Title: Church Without Walls? Social Media as Ritual Carrier for Megachurch Congregants in the Renegotiation of Ritual Space

Short abstract

The desire for spiritual experiences, particularly religious rituals, has further increased during the pandemic. Through a netnographic examination, this study explains how consumers-congregants of a London-based megachurch, during the England's national lockdown, has renegotiated their spiritual experience and ritual space, to create their 'living-room ritual' and 'cyber-ritual', with the social media platforms serving as ritual carriers.

Extended abstract

A strong marketplace shift in consumer needs, from functional and emotional towards spiritual experiences (Dodds et al., 2021), has encouraged consumers to explore their inner selves and gain self-actualization through ancient spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation (Belk and Costa, 1998) and also through more explicitly religious rituals (Scott, 2020; Arvidsson, 2014). The desire for spiritual experiences further increased during the pandemic (Davies, 2021; Bryson et al., 2020), arguably the most unsettling and disruptive experience that our world has ever had to endure. At the same time, the England's national lockdown (2020-2021) was a period of transition during which consumers' increasing spiritual desire promoted the renegotiation of a 'new-normal' approach to spiritual experience and ritual space.

As a notion closely related to the concept of religion (Rinallo et al., 2013), spiritual experience is characterised as the meaningful exploration of the inner-self and spiritual well-being, in relation to the broader reality (Kale, 2006). This research strand focuses on the transformation through which consumers create sacred experience from their mundane consumption activities (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Arnould and Price, 1993). The last two decades has observed strong research interest in the 'channel of delivery for spiritual goods' (Kale, 2004, p. 103), including the technology and cyber-space (Cambell, 2005). Recent studies have called for future research on gaining an understanding of consumer interaction with spaces and places to access spirituality and their conduciveness of ritual space.

The literature points us in the direction of 'ritual carrier' as a means of generating and framing ritual space (Shi et al., 2021). In such a context, ritual carrying is no longer understood as the

work purely of human actors. Instead, language, text, images and other multimedia resources now need to function as carriers and promoters of newly reinterpreted experiences (Fidler, 1997). The creation of virtual worlds opened the door to the creation of immaterial and disembodied ritual spaces; sacred space no longer needed to be physical alone but could also be reconstructed through technological and digital mediation (Kiong and Kong, 2000; Kong, 2001). In digital-first contexts, ritual carrying now has to be recontextualised, reconfigured and reconstituted digitally, and executed in the consumer's own place. There can be no distancing from or transition to ritual space as it finds embodiment in 'living room ritual' and 'cyber ritual' (Kong, 2001), and moves beyond the physical location to become a sacred moment in time in a fundamentally profane space. This negotiation has to be generated through new ritual carriers, which our work seeks to identify and interpret from the consumer's perspective, since insight on how consumers receive, perceive and integrate such ritual carriers into their lives is still emerging (Huseman and Eckhardt, 2019).

The ideal context for such an exploration is undoubtedly the pinnacle and archetype of consumer-driven religion, the megachurch. Megachurches (congregations of over 2,000 attenders) have long been expert in the creation of the spectacular ritual spaces and heavily reliant upon technology to carry their ritual experiences beyond the physical building. Congregants of Megachurches gather for imaginative and creative ritual experiences that address the challenges and priorities of contemporary life. The national lockdown created a further set of boundaries around these consumer-congregants, however, denying the church the opportunity of using its physical ritual spaces to engineer ritual worlds and pushing them to cyberspace instead.

Our research, therefore, aims to explore the core research questions:
- How do these consumer-congregants ritualize their newly-limited worlds?
- How do they negotiate the notion of ritual space through engaging with cyberspace, with the social media platforms serving as ritual carriers?
- How do they integrate their religious rituals into their daily experience?

Methodology

We seek to address these questions through a two-phase research programme.

The first phase relies upon the data collected through netnography (Kozinet, 2020, 2002). We are scrutinising the social outputs of London-based megachurch Kingsway International

Christian Centre (KICC) on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. KICC has long identified itself as 'a church without walls', and so we seek to better understand the process by which KICC's consumer-congregants interacted with ritualising content, learnt to un-wall the sacred space during the height of the pandemic and continue to do so presently as the social media provision became the focal point. Data will be collected from five stages of the pandemic to-date:

1. Pre-pandemic (Jan-March 2020)

2. Initial lockdown 2020 (March-June 2020)

3. In-person worship resumes (4 July 2020-Dec 2020)

4. Winter lockdown 2021 (Jan-Feb 2021)

5. Continuing uncertainty (March 2021-Sept 2021)

In the second phase (2022), we are planning to conduct in-depth interviews with KICC's congregants. We will focus extensively on the ways in which the content reconstitutes ritual space and carries ritual value as well as the consumer response to this reconfiguration.

Findings

We have seen that lockdown restrictions led in many ways to increased ritualization of everyday life and the reshaping of profane home-space into sacred experience. Our preliminary insights suggest that consumers are indeed open to renegotiating both sacred space and ritual carriers creatively through digital means and that such reinterpreted rituals are genuinely felt to be both authentic, accessible and beneficial. The connection between megachurch and consumer-congregant is just as genuine even though it exists in a different space and operates on different parameters. No matter how the space is defined or negotiated, digital church is still authentically church, and still promotes ritual solidarity. The church still adds genuine personal values to consumers, promoting their physical and mental as well as spiritual wellbeing, and supporting their personal growth and flourishing. We show how consumers generate ritual spaces in their own homes by their engagement with facilitated content which seeks to shape and frame their spiritual experience, and reflect upon the ways in which they reinterpret the ritual space of the church building into their living rooms with the help of cyberspace. Furthermore, consumers can clearly revise their notions of ritual as need arises, and the range and variety of forms of ritual carrier can expand to shape ritual presence and ritual space in new and creative virtual ways.

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