Sacred Places: an Exploratory Investigation of Consuming Pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT
In line with the growing commercialization of religion, this paper focuses on the consumption of sacred place within the context of the Christian pilgrimage. Theoretically, we raise the profile of place within consumer research and contribute to understandings of the relationship between the sacred and the profane.

INTRODUCTION
The aim of this paper is to explore the religious consumption experience of pilgrims within sacred places. The interplay between economics and spirituality has been well documented within consumer research literature with regards to the sacralization of consumer culture (O’Guinn 1991, Kozinets 2001, Muniz and Schau, 2005). However, there is less research interest on the secularization of the sacred in relation to the commercialization of religion. We contribute to this research stream by exploring the context of the Christian pilgrimage.

Previous research on the interaction between the spiritual and the material has focused on people (O’Guinn 1991), possessions (Muniz and Schau 2005) and activities (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993, Arnould and Price 1993). Our focus brings the issue of place to the forefront, highlighting that place is central to our understandings and experiences. We begin by discussing the concept of pilgrimage to help contextualize the study.

DEFINING PILGRIMAGE
The traditional definition of pilgrimage relates to “a physical and spiritual journey in search of truth, in search of what is sacred and holy” (Vulkonic 1996 cited in Timothy and Olsen 2006). This perspective prioritizes religious and spiritual fulfillment whereby pilgrims journey to a holy site where the earth and the divine are believed to meet. Within contemporary consumer culture the definition of pilgrimage has evolved to encompass more than holy sites alone. As Morinis (1992) suggested, a pilgrimage site can be any place where an individual finds enlightenment, clarity or happiness. Following this approach, pilgrimage can be discussed within the context of dark tourism to places like Auschwitz or celebrity pilgrimages such as a trip to Graceland.

Pilgrimage sites become sacralized because of events that have taken place there. In this paper we focus on Christian pilgrimage sites. For example, Lourdes in France is seen as one of the most celebrated Roman Catholic shrines in the world, with a yearly intake of approximately 5 million pilgrims, travelling to worship the apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1858. Similarly, Fatima in Portugal receives approximately a million pilgrims between May and October each year, honoring the apparition of the Virgin Mary to three children in 1917. A typical Christian pilgrimage involves processions, individual prayer, meditation, and collective worship during religious services.

Given the growing commercialization of religion, a consumption vocabulary surrounds Christian pilgrimage discourse. The pilgrim is increasingly viewed as a tourist and the pilgrimage site becomes the marketplace where hotels, souvenir shops, restaurants and tour operators all compete to attract the lucrative pilgrim consumer. In this respect, pilgrimage sites provide an overlapping of the sacred and the profane, offering an appropriate context to explore and seek understanding of the complex relationship between religion and consumerism.

RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY WITHIN CONSUMER CULTURE
Statistics point to the global decline of religious practice and belief. In Scotland, where the research was conducted, the 2001 population census found that thirty percent of the Scottish population had no religious affiliation whatsoever (Voas 2006). A similar trend is present in the USA with the “American Religious Identification Survey” discovering a nine percent drop in the number of citizens identifying themselves with a religion, and with Christianity seeing a twenty percent drop in following between the years 1990 and 2001 (Kosmin and Mayer 2001). In contrast, consumers are moving towards the production and reworking of their own religions (Scott and Maclaran 2009), implying that individual beliefs have more significance in everyday life than the social structures and institutions that support them. For example, in Ireland, despite falling Church attendance, Palmer and Gallagher (2007) argued that the ideology of religion remains important, thereby reinforcing the multidimensionality of religiosity. Religious institutions may have particular difficulty in appealing to younger age groups who seek innovative non-traditional approaches (Davis and Yip 2004).

Equally, while we have witnessed a decline in traditional religious beliefs, there has been a proliferation of New Age spiritual thinkers, who according to Rindlesh (2005, 343) position New Age spirituality as “social products” for consumption.

SACRED CONSUMPTION
Following a Durkheimian approach, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989, 13) defined the sacred in contrast to the profane. They argued that sacred occurrences may be “ecstatic” and “self-transcending” and are often “aided by a social context involving fellow believers who also revere the object or experience.” In opposition, the profane is “ordinary and lacks the ability to induce ecstatic, self-transcending, extraordinary experiences.” However, research has acknowledged a blurring and narrowing of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. This is evident through two parallel trends in relation to religion and consumption, first, the secularization of the sacred and second, the sacralization of the secular (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989).

The sacred experience is no longer confined to the religious arena, rather consumption activities offer the possibility of transcendence (Arnould and Price 1993, Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993, Hamilton and Hewer 2009), filling the void left by the less central role of religion in everyday life. Shopping malls are seen as “cathedrals of consumption” that offer “enchanted settings” where consumers can gain a sense of community (Ritzer 2005, 7). Fans worship and imbue celebrities with god-like powers and fan clubs serve important social functions, facilitating sharing and bonding (O’Guinn 1991). “ Cherished possessions” or “inalienable wealth” (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004, 609) account for an important part of the self. The religiosity of brand communities highlights the transformation of seemingly profane and functional consumer goods into objects that offer emancipation and liberation (Muniz and Schau 2005). This use of religious themes and narratives in marketplace discussions points to “the continued presence, vitality, and relevance of religious connections” (Muniz and Schau 2005, 745). Through consumption practices “the material world can become the seat of the sacred again; consumption can become (re)ensouled” (Kozinets 2002, 32).
Equally, religious commercialization is growing as religious souvenirs, devotional objects, music and home decorations objectify the sacred (Ger and Wilk 2005) while religious theme parks merge the sacred and profane (O’Guinn and Belk 1989). Trends such as these draw attention to the expanding reach of market capitalism, supporting the idea of a consumer civilization (Campbell 2004).

METHOD

This exploratory study was conducted in order to understand the experiences and opinions of visitors to Christian shrines. Ten one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents who identified themselves as Christian and who had participated in a Christian pilgrimage. Access to five of the respondents was negotiated with the assistance of a parish priest from a local Catholic church. Following a snowball method, the parish priest then aided an introduction with a local Episcopalian minister which led to three further respondents. All of these respondents practiced their religion on a regular basis. Although not included in the current paper, we also conducted two interviews with respondents who identified themselves as Atheist. As shown in table 1, respondents were mixed in terms of gender and age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Religious Belief</th>
<th>Pilgrimage Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Jerusalem, Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Taxi Driver</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lourdes (several times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lourdes (several times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Lourdes (several times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Clerical work</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lourdes (once)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Lourdes, Walshingham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>House-wife</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lourdes, Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>House-wife</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Lourdes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted in a social room within the Catholic Church hall and lasted up to 100 minutes. Interview topics focused on accessing the lived experience of respondents’ understandings of pilgrimage. Discussion centered on defining pilgrimage, personal meaning of pilgrimage and the role of marketing in the pilgrimage experience. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. We adopted a hermeneutic approach to data analysis by first seeking an idiographic understanding of each transcript and second, seeking a holistic understanding by exploring common patterns and themes (Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994).

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in relation to three emergent themes; understanding pilgrimage, the social context, and pilgrimage as a consumption experience versus pilgrimage as a spiritual experience.

UNDERSTANDING PILGRIMAGE

Belhassen, Caton and Stewart (2008) suggested that a fully comprehensive understanding of place cannot be obtained without consideration of physical environments, experiences and meanings. This provides an appropriate framework to deconstruct the meaning of pilgrimage and present this section of the findings. Although each aspect is discussed separately, it should be apparent that physical environment, experience and meaning are interrelated.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Given the centrality of place to the pilgrim experience, the aspects of physical location were frequently mentioned during interview discussions. For respondents, a pilgrimage site is somewhere that something “special” or “miraculous” has occurred. Put simply, it is “a holy site.”

Mark: “I feel that it has to have some type of spiritual core to it, some type of pull that makes people deem it as special enough to visit.”

Daniel: “certain locations have this, what experts call, a numinous feel to it, where you actually feel when you are in a place that there is something special about it.”

Whilst the idea of specialness derives from shared social and cultural understandings relating to historical sacred occurrences, some referred to more personal events. For example, Mark considered his pilgrimage to Lourdes “as being one of the curers for my illness” reinforcing the powerful, self-transcendent nature of the sacred (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1989). Irene described a pilgrimage as “a personal mission” while Katy commented:

Katy: “I think it has to have something special to the individual. For me Lourdes is very special, not because I have seen huge miracles occurring there, but I truly believe that little miracles happen there every day. And to see small children who are seriously ill and people seriously ill, but who still believe and smile, and laugh, that is humbling and puts life in perspective for you, makes you wonder what am I worrying for? So for me, that humbling aspect is a miracle in itself.”

Such social and personal understandings result in the pilgrimage site being viewed as “a place of worship,” or “a place of prayer” where pilgrims can celebrate their faith in a spiritual centre.

Another key theme that emerged in relation to the physical environment was the way a pilgrimage must involve a “journey” and consequently, somewhere away from one’s everyday domain. As Fiona commented, “a pilgrimage for me is travelling out with your normal environment and everyday life.” For all of our respondents, the pilgrimage had necessitated significant travel, normally involving a trip from the UK to continental Europe. However, further analysis of this idea reveals that the physical distance travelled is not the most important criteria of the journey.

Katy: “I think the problem is we have got it into our minds that by going further afield we are making more of an effort, but I think that we all journey, and can all make good pilgrimages, as long as we set out and achieve the goal.”
that we aimed for, no matter where we actually made the journey. I would not say you have to leave the county to make a pilgrimage, I mean it is all about a journey. And for some people it might be a hard journey just getting into the door of the church, or going to mass, so in that way yes I think for some it could be a pilgrimage. But for me mass, and prayer are my everyday norms, so going to Lourdes and other pilgrimage places, I feel helps me learn more about my faith and allows me to broaden my spiritual and faith journey.”

This further suggests that pilgrimages are individualistic experiences that involve a distancing from one’s daily routines and realities. This physical distancing or escapism provides the additional benefit of time, or as one respondent puts it, “time for thoughts and prayer.” Although from the above, it is evident that the physical environment is important, for many this is not the only or central aspect to a pilgrimage. Indeed, for some, the emotional journey becomes far more significant. This is explored further in the following section on the meanings of pilgrimage.

MEANINGS

Given the personalized nature of pilgrimage, it can have many layers of meaning. Some see it as “enlightening,” and a time for “spiritual growth in your inner faith.” In this sense, it offers a reminder of the nature of existence:

Daniel: “The basis of pilgrimage as far as I can understand it is the notion that our life on earth is transient, that we are all pilgrims in the sense that we have come, and we are moving and we are going, we cannot settle down here forever, we are on a pilgrimage. And the notion of going to holy places is to in a way, for many people anyway, is to bring that realization. .....to bring people to an awareness of the spiritual image of human existence.”

A common theme for many respondents was the potential of pilgrimage in relation to “the liberation of emotions.” Particularly significant, was the idea of mixed emotions. While respondents mentioned “enjoyment,” “pleasure” and “fulfillment,” they also talked about “sacrifice,” “effort,” “tiredness,” “exhaustion” and a “testing,” “pushing” and “draining” of the self. Some respondents employ exchange terminology in an attempt to explain such mixed emotions. In other words, while the experience “can be quite exhausting both physically and mentally,” this is “in exchange for spiritual fulfilment” and the achievement of other personal spiritual goals. As such, pilgrims are content to endure the “emotional cost” in order to reap individual benefits.

For some respondents it was this exchange aspect that differentiates a pilgrimage from a holiday:

Mark: “there are times you will be in blasting heat and you think wow if I was on holiday I would be sunbathing or having a drink, but that is not why you’re there, you’re there to help the sick and to gain better spirituality yourself. So yes I agree there is and always should be a level of penance involved, I think that’s what makes it worthwhile, and what separates normal holidays from pilgrimage.”

Robert: “going on your holidays is solely to relax, but I think if you go on a pilgrimage you look to test yourself too, and it is not all about relaxing so I believe there is a level of penance and servitude involved.”

Fiona: “A tourist is there to take pictures and do their noisy and see what the hype is and then move on, and to buy the tack, to buy the flashing Our lady and the huge tacky rosaries and all that. The pilgrim I feel is there for his or her purpose, you are there for your spiritual need, for you to take your time to pray the way you want to pray, to light your candles and all the things you want to do.”

Previous consumer research on experiential activities tends to adopt a positive tone in that they afford consumers the opportunity for relaxation, fun and pleasure (Goulding et al. 2008), and even in some cases a kind of flow experience (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993). In contrast, this study highlights the dual and complex nature of emotional release within the pilgrimage context. Alongside consumption and enjoyment, pilgrimages require “effort,” “hard work” and “penance.” These multiple meanings produce differential but complementing pilgrimage experiences, to which we now turn.

EXPERIENCE

This section focuses on the various different roles played and performed by the pilgrim. These different roles can be partly explained by individual motivations behind the pilgrimage:

Daniel: “In my case, when I go to a place it is more for historical reasons, more because I am interested in the history of religion, I am interested in where it comes from if you like, where its sources are, it was for this reason that I went to Jerusalem and Rome. It is maybe a bit idiosyncratic, I don’t go for the usual reasons, I don’t feel obliged to go as a kind of religious duty, I go out of interest to search out the underlying sort of historical meaning or truth behind the Christian faith.”

Mark: “For me I have been to Lourdes as a member of the sick twice and as a helper once also. I feel that you get different things from the experience each time you go. When I went as a sick person, I found that it was meeting people and the generosity of people that moved me most, but as you go as a helper it changes as it is much more rigid and you have to do certain things. Making it more difficult at times, but also incredibly rewarding, as you know you are helping bring some peace to others who are now in a situation I was in before.”

The pilgrim site thus provides a stage where pilgrims are helpers, cultural and historical enthusiasts, worshippers or in search of healing.

Findings reveal that within the pilgrimage site, individuals often perform a dual role fluctuating between pilgrim and tourist. Despite these overlaps respondents are clear that “it is not by any means a holiday” and underlying motivation separate the pilgrim and the tourist.

Pilgrimages are often presented in a similar fashion as package holidays making it difficult to make a clear distinction between the two. We suggest that a distinction between journey and destination may be appropriate. Tourists consider the pilgrimage site as a destination, somewhere to explore while for pilgrims, the site is part of a journey. This calls to mind Belk, Ger and Askegaard’s (2003) research on consumer desire. They argued that the journey towards aspirational consumption goals can be enjoyable in itself, sometimes outweighing the benefits that are achieved once the goal is realized. Within the context of pilgrimage, it is the journey itself that pilgrims value and in this respect it is pilgrims who gain
the deepest satisfaction from the pilgrim site. This reinforces the need to think of place as comprising different elements; while the physical environment remains the same, individual experiences will differ (Belhassen, Caton and Stewart 2008).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Pilgrims can make their journey individually or as a part of an organized tour group, both of which provide slightly different experiences.

Robert: “On your own you have the freedom to do as you wish meaning you can tailor your journey to suit you, your pilgrimage is to benefit you the way you want and need, extra prayer time, etc. But also on the organized trips you have more structure and routine, which can limit you, but you have comradeship, which can be nice and spiritual in its own way.”

Even those who make an individual pilgrimage are surrounded by other people, an issue that appeared to be central and “vital” to the pilgrimage experience for our respondents. Through a “common thirst for the some kind of spiritual reality,” people from diverse nationalities and cultures are connected.

Daniel: “I think it enhances or it should enhance the notion of human solidarity, and belonging and it should do away with the normal prejudices, like prejudices of race, etc…. I think that one of the great benefits of pilgrimage should be to see other people and realize that being human is what is important.”

Isabelle: I also found that the mixing with the different nationalities was extremely rewarding and even though you don’t speak the same language you all have a common understanding and can make yourself understood in the pilgrimage situation for you are there for the same purpose, searching and worshipping together…. I believe that it is about brotherhood and sisterhood, about realizing that we are all connected, about coming together.”

The idea of sharing a common purpose was something that several of the respondents mentioned. This creates a strong feeling of integration and togetherness and an environment where “there is so much love” and no barriers created by language or race. As Belk (2010) suggested, unlike economic exchange, such sharing helps to create a sense of community. The dissolution of boundaries between pilgrims creates a luminal state and strong evidence of communitas (Turner 1969).

While the common purpose often results in “a group of similarly minded people,” pilgrimage also provides the opportunity to meet people with different religious beliefs and backgrounds. As Mark suggested, “there are so many that may not even come from a religious background, but they return year after year due to gaining something from the experience.” Similarly, one of our respondents discussed an encounter with someone from a non-Catholic background:

Penny/David: “one of the times I went to Lourdes, I met a man who was Grand Masonic Leader in Scotland, and he went just to see what all the hype was about at Lourdes, and felt so much passion and feeling when he entered the site, that he returned three times following from that, well he was on his fourth visit when I met him and he planned to return every year till as he put it ‘God allowed.’”

This provides an example of the way in which the pilgrimage site can incite the sharing of personal narratives creating unity even amongst strangers. To seasoned pilgrims, stories such as this serve to reinforce and confirm the miraculous and special nature of the pilgrimage site. Muniz and Schau (2005, 740) reported a somewhat similar situation in their investigation of the Apple Newton brand community where the telling of stories was identified as a form of “consumer magic.” The emphasis on sociality contrasts with Palmer and Gallagher (2007) who found that the social support offered through religious institutions plays a less significant role in everyday life. Instead, it reinforces the importance of self-other relations with spatial environments.

CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE OR SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE?

In this section we explore the interplay between religion and consumption, investigating whether respondents view pilgrim sites as truly sacred or if they have become contaminated by commercialization. Many of our respondents accepted that marketing, consumption and tourism are inevitable elements of pilgrimages and indeed, several simply explained marketing as an “everyday norm”

David: “consumerism is a part of everyday life, so why would religion, which let’s face it is a huge part of peoples’ lives not also be included in this consumerism. It is just that when people think religion, they automatically believe it should be neutral from all changes, but it evolves and changes with life like everything.”

Nevertheless this does not appear to detract from the benefits of the pilgrimage and some even highlighted the resulting economic benefits of pilgrimage to towns surrounding the shrines. However, this perspective depends on the creation of certain boundary lines over which marketing cannot intrude. Several respondents discussed this idea in relation to Lourdes, arguing that as long as the grotto (where the visions of the Virgin Mary were seen) itself remains sacred, they do not object to commercialization outside the gates:

Fiona: “to be honest at the grotto it is like another world, the grotto and the basilica is like another place completely, the minute you go through the gates it is the strangest thing, but it is almost like a presence enters you, and it stays with you throughout the domain, and it happens every time you go through the gates not just the first time. You see something different every time you go into the domain. They have managed to keep the bustle and tack of the commercial side of Lourdes away from the domain.”

Similarly, Penny suggested that “once you enter the domain, there is just so much relaxation, there is none of the bustle, or the buying and the selling.” The movement from “busy streets” to “tranquility” allows for a change in mindset and complete absorption in the task at hand so that “you are not thinking about anything other than your faith and Our Lady.” O’Guinn and Belk (1989) noted that visitors experienced a similar feeling of other-worldliness in Heritage Village, USA, the religious theme park, despite the presence of a shopping mall and other forms of entertainment. However, in the present study, findings suggest that the Christian pilgrim site can provide a complete and temporary escape from the marketplace as it is free from “tackiness” and “commercialization.” In this respect, it can remain pure, outside the domain of contemporary consumer culture. Reminiscent of Belk’s (2010, 730) conclusion on sharing, we can argue that an understanding of pilgrimage challenges “the
encroachment of the perspective that all the world is a market and everything and everyone within it is an exchangeable commodity.”

A few respondents discussed the way in which the surrounding consumer culture inadvertently contributed to a more intense pilgrimage experience:

Daniel: “I believe that you just have to cling to your faith and ignore all the tachiness, and all the nonsensical things that happen around you whilst on your pilgrimage. I suppose you could say that is new form of penance in modern day pilgrimage that you have to eradicate from your mind, all the irrelevant things happening around you.”

Likewise, Irene concurred that an aim of pilgrimage is to “challenge myself to block out the everyday live and focus on my faith and religion.” Others discussed more straight-forward benefits of the consumerist element, for example, some respondents appear to get enjoyment from the consumer environment that surrounds pilgrimage sites such as the opportunity to “go for dinner and maybe have a glass of wine or whatever with my friends.” Others also like to shop for souvenirs:

Isabelle: “I got a lot of enjoyment picking presents to take back for people in my church, you just had to watch where you went for them, obviously there are the tacky shops but there are also some really lovely and very spiritual shops which sell some lovely religious tokens.”

Katy: “And I also think that bringing back a small souvenir for people from a holy pilgrimage site can mean the world to the person, allows them to feel a part of that pilgrimage themselves and allows them to know they are thought about and loved.”

Souvenirs appear to provide a tangible memento or symbol of the journey both for the pilgrim or a way of spreading the sacredness to others. For some pilgrims, the opportunity to consume and relax is essential. Indeed one respondent argued that without escapism through the tourist market, “it would be torture.” This supports the earlier discussion on the fuzzy boundaries surrounding the tourist and pilgrim roles.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper focuses on the consumption of sacred place within the context of the Christian pilgrimage. In relation to theoretical contributions, we raise the profile of place within consumer research, addressing Sherry’s (2000, 277) concern that consumption theory often neglects “place as a lived experience.” Increased mobility, alongside technological advances, has resulted in a lack of embeddedness or indeed, placelessness appearing as a central feature of consumer culture (Cushman 1990). However, we demonstrate that place can have significant meaning in our lives, indeed, the spiritual and emotional release achieved by our respondents cannot be de-contextualized from the physical places in which they occur. In this respect, place is central to our understandings and experiences.

We also contribute to understandings of sacred consumption, in particular the relationship between the sacred and the profane, discussions which have only a marginal place within consumer research literature (Arnould 2004). Much of the research in this area tends to focus on the sacralization process, whereby sacred and secular meanings intertwine as consumption extends far beyond a core commercial purpose. We attempt to redress this balance by exploring the issue of secularization and the way in which spiritual and religious meanings have become increasingly commercialized.

We began this paper wondering if “consuming pilgrimage” was an appropriate phrase to use in the title. However, throughout the findings we have highlighted the fuzzy boundaries between the sacred and the profane and illustrated that places can combine both sacred and profane elements. We suggest that religion can have a place within consumer culture and that the presence of commercialization does not appear to reduce or dampen the religious or spiritual experience. Despite commercialization, pilgrimages still offer the opportunity to “transcend existence as mere biological being coping with the everyday world” (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, 2).

Place attachment theory is often considered in relation to our homes or places that we visit on a regular basis. However, through an examination of the physical environment, experiences and meanings of pilgrimage sites, we demonstrate how consumers can also experience strong attachment to places that are far from our place of residence yet places that are deemed to deserve reverence. Our findings reveal that the combination of sacred space and special activity or practices creates a sense of utopia (Maclaran and Brown 2005). Sacred sites place the consumer, providing a welcome feeling of belonging in light of the increasing displacement associated with consumer culture. Visiting such sites of enhancement can have important spiritual benefits. Within consumer culture theory there has been much debate surrounding rationality and emotion. We suggest that what is missing from this discussion is spirituality. As well as receiving functional and emotional benefits through consumption, spiritual benefits are also achievable. Indeed, as humans it could be argued that we need and seek some form of connection with the spiritual side of existence.

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