees’:
   - Length of involvement and reason for involvement in Fair Trade;
   - Fair Trade meanings;
   - Personal beliefs and values;
   - Understanding of the relevance of these beliefs and values to Fair Trade involvement;
   - Opinions of personal and other changes connected to the development of Fair Trade.
III) Using a set of consumer artefacts (e.g. Fair Trade coffee) and written prompts (e.g. quotes), the researcher and research participant engaged in discussions on:
   - Reactions to Fair Trade and non-Fair Trade products;
   - Intentional action and the Fair Trade consumer;
   - Comparative and contrasting views of the consumer culture, elicited using written prompts:
     i) “… Render therefore unto Caesar …” (Matthew, xxii, 22);
     ii) “The consumer society exists today …” (Miller 1995);
     iii) Five summary critiques of the consumer culture derived from Droge et al (1993);
     iv) The ‘definitions’ of sacred and profane used by Belk et al (1989);
     v) A description of Fair Trade Christmas composed using four of the twelve properties of sacredness.
IV) Personal details: age / occupation / education / religion.

The schedule is a mix of conversational prompts typical of traditional qualitative research and the use of media that have a market research character.

Due to the origins of Fair Trade and the focus on sacred/profane, respondents were purposively sampled as Christian and ‘no formal religious affiliation’ (NFRA). Additionally, ‘greater than ten years as a Fair Trade consumer’ was used as a selection criterion.

Initial Findings

Currently, data from 10 interviews have been processed. Interviewee breakdown is: 4 female/Christian; 3 male/Christian; 2 female/NFRA; and 1 male/NFRA. Experience as a Fair Trade consumer ranged from 10 to 40 years. (Interviewing of other respondents continues; more NFRA’s need to be recruited.)

Initial findings indicate:

• Considerable use of Fair Trade products in daily life;
• A belief in making social justice a reality, common to all interviewees;
• Clear articulation of Fair Trade as a means of substantiating those beliefs;
• Christian respondents expressed the view that their faith needed to be lived out as direct connection with the Poor and Fair Trade was one means for doing this;
• Respondents least favoured the Puritan critique of the consumer culture and most favoured the Quaker;
• Before considering the sacred/profane issue, many interviewees referred to certain products as evil. Connections were made to ecological degradation and particularly the promotion of formula milk in developing countries. Respondents used these opinions to inform their complex reflections on the sacred and profane. For Fair Trade products, there was partial agreement with the
definition of sacred but the facet of ‘ordinariness’ provoked rich and varied responses, difficult to reconcile with the definition of the profane.

References

Effects of Interior Color on Healthcare Consumers: A 360 degree Photo Simulation Experiment
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The effects of the ‘servicescape’ (Bitner, 1992) on consumer behavior have long been recognized. Especially in high-stress services, such as medical care, the physical environment can strongly influence customer evaluation. This experiment investigates the effect of interior color on patients’ emotional and cognitive appraisal and perceived service quality. Subjects were exposed to QuickTime 360° panorama photos of a first aid examination room and a private ward room. Blue walls (as compared to white walls) reduce anxiety and increase cognitive and affective appraisal and even perceived service quality.

Introduction
Hospitalization can have a great psychological impact. A patient’s health is at stake, and (s)he is temporarily separated from family and friends. Under such conditions, patients display a strong need for information concerning their health and treatment (Engström, 1984). However, reliable information about the quality of healthcare is rather difficult or even impossible to obtain, as patients lack insight into the procedure and effects of the treatment. To reduce this uncertainty, patients will be inclined to infer their judgment of service quality from other indicators, such as the tangible environment. Therefore, physical aspects of the service environment play an important role in customers’ evaluation of healthcare services (Arneill & Devlin, 2002).

A considerable amount of empirical evidence is available about the effects of environmental factors on a wide variety of consumer responses (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Historically, the atmosphere in clinical environments has been cold and sterile due to color, lighting and furniture. The current trend in hospital interior design is to create an attractive, relaxing atmosphere in order to relieve patients’ stress and anxiety, improve their emotions and hence encourage the healing process (Devlin & Arneill, 2003). Color can be used effectively for this purpose (Calkins, 2002; Marberry & Zagon, 1994). Blue has been found to be the most preferred color throughout color literature (e.g. Bellizzi, Crowley & Hasty, 1983; Guilford & Smith, 1959), and stress-reducing effects of short wavelength colors (blue, green) are well-documented (e.g., Birren, 1979; Valdez & Mehraban, 1994). Yet, solid empirical evidence for anxiety-reducing and affect-enhancing effects of interior color in healthcare settings is largely lacking.

In this study we investigated the effects of wall color on anxiety, pleasure, evaluation of the room and perceived service quality in a simulation of a general hospital. We expected subjects exposed to a hospital room with blue walls to experience more positive emotions, and lower anxiety, to evaluate the room more positively, and to appraise the quality of the service higher than subjects exposed to a white hospital room.

Method

Procedure
A total of 90 students participated in a uni-factorial between-subjects design (blue vs. white wall color), using desktop computers in a social science laboratory.

First, participants were asked to imagine being hospitalized with a leg fracture, after a fall from a ladder. The vignette described how the patient, upon arrival in the hospital, was admitted to a first aid examination room. After the doctor made X-ray pictures, he performed surgery on the patient.

Next, for 70 seconds, subjects were exposed to a QuickTime 360° panorama of an examination room. Photos were taken at a local hospital. In a 360° panorama, the direction and rotation speed of the representation can be controlled by moving the mouse in the desired direction. Wall color was manipulated using Adobe Photoshop. Subjects were randomly assigned to either the white (Hue 336°, Saturation 3%, Brightness 93%) or the blue condition (Hue 226°, Saturation 27%, Brightness 80%). They filled out a questionnaire measuring anxiety, pleasure, cognitive appraisal and perceived service quality. Subsequently, the vignette described the patient being transferred to a private ward room for a 10-day recovery. A 360° panorama of the ward room was shown. Again, subjects were randomly assigned to the color conditions. The same colors were used as in the examination room, and again, the cognitive appraisal, pleasure and anxiety-scales were administered.