Is the Crucifix Sacred? Exploring the Catholic Consumption of Sacred Vessels in Building Connection With the Sacred

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Our investigation into the role of sacred vessels for Catholic consumers contributes towards sacred consumption theories. Our findings raise issues regarding terminology and we suggest that the predominant research focus to date has not been the absolute idea of the Sacred, but the consumption of sacred vessels.

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Leighanne Higgins, University of Strathclyde, UK
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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to contribute further towards sacred consumption theories offered within consumer culture. So far, research has often pointed to instances of transcendence been found through the consumption of objects and possessions (Belk, 1988; Belk et al., 1989), white water rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993) and salsa dancing (Hamilton and Hewer, 2009). Additionally, a ‘celebrity sacralization process’ (Hamilton & Hewer, 2011) has been witnessed in the consumption of celebrity icons such as Barry Manilow (O’Guinn, 1991), Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (Schau & Muñiz, 2007) and Kylie Minogue (Hamilton & Hewer, 2011). In turn proving the stance taken by Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry (1989, 2) of religion being one but “not the only context in which the concept of the sacred is “operant” to be correct.

This said, relatively little research has been conducted looking at the consumption of the sacred from a religious perspective, for example within well-established religions such as Catholicism. As such the voice of the religious consumer is very much unrecognized within Consumer Culture Theory to date. This study contributes to this gap with the key aim of investigating the role of sacred vessels (religiously linked objects and services, such as crucifixes and Mass) for Catholic consumers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION WITHIN CONSUMER CULTURE
Weber’s (1930) ‘Protestant Work Ethic’ suggested that Puritan ethics of focus on working towards personal wealth and success, led to capitalism, secularization and “disenchantment” within society. Since Weber’s concept, well-established religions and their followers have been under attack continuously, from works such as that by Gabriel Vahanian and his ‘Death in God’ movement of the 60’s, to the numerous studies such as the 2001, ‘American Religious Identification Survey’ which highlighted a 9 percent decline in the number of people identifying themselves with religion. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been a resurgence in the number of people interested and consuming spirituality, in particular New-age holistic spiritualities of life (Heelas, 2008, 6), which are the consumption of spiritual experiences found “in our most valued lived experiences” (Eliade, 1958, 8) and similar are spiritualities which are “consumed, for the sake of enhancing hedonistic experiences”. Heelas (2008, 6) even suggests that the popularity of the consumption of such holistic spiritualities of life might in time, “provide a worthy successor to Christianity in western settings”. In short, proclaiming the situation for well-established religions such as Catholicism to be very bleak.

However, little reference, if any, is ever made to research such as the ‘Beliefnet Poll’ conducted in 2005, which demonstrated that 90% of Americans refer to themselves as believers. Or, the UK-wide study conducted by the charity ‘Tearfund’ in 2008, which found that despite perceptions of declining faith levels, 12.8 million adults in the UK go to church at least once a year. Furthermore, from the Catholic perspective, and on a global scale, the 2010 edition of the Pontifical Yearbook pointed towards an increase in the worldwide population of Catholics, with a figure of 1.166 billion, concluding that around 1 in 6 people worldwide are Catholic. Thus, there is research illustrating that the consumption of well-established religions such as Catholicism is still very active and a large practice, yet as such within Consumer Culture Theory often overlooked.

CONSUMER CULTURE & SACRED CONSUMPTION
The growing abandonment of Durkheim’s sacred and profane dichotomy within consumer culture, led by pioneering researchers in the field (Belk et al, 1989) and their theory of a growing sacralization of the secular and secularization of the sacred has led to the aforementioned growing acceptance of the sacred being “operant” (Belk, 1989, 8) in domains out with religion. Over the last 20 years a growing interest in consumer culture around the area of sacred consumption has occurred, resulting in shopping malls now being viewed by many as “cathedrals of consumption” (Ritzer, 2005, 7) and consumption subcultures such as that of the new bikers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, 50), providing “magical and otherworldly” experiences. Nevertheless, to date in consumer culture the emphasis has been upon the sacralization of the secular domains, with very little focus upon the consumption of spiritual and religious goods in order to bring about transcendental experience (Rinallo, 2009). This study will aim to contribute towards such a gap through its focus upon religiously linked objects and services, and as such a major concept used within this study has been Eliade’s (1958, 9) “cryptic and clear hierophanies”.

A basic description of hierophany is a manifestation of the sacred to man (Eliade, 1958). For Eliade (1958, 8) however, “some hierophanies are not clear, are indeed cryptic, in that they only reveal the sacred meaning embodied or symbolized in part, or, as it were, in code, while others (more truly manifestations) display the sacred in all its modalities as a whole”. As such, for a Catholic consumer, a clear manifestation would be attributed to a holy site such as Lourdes, whilst an unclear or “cryptic” manifestation would be the connection build with God during the consumption of salsa dancing (Hamilton & Hewer, 2009) or other secularly deemed activities. Arnould & Price (2004, 53) echo Eliade’s concept of “cryptic hierophanies”, in their belief of “salvific moments” being one of three ways by which the sacred can be “identified”. These moments relate to the, “unscripted eruptions of the sacred in otherwise mundane contexts” such as at “sporting events”. As aforementioned, a critique in sacred consumption theory to date has been their predominant focus upon the sacralization of the secular, and through the adoption of Eliade’s (1958) concept of “cryptic and clear hierophanies”, we further add to this critique. As we suggest that to date, the consumption of the “cryptic hierophany” has been the focus, with very little, to no research conducted upon the consumption of “clear hierophanies”, and as such this study focuses upon the “clear hierophanies”, such as religiously linked objects and services, like, Mass and the crucifix, often consumed by the Catholic consumer.

In 2001, Iacobucci critiqued consumer behavior for it’s lack of emphasis upon the, “S’aured”, stating that she wished to, “begin a tradition” of research that focused upon, “the subset or a narrower instantiation of the ‘s’aured, specifically involving an individual’s experience with religion, spirituality, worship, and God” (2001, 110-111). Hence, so far within this paper, we have only referred to the un-capitalized sacred, and our reasoning for this is due to the study’s grounding within platonic thinking. Iacobucci’s (2001)
aforementioned differentiation between the ‘small’ sacred and the ‘capital’ Sacred, is platonic thinking at its finest. As Plato believed that tangible things were mere forms of an Absolute, and thus Plato like Iacobucci (2001), and ourselves believe there is a difference between the form of the sacred and the Absolute Idea of the Sacred. A predominant research focus upon cryptic hierophanies, has resulted in Iacobucci’s (2001) estimation that to date a metaphorical level of sacred has been researched as opposed to the Absolute level of the Sacred. We agree with this opinion and as such we will differentiate throughout this paper between the sacred and the Sacred, with the former relating to the sacred at a metaphorical level and the latter relating to the Absolute form of the Sacred.

**THE RELIGION-CONSUMPTION DICHOTOMY**

Focus within consumer culture has been as aforementioned on breaking down the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, but an even greater dichotomy exists between religion and consumption, and the belief that the two of them cannot integrate. We believe this dichotomy has came about due to the generally “negative associations” (Heelas, 2008, 83) held regarding consumption. Wattanasuwan (2005, 183) discusses that we are all “enslaved” to consumption and likewise Ekstrom & Brembeck (2001, 1-2) state, “consumption (and consumerism) is gradually trickling into all areas of human life”. Thus, the general negative feeling shared towards consumption by many, has led to the belief that religion and consumption cannot be mixed positively. As such, we suggest this may be the reason for a lack of focus upon the religious consumer within consumer culture to date.

However, some papers have rallied to join Iacobucci’s (2001, 110-111) call for beginning “a tradition” of research focusing on an, “individual’s experience with religion, spirituality, worship, and God”. And in doing so have managed to demonstrate that there is no need for such a dichotomy, as religion and consumption can be and are mixed together, and positivity reigns from such mélange. Touzani & Hirschman (2008: 379) in their representation of the Muslim consumer found that, “religious patterns can be and are appropriated into consumption styles without undermining Islam itself”. Similarly, Sandici & Ger (2010, 33) found in their work that, “Islam is neither a threat nor a panacea for consumerism and capitalism”, whilst Higgins & Hamilton (2011) found though their work on the consumption of sacred pilgrimage sites, like Lourdes, that the religious pilgrims accepted the near proximity of the commercialized side of Lourdes as a “modern day penance” to their pilgrimage. Furthermore, the use of the word consumption can be dated back to biblical times, as the New Testament mentions that on Pentecost, a day of huge significance within Christianity, the Apostles were consumed by the fire of the Holy Spirit and as such became one with God. So, consumption has been around as long as religion, and likewise has been mixed together over the centuries, thus proving that there is a need for more research focused on breaking down the religion-consumption dichotomy. As such, this study will further add to this growing “tradition”, by offering the voice of the Catholic consumer, and investigating the ways in which Catholic consumers consume “clearer hierophanies” such as Mass and crucifixes, as a method for building connection with God.

**METHOD**

It is often said that ‘a chain is only as strong as it’s weakest link’ and due to this we thought it best to deal with what could possibly be viewed as a weakness in this study – one of the researcher’s Catholic beliefs. This study was in conjunction with a wider study, investigating the effects of the current financial crisis upon the consumption of Catholic Mass in Scotland. This phenomenon was recognized within the home parish of the main researcher, and as such we adopted a single case study. Although some may argue that this is too close a position for the researcher, previous research within the area, raised awareness of the reservations many religious consumers feel at being interviewed about faith. As such through familiarity within the parish, the researcher was able to overcome the access and trust issues that can often arise in single case studies (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Furthermore, it was our belief, that the shared religion resulted in a high level of ‘verstehen’ (Wax; 1967) being encapsulated within the researcher, which was believed to only further strengthen the research, as it resonated with Schouten & McAlexander (1995:44) and their finding that deeper integration with the subculture of new bikers enabled, “access to informants near the core of the subculture” to improve greatly. Thus, as a member of the Catholic faith, the presence of ‘verstehen’ within the researcher enabled gaining of a better understanding of respondents.

The case study parish has the motto of “serving the community” and approximately 1200 regular Sunday mass attendees. We conducted one to one interviews with twenty-one of these regular attendees; half of the sample was generated through a snowballing method. All respondents were Catholic, and as shown in table one, they ranged in age, gender and occupation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent’s Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>Retired nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Secondary School Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fr. Grant</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fr. Jack</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>Parish Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>Ironmonger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>Works in Prisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>Classroom assistant (Primary school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16-24</td>
<td>Works in benefits dept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>Seamstress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The consumption of sacred vessels 

Sacred Perceptions

“It means to me the accumulated wisdom of 2000 years, where people have tried to live out their relationship with God and it becomes shared in that sort of body of teaching or way of spirituality”

(Fr Jack).

In order to understand the Catholic consumer’s perception of the Sacred, it is important to firstly, understand respondents definition of Catholicism. The preceding definition from Fr. Jack, the parish priest of the single case study, is apt as it demonstrates a shared viewpoint amongst all participants in this study – that Catholicism is a way of life. But more than that, the reference of Catholicism being about ones ‘relationship with God’ indicates towards individuality being present within Catholicism, resonating with the all-embracing, universal meaning of the word. Highlighting that Catholicism can mean different things to each individual Catholic, but that at its core they will each share a set of beliefs unifying them together as one distinct religious institution. This shared unity amongst Catholic consumers was revealed in many ways throughout the study, one such way being the shared perception of the Sacred.

All respondents agreed that the Sacred, “can be open to interpretation” (James) and that connection with the Sacred, “can come in the most strange sort of ways” (Philip). This said, all respondents shared descriptors of the Sacred as being: “out of this world”, “everlasting and immorally beautiful”, “irreplaceable”, “holy”. Similarly, the respondents all shared the belief in the Sacred being an “intangible presence”, often difficult to explain and understand.

Lisa: “I mean people use the term ‘out of this world’ and it is like that in a way, it is beyond the reach yet striving to reach it”.

Fiona: “sacred means for me, a set apartness from the daily grind of the world, it is something that is above all of that - it is something that is not of this world “.

Craig: “I personally would not say that the most sacred thing to me is something that I could physically hold or touch”.

Ryan: “ I think it is a personal relationship with God. Yeah, I suppose a sacred space or a sacred time is a time when you would feel very much one-to-one with God so yeah, I think it is your relationship with God”

This shared belief in the intangible quality of the Sacred, resonates with Belk et al’s (1989, 9) offering of “intangibles” as one of six potential sacred consumption domains. However, within Consumer Culture Theory to date, there appear issues regarding terminology, and as such our findings show that for the Catholic consumer it is the actual absolute Sacred which is intangible, and connection with this intangible Sacred is built through the consumption of religiously linked objects and services such as Mass, and the crucifix. As such, respondent’s shared belief in this intangible Sacred, led onto deep discussion into what many would believe to be a rhetoric question – is the crucifix sacred? We found that for the Catholic consumer, the crucifix – the actual tangible, crucifix positioned within chapels, and homes, and worn upon necks worldwide – is not Sacred, leading onto the key theme and contribution from this study – the consumption of sacred vessels.

The consumption of sacred vessels

“...Give them something to look at and they will understand it, but they don’t understand that presence and I don’t either, but I
know it is there, and I couldn’t logically try to give you an explanation, but there is something there, but we give ourselves something to fixate on” (James).

This response successfully introduces the idea of sacred vessels, as it indicates a common belief amongst Catholic consumers, that the Sacred sought after by mankind is untouchable and incomprehensible whilst we are living. Studies to date, on the resurgence of spiritualities of life (Hellas, 2008), and within consumer culture, have shown that, “humans are spiritual seekers, even in a consumer society that so many critics say leads to apathy and meaninglessness” (Scott & Maclaren, 2009, 60), indicating that man has an awareness of the presence of an Absolute, which for the Catholic consumer is God. But, our research suggests, in order to connect with this presence we give ourselves tangible resources to help us fixate and understand the Sacred. Continuously respondents illustrated that the crucifix, religious statues of Our Lady, and other saints, although special and deserving of respect, were but, “reminders”, “figureheads”, “connectors”, “vessels” which all help the religious consumer to communicate and connect with the absolute Sacred, with God.

Chloe: “I love to light candles and pray at Our Ladies alter – but I don’t look at that as being a golden calf, as Sacred, it is just a vessel in which to pray through, a vessel to get through to God”.

Maria: “At the end of the day the crucifix is only a wooden cross, it is more what that sort of stands for that I would class to be Sacred rather than the object or the cross itself”.

Miriam: “Objects cannot actually themselves be Sacred but they can focus, they can be a visual representation of something”.

James: “You could remove the statue and the presence would still be there, the statue is only a figurehead”.

This vessel idea was further supported through the examples of respondent’s consumption of religious jewelry such as, the wearing of medals and crucifixes upon their necks.

James: “I wear a crucifix – and I don’t know if I would say that it was that Sacred - but it is so, so special to me. And I get up every morning and I make sure it is on the right way, it’s never off my body - it’s always there… but it just makes me feel as though there is somebody with me”.

Tom: “I wear medals round my neck and I have always worn symbols around my neck, but they are not Sacred, they are just a reminder, they are a help to me, if I forget things and all of a sudden I hear them jangle, it is a sort of wake up call”.

The wearing of such jewelry symbolizes the Catholic consumers connection with God, resonating with Fernandez & Veer’s (2004, 55) work on the symbolism of jewelry during Hindu wedding rituals. And as such this research contributes further to symbolic consumption theories (McCracken, 1988).

To date, within symbolic consumption the emphasis has been upon the ‘self-concept’ whereby consumers “employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, 179), and as such, “material possessions serve as symbolic mediators between the self and others” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, 182). Symbolic consumption, however, has been researched at more conspicuous levels (Schouten, 1991), with the aim of consumption being the consumer’s attempts to create the identity they wish to communicate with others. Popular New-Age spiritualities of life resonate very much with what has been looked at within symbolic consumption to date, as these spiritualities offer consumers the chance of self-spirituality, with the focus of these new-age spiritualities being “locked”(Heelas, 2008, 7) within the self. However, this study points to a different dimension of symbolic consumption. For the sacred consumption of candles, and the wearing of religious jewelry are all consumed at an individual and private level, aiding the Catholic consumer to build further their connection with the Sacred. But this symbolic consumption practice is not about creating an identity for others to see, but is about the personal connection build with the Sacred.

Furthermore, the symbolic consumption of Mass differs from that mentioned above and within symbolic consumption theories to date, as it is a shared consumption practice.

Ryan: “I thoroughly enjoy mass, I love the way that it crosses so many boundaries; time, history, geography; people who have died, people who are still to come, we pray for the people here now and we pray for the whole church. I think it’s a deep leveler, knowing that for 12 hours before us and 12 hours after us people will still be celebrating mass throughout the world and I think that’s just a beautiful concept”.

Philip: “I live almost six thousand miles away from my mother, and that she still goes to mass, that she will be having a different but a similar experience to me because we are part of something big”.

The idea of being part “of something bigger than myself” echoed amongst respondents and as such it came to the forefront that Mass is a symbolic consumption practice adopted by Catholic consumers as a way of developing and building their personal relationship with God. Further than this however, through the shared symbolic consumption of Mass, the Catholic consumer focuses not upon the self, but upon the fact that through their faith, they belong and are part of something “much bigger” than the self, and through this selflessness, the Catholic consumer is able to build connection with the entire Catholic community as well as with the Sacred. Belk et al (1989, 31) suggest that consumption of the sacred is rooted in consumers’ needs for self-differentiation through their consumption of something out with the ordinary, in turn providing, “meaning in life and a mechanism for experiencing stability, joy, and occasionally ecstasy through connection”. However our findings demonstrate the antithesis, as we demonstrate that consumption of sacred vessels enable connection with the absolute idea of the Sacred but also enable collectivism with the entire body of Catholicism. As such our research resonates more with Belk’s (2010, 725) discussion on the idea of “sharing-in” whereby “others are included within the aggregate self”. For through the shared consumption of Mass respondents felt barriers of race, age, and social-class break down between them. However, at a deeper level, the preceding usage of the word ‘community’ and the sharing-in amongst respondents whilst consuming Mass, enables a symbolic consumption practice that narrows the boundaries between: life and earth, the past, present and future, geographical separations, in short it symbolizes the connection build with the entire body of Catholicism as it has been for the last 2000 years, and as it will continue to be in the future.

Plato stated, “the truth of the matter, is after all, only known to God” (Plato Republic, 1954: 282). We likewise conclude that due to it’s discombobulate nature, complete understanding of the
Sacred is an improbable if not impossible feat, and as such it is incorrect to state that research to date in consumer culture has focused upon the Sacred in its entirety. This said, we suggest that what has been researched to date in consumer culture has in fact been the ‘consumption of sacred vessels’ not the consumption of the absolute form of the Sacred. Thus in short, Arnould & Price’s (1993) respondents consumed the sacred vessel of white water rafts as a method for building connection with their Sacred; likewise Hamilton & Hewer’s (2009) “salseros” consumed the salsa dance floor as a sacred vessel for connecting with their Sacred. And in the religious context our Catholic consumers consume the crucifixes in their churches, homes, and around their necks as sacred vessels for building connection with their absolute Sacred. As such the material world provides a platform enabling man to connect with the Sacred, and likewise for the Catholic consumer the shared symbolic consumption of Mass is a sacred vessel enabling connection to be build with God, but likewise to build connection with the entire body of Catholicism.

Continuously, throughout the analysis process, we debated whether, in fact sacred vessels of consumption was the correct terminology. Primarily the usage of the word vessel was debated, especially in light of the recent work from Fernandez & Lastovicka (2011) on fetishes, which demonstrates the idea of ‘conduits’ with the more powerful. However, the shared usage of the word ‘vessel’ amongst respondents made us turn to the bible for answers, leading us to the biblical sense of the word of vessel as meaning something believed to hold or embody a particular quality and the sacred vessels discussed in this research behold a particular quality, which enables connection with the absolute Sacred. A priest once mentioned to us that the sign of the cross made before a prayer is the dialing of a telephone call between man and God. Likewise, for the respondents in this research the statues, the crucifix, the Mass, are not bridges or portals, for this almost gives the impression of them being immaterial and moving. Instead using the telephone metaphor, the statues, crucifix, Mass are all material telephones, which enable the dialing/ connection between man and the absolute Sacred to occur. Hence we remain with the term vessel, as opposed to bridge, portal or conduit to communicate the often, material nature of these metaphorical sacred vessels. Secondly, our reasons for this particular terminology stemmed from the spirituality of life movement (Heelas, 2008), which differentiates between spirituality and transcendence theism (religion), suggesting that the former is about man creating and giving meaning to life, whereas the latter is relating to the idea of being given the meaning of life from a higher being such as, God. As such we questioned if perhaps the “cryptic hierarchies” studied within consumer culture to date such as Schouten & McAlexander’s (1995) new bikers, had in fact been the consumption of spirituality as opposed to sacred consumption? However, this seemed a somewhat arrogant viewpoint and as such did not sit well with the researchers. For who has the right to claim that the connection build with the Sacred through spiritualities of life, differs from those build through Catholicism or any other well-established religion? Thus we suggest that the Sacred is Sacred, and mans approximation of the Sacred cannot be changed, due to our inability to understand the Sacred in its entirety. In turn suggesting that the Sacred connection built by white water rafters, salseros, celebrity aficionados, new-age life spiritualists, Catholics and a plethora of other consumers who practice sacred consumption habits is the same Sacred, and does not change. It is the sacred vessels for building connection with the Sacred that changes, not the over-arching Absolute itself. In saying this we recognized from our study, that the aforementioned terminological issue has it’s routes in the idea of transcendence, and as such we suggest that future research lies in furthering consumer culture’s terminology, particularly in the area of transcendence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has added to Iacobucci’s (2001, 110-111) call for a “tradition” of research within consumer culture that researches “an individual’s experience with religion, spirituality, worship, and God”, and as such, we have shown that it is possible for consumption and religion to come together in useful ways. Hence, illustrating that the dichotomy existing between religion and consumption within consumer culture and society as a whole, should be eliminated. Our primary focus for this paper has been upon the Catholic consumption of sacred vessels to build connection with the Sacred. Thus, regarding theoretical contributions, we have further contributed to sacred consumption theory, but also an emergent contribution for this study has been within the area of symbolic consumption.

On deciding the title for this paper we questioned the appropriateness of the use of the question, “is the crucifix sacred?” But upon reflection we realized that without such discussion this paper and as such its realizations would never have been born. As the crucifix is key to understanding our findings and contributions to sacred consumption theory, for if the most significant symbol for one of the widest established religions is not regarded as Sacred, it is fair to concur that the majority of sacred consumption studies to date, if not all, have not focused upon the absolute idea of the Sacred. As such, we conclude that in Consumer Culture Theory to date, the Sacred in itself has not been studied, but in fact ‘sacred vessels’ enabling connection with the absolute idea of the Sacred have been the predominant focus. And as such, we suggest the deconstruction of sacred consumption theory to date to incorporate such a finding.

Regarding symbolic consumption our work has contributed by showing that the consumption of sacred vessels such as religious jewelry and candles are symbolic consumption practices, which for the Catholic consumer are consumed at the individual, and private level, not at the conspicuous level but with the aim of drawing closer and building connection with the Sacred. Likewise, our findings have demonstrated that the consumption of Mass is not an individually symbolic consumption practice, but a shared one. Focusing upon building personal connection with God, but likewise about building connection with the body of Catholicism in its entirety. Thus, we have shown symbolic consumption practices from the Catholic consumer, which go against the norms of conspicuous symbolic consumption, which have been the forerunners within symbolic consumption theory to date. Additionally, this research points towards the complete antithesis of self-differentiation within sacred consumption as we demonstrate that the consumption of sacred vessels builds communication with God/ the absolute Sacred, but simultaneously builds connection and communality with the entire body of Catholicism.

Ger (2005:79) questioned, “How does sacred religion appropriate the profane consumption…how does the spiritual interplay with the material?” We reference St. Paul in answering this query, “the world, life and death, the present and the future are all your servants; but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God” (3:16-23). Thus, God gave man the material world to serve their needs, in short it is a playground for man to interact upon, and as such draw closer to Him. The findings from this study agree with St. Paul, as they demonstrate that material goods provide an interactional platform with the Sacred, for through consumption of the material world consumers are able to build connection and
draw closer to the Sacred. Our research therefore, adds further to research such as Touzani & Hirschman (2008) and Sandikci & Ger (2010) which have proven that the dichotomy existing between religion and consumption is a false one, as consumption does not demean religion, but often has a “symbiotic relationship” with it.

Throughout this study we have discovered that within consumer culture there appear issues regarding terminology. Through our adoption of Plato and Iacobucci’s (2001) differentiation between the metaphorical form of the sacred and the absolute idea of the Sacred, we have introduced a body of theory addressing such terminological issues, with our consumption of sacred vessels concept. Nonetheless, confusion remains within consumer culture whereby words such as sacred, spiritual, and especially transcendent are all used inter-changeably. And as such, we suggest that instead of continuous focus upon secularizations, sacralizations, or even upon the consumption of religiously/spiritually linked goods, which help build connection with the Sacred, we need to start questioning and focusing upon terminology. And in doing so we shall be able to further diminish the religion-consumption dichotomy present within consumer culture and society today. We believe a predominant conundrum exists in consumer culture’s usage of the word transcendence, and as such we suggest that future research begins with questioning transcendence terminology, by asking and answering: “What is transcendence and in what ways do the transcendental feelings experienced during differing consumption practices resonate or differ?

REFERENCES


