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INTRODUCTION



Consumer spirituality

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ABSTRACT

Consumers increasingly turn to the marketplace in search of spiritual well-being. In this introduction to the special issue, we unpack the concept of consumer spirituality. We define consumer spirituality as the interrelated practices and processes engaged in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield 'spiritual utility'. The market offerings are purposely designed to quench consumers' thirst for meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power. We identify three vehicles – materiality, embodiment, and technology – that consumers engage with to access consumer spirituality. By unpacking the concept of consumer spirituality along three themes - (1) shaping markets for consumer spirituality, (2) the means for accessing consumer spirituality, and (3) making sense of and researching consumer spirituality - we provide a future research agenda to advance scholarly explorations of consumer spirituality and to facilitate a systematic development of this nascent body of literature in marketing and consumer research.

KEYWORDS

Consumer spirituality;
spirituality; religion;
consumer research;
marketing

In today's liquid world, where life is more uncertain than ever before (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2007), and where pace of life is accelerated to the degree where it is difficult to stop for reflection (Rosa, 2013), people are actively searching for answers and meaning in their lives; they are seeking the spiritual. Places such as ancient pilgrimage sites revive and blossom (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann, Eckhardt, Grohs, & Saceanu, 2016), religious movements such as Pentecostalism are globalising rapidly (Bonsu & Belk, 2010), New Age versions of centuries-old spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation thrive around the world (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012), and spiritual retreat tourism in ashrams or cloisters along with digital detoxes are becoming increasingly popular (Buckley, 2015; Graham, 2013). Together, these paint a picture of how contemporary 'quest culture' (Roof, 1999, p. 10) gives rise to a generation of seekers in deep hunger for reconnecting with 'one's inner self-to the known world and Beyond' (Kale, 2004, p.93; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2013).

Against all predictions, late modernity has not turned into a web of disenchanting and secularised (Hammond, 1985) societies where spirituality, religion and the search for transcendence become irrelevant (Berger, 1999). Consequently, marketing researchers are increasingly interested in the role of markets and consumption in the search for

meaning, and a research field at the intersection of spirituality, religion, markets and consumption is taking shape (e.g. Arvidsson, 2014; Bamossy et al., 2011; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, Jr., 1989; Bonsu & Belk, 2010; Gould, 2006; Hirschman, 1985; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016; McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014; Mick, 2017; Mittelstaedt, 2002; Muñoz Jr. & Schau, 2005; Redden, 2016; Rinallo, Borghini, Bamossy, & Kozinets, 2013; Rinallo, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2016; Rinallo et al., 2013; Sandikci & Ger, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Veer & Shankar, 2011). Together, this research has shown that the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, are irreversibly intertwined and that consumers along with marketers and spiritual institutions interact in a 'quintessential spiritual marketplace' (Redden, 2016, p. 231) to co-produce meaning in consumers' lives (Bamossy et al., 2011; Rinallo et al., 2013).

Much research in this field focuses on how marketers' sacralise their products and brands with spiritual meanings to increase the market offers' attractiveness (e.g. Rinallo et al., 2013; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), how spiritual/religious institutions draw on traditional marketing techniques to recruit new believers (Bonsu & Belk, 2010; Croft, 2013; Einstein, 2013; Rinallo et al., 2016; Yip & Ainsworth, 2016), or how consumers transform their mundane consumption activities into sacred ones (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Buchanan-Olivier & Schau, 2013; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Muñoz Jr. & Schau, 2005; O'Guinn & Belk, 1989; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) (for a detailed overview see Rinallo et al., 2013).

Research on consumer spirituality, however, which studies how consumers engage with spiritual goods, services and places that are (more or less) purposefully designed to enhance consumers' spiritual well-being and actualise a spiritual experience, has just recently begun to spark interest among marketing scholars. This new body of research has explored the consumer experience of pilgrimage and the role of consumption practices, objects and markets in realising a spiritual experience (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016; Kedzior, 2013; Moufahim, 2013; Scott & Maclaran, 2013; Turley, 2013). Kedzior (2013), for example, studies the New Age pilgrimage experience of visiting the vortex energies in Sedona and highlights the conflict-laden, but important, role of materiality and commerce in accessing the spiritual. Husemann et al. (2016) who study the pilgrimage experience in Medjugorje find, similar to Kedzior (2013), that pilgrims need to skilfully navigate marketplace tensions that result from an over-commercialised religious marketplace to experience spirituality. At the same time, however, they find that pilgrims draw on marketplace resources such as tour guides and smartphones to deepen their spiritual experience.

Moufahim (2013) explores gift-giving practices in Islamic pilgrimage and concludes that gift-giving rituals imbue the pilgrimage with meaning and that this meaning becomes materialised 'via the consumption of sacred and profane objects' (p 422). Furthermore, Husemann and Eckhardt (2018) reveal how pilgrims achieve a slowed down temporal experience via limiting their use of technology, curbing their physical movements and reducing their consumption levels while walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage. Deceleration, they argue, can be seen as a new post-secular form of spirituality. Finally, Higgins and Hamilton's (2016, 2018) research on the marketplace dynamics and consumer experiences of the Lourdes pilgrimage shows how consumers' involvement with the pilgrimage marketplace can have therapeutic as well as

transformative and magical qualities. Together, these studies share the understanding that consumers increasingly desire to access a marketplace that promises transcendence along with the view that spirituality is something that can be consumed.

To further the process started by Mathras et al. (2016) of developing a systematic approach to this growing and increasingly important body of literature in marketing and consumer research, we introduce the concept of consumer spirituality, defined as the interrelated practices and processes that people engage in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield 'spiritual utility' (Kale, 2004, 2006, p. 109), and outline how the six peer-reviewed articles and four invited commentaries in this special issue contribute to our current understanding of consumer spirituality. To do so, we categorise each article within three themes: (1) shaping markets for consumer spirituality, (2) the means for accessing consumer spirituality, and (3) making sense of and researching consumer spirituality. We use these themes to map out the current literature more broadly, and to outline a future research agenda, to energise and focus this nascent yet increasingly important field of study.

The concept of consumer spirituality

Spirituality is the meaningful exploration of the inner self in relation to the broader reality (Kale, 2006). It is closely related to the concept of religion, although it is less formal, rigid and institutionalised in nature (Rinallo et al., 2013). We define consumer spirituality as the interrelated practices and processes that people engage in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield 'spiritual utility' (Kale, 2004, 2006, p. 109). That is, the market offerings that are being accessed in consumer spirituality are purposefully designed to quench consumers' thirst for meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power. We identify three vehicles – materiality, embodiment and technology – that consumers engage with through interrelated practices and processes to access consumer spirituality.

Shaping markets for consumer spirituality

Two of the commentaries in this special issue offer insights into how markets are shaped for consumer spirituality. These are Philip Kotler's commentary entitled 'The Market for Transformation', and Roy Suddaby's commentary entitled 'Spiritual Myths of Consumption: Puritanism, Transcendentalism and the Consubstantiation of the American Consumer'. Kotler describes modern, globalised life as being VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous – which results in people increasingly looking for hope, remedies and anchors in the spiritual marketplace that offer change or transformation. Kotler's key contribution lies in outlining the three core elements of a spiritual marketplace. He outlines that a market offering which aims to alter a consumer's persona (body/mind) requires, first, a consumer who would like to change and who sees value in being transformed; second, a seller of change, who may be a spiritual practitioner, who is triggering the transformational process; and third, a place where buyer and seller meet for the change to happen. Kotler concludes that it is not surprising that buyer, seller and marketplace form the three cornerstones of a spiritual supermarket. But what is surprising is that people are looking to the marketplace more

and more to experience spirituality, assuming that the 'right' combination of the three elements can change their lives.

In contrast to Kotler, Suddaby's contribution lies not in mapping out features of the spiritual marketplace but rather in tracing how it has developed. He unravels some of the historical and institutional processes that underpin the spiritual marketplace in the USA by mapping out the religious and spiritual roots of three contemporary spiritually inspired consumer movements. In particular, he demonstrates how religious values of Puritanism and spiritual values of Transcendentalism influence three enduring collective myths of American culture: the myth of the American dream, the myth of the American Adam and the Myth of American Exceptionalism. He goes on to show how these myths in turn define three prevailing consumer movements of contemporary American capitalism: voluntary simplicity, transformational consumption and radical consumption.

Together, both commentaries contribute to current debates on marketplace dynamics in the 'spiritual service industry' (Bowman, 1999, p. 181), the 'spiritscape' (Kale, 2004, p. 102), and therapeutic servicescapes (Higgins & Hamilton, 2018). By firmly locating the experience of spirituality into the realm of the market, Kotler's commentary not only supports the view that consumers' search for meaning is more and more fulfilled by purposefully designed spiritual goods and services, but it also speaks to accusations of 'economic imperialism' (Bonsu & Belk, 2010, p. 305) and 'spiritual materialism' (Gould, 2006, p. 63) that often go along with discussions of a new 'global spiritual ecology' (Kale, 2004, p. 102). Suddaby does not criticise the commodification and commercialisation of spirituality in today's marketplace, but rather he questions the newness of seeking out the spiritual via consumption and respective market structures. By revealing how deeply contemporary consumer trends and movements are rooted in, and penetrated by, historic spiritual movements, Suddaby makes an important contribution to debates revolving around the secularisation of society and the sacralisation of consumption (Belk et al., 1989). The spiritual, he argues, has never fully faded but rather continuously re-merges, just in different shapes and forms, depending on what social conditions allow.

Future research

We are only at the beginning of understanding the market for consumer spirituality. Future research should explore marketplace dynamics, market actors and megatrends that are relevant in this growing spiritual marketplace. First, the nature of marketplace dynamics requires further investigation. Future research can explore how spiritual markets are shaped, grow and globalise. Globalisation had been identified as one of the key triggers of the growth and marketisation of religions and spirituality as well as the increasingly popular consumer trend of mixing and matching resources from different faiths and belief systems (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 20121; Bonsu & Belk, 2010; Rinallo et al., 2016; Roof, 1999). But how do these spiritual markets grow? How do they globalise? What are the macro-environmental conditions as well as the specific processes and mechanisms that allow century-old religious institutions such as Catholicism to include Zen mediation or Taoist prayers into their spiritual offering? What is the role of migration and war in the spread, blend or disappearance of spiritual offers and practice? How do spiritual practices that are often tightly linked to the geographical

and cultural context in which they developed deterritorialise and transfer to a new cultural context? Research on the globalisation of Pentecostalism sheds light on localisation-globalisation dynamics in this process (Bonsu & Belk, 2010). We encourage further research to explore the role of acculturation, experiences, emotions and space in the growth and globalisation of markets for consumer spirituality.

A second, and related, field of inquiry relates to the role of market actors; in particular to the role of spiritual practitioners, entrepreneurs and leaders, in shaping the spiritual market offer. Bonsu and Belk (2010) as well as Rinallo et al. (2016) investigate the strategies and challenges of promoting and selling spiritual experiences to seekers. They find that local religious entrepreneurs are the key to the success of spiritual market offerings. Through 'social interactions', religious or spiritual entrepreneurs contribute 'to the development of a shared identity and shared consciousness among [...] seekers' (Rinallo et al., 2016, p. 437). The findings of these studies suggest that there is a lot more to explore from a marketing perspective. What is the role of self-branding in successfully spreading spiritual messages? To what extent do spiritual leaders manifest human brand qualities? How do spiritual entrepreneurs successfully 'package' market offerings that address New Ager's desire to mix and match spirituality from various sources?

Finally, future research can get a clearer understanding of the megatrends that the market for consumer spirituality will be facing in the next 20 years. In 2004, Kale outlined five globalisation trends in the realm of spirituality and religion: harnessing religion and spirituality as means to deal with reterritorialisation; integrating spirituality in all aspects of life; individualising spirituality; experiencing spirituality through technology; and syncretising spirituality. These tendencies are still relevant in markets for consumer spirituality, but there are other developments that need investigation to understand the spiritual marketplace of the future. For example, the rise of niche religions, the increasing need to escape everyday life to experience the spiritual (i.e. escapism and the disintegration of spirituality and everyday life), as well as peoples' tendency to turn away from the idea of spirituality, with its religious overtones, towards a similar but more secular notion of seeking resonance. Resonance is not a feeling but a mode of relationships between a person and a segment of the world (e.g. people, nature, things and work) that is experienced as vibrating, responsive and meaningful (Rosa, 2016).

Means for accessing consumer spirituality

Materiality and consumer spirituality

Three articles in the special issue address the connection between materiality and consumer spirituality. That is, what is the relationship between material objects and how consumers search for, and experience, spirituality in the marketplace?

In their article 'Jesus, Take the Wheel: The Appeal of Spiritual Products in Satiating Concerns about Randomness' Steven Shepherd and Aaron C. Kay start out by asking a simple and straightforward question: Why are consumers drawn to spiritual products? Drawing on compensatory control theory, their research posits one possible answer to this question. It shows that products that are imbued with religious/spiritual significance help consumers manage concerns about randomness and uncontrollability, concerns ever present when navigating the modern world. In particular, the authors reveal two

insights. First, when randomness concerns are heightened – either when the product itself behaved randomly (i.e. unreliable) or when using the product subjects oneself to random uncontrolled events (i.e. driving a car) – religious participants show an increased interest in imbuing products with religious significance. Second, the study reveals what advantages spiritual products have over non-spiritual products. Spiritual products are seen as having access to a form of nonmaterial efficacy that is relatively less accessible to a purely material, non-spiritual product, and the efficacy of a spiritual product is also seen as less falsifiable.

Ateeq A. Rauf, Ajnesh Prasad and Abdullah Ahmed's article titled 'How Does Religion Discipline the Consumer Subject? Negotiating the Paradoxical Tension between Consumer Desire and the Social Order' identifies a specific boundary condition to the concept of consumer desire. They show how religion can have the disciplinary effect of having consumers swap cyclic, material, worldly desires with spiritual, eternal, other-worldly desires. Informed by Lacanian psychoanalytic thought as well as by Foucault's central argument in *The History of Sexuality*, the authors study the consumption practices of a religious group that follows a traditional view of Islam. In their analysis, the authors consider how the institution of religion functions as a disciplining force by which to mediate the (potential) conflict between human desire and the social order. The authors find that it is the belief in a life after death, the recognition of the temporality of this life, as well as the motivation for committing any action to realise the pleasure of God, that makes their participants work towards abiding a moral code of conduct with regard to their consumption practices that are defined by simplicity and anti-consumption tendencies. That is, this religious group actively works against the idea of excessive material consumption to please and experience God.

In the article entitled 'If it Comes from Juazeiro, it's Blessed! Liquid and Solid Attachment in Systems of Object Itineraries of Pilgrimages', Weber Janssen Pires de Santana and Delane Botelho present their ethnographic research on the movements of consumers and objects during a Catholic pilgrimage in Brazil. They find that as pilgrims circulate in the temporary mobility of the pilgrimage, they develop liquid attachment to some objects and enter into solid relationships with others. In particular, they identify four main itineraries in which pilgrims tend to liquefy attachment for gratitude and blessings received and solidify attachment to materialise their experience, their faith and their identity. They also provide empirical evidence that pilgrim consumers consider even liquid, temporary, more detached relationships with possessions special and of high value due to the movement of objects, power of the sacred site, and the significance of the rituals. Finally, they show that the circulation of a constellation of material artefacts is fundamental to pilgrims to relate to the sacred, God and saints. Together, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how and why pilgrims develop attachments to objects while being on a sacred journey.

Research on consumer spirituality has established the notion that materiality and spirituality do not oppose each other (Rinallo et al., 2013). Kedzior (2013) argues that consumption can materialise spirituality which is in line with Moufahim's (2013) findings that show that '[t]he consumption of material objects appears to be integral to pilgrimage rituals and transforms the intangible spiritual experience of the pilgrims into something "palpable"' (p. 421). The three articles just summarised follow the call to direct attention to the significant interaction between religion, spirituality and consumption

(Bonsu & Belk, 2010) as well as to further breakdown the binary position between spirituality and materiality (Husemann et al., 2016). They do so by showing that consumers are not just using material objects to experience the spiritual, but that consumers need to use material objects in the 'right' way, which depends on faith, group belonging, and socio-cultural context. 'Right' engagement with material objects can range from blessing everyday mundane objects (Shepherd and Kay), to de-materialising and simplifying consumption along with moral religious codes (Rauf, Prasad and Ahmed), to forming liquid and solid attachment with material objects during pilgrimage (Santana and Botelho). Also, reasons for accessing the spiritual via materiality can differ extensively. Consumers, for example, use spiritually imbued products to deal with uncertainty in the here and now (Shepherd and Kay), they tame their consumption in the here and now to reach a desired after life (Rauf, Prasad and Ahmed), or they use material objects to relate to God during a sacred journey (Santana and Botelho). In sum, these papers add nuance to our understanding of how and why consumers engage with material objects in attempts to access spirituality which can extend beyond geographies, time and even beyond life.

Embodiment and consumer spirituality

In addition to materiality, two of the papers in the special issue highlight the relationship between the body and consumer spirituality. In their article entitled 'From Caterpillar to Butterfly: Experiencing Spirituality via Body Transformation', Andrea Hemetsberger, Maria Kreuzer and Melanie Klien offer an embodied perspective of consumer spirituality. They explore the somatic practices of consumers who seek to reduce weight and detox their bodies via consuming a food supplement based on chlorophyll. The study reveals that the consumption of body-transforming substances can initiate a mindful, spiritual consumer journey which allows consumers to actively develop and experience their inner spirituality through recurring cycles of reduction, reflection and release. Thus, their study contributes to current theorising in the field of consumer spirituality with (1) a processual perspective of self-transformation that assumes that (2) mind and spirituality are embodied, and where (3) therapeutic consumption of body-transforming market offers, mediates and facilitates processes of self-renewal and re-incarnation.

Véronique Cova and Bernard Cova's study, entitled 'Pain, Suffering and the Consumption of Spirituality: A Toe Story', also assumes an embodied, corporal perspective on consumption. But in contrast to Hemetsberger, Kreuzer and Klien, this article focuses on the experience of pain as a vehicle to actualise a spiritual experience. Drawing on a comparative auto-ethnography of two painful pilgrimage experiences, one on the catholic Camino de Santiago in Spain and one on the secular Quebec Compostela in Canada, the authors show that pain can become a vehicle for greater spirituality by forcing the person suffering it to focus on their body. The study reveals powerful boundary conditions to this mechanism by revealing that pain needs to be 'transformed' to actualise the spiritual experience. Transformation happens when pain is experienced alongside spiritual features (e.g. religious rituals), fostering a greater connection with something higher, when the participant can mobilise their spiritual capital to link the pain to something higher, or when pain is displayed and shared with other

sufferers. Without these transformations, pain remains a corporeal sensation with no spiritual impact.

Together, the two articles add a novel, embodied perspective to research on consumer spirituality. Previous research has shown that painful bodies can be a powerful vehicle to slow down consumers' minds (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018) as well as to enable consumers to escape the self and help create the story of a fulfilled life (Scott, Cayla, & Cova, 2017). These two articles add that, via the body or bodily sensations such as pain, consumers can actualise a spiritual experience. Similar to how material objects can help consumers to access the spiritual (see previous section on materiality and consumer spirituality), (painful) bodies can turn the spiritual into a tangible, more 'palpable' (Moufahim, 2013, p. 421) experience. Hemetsberger, Kreuzer and Klien reflectively and rightfully argue that '[t]his lengthy process of developing embodied spirituality is no commercial offering experienced at weekends (Gould, 2006), nor is the spiritual consumed via sacralised consumption objects, but rather cultivated through corporeal, reflective and emotional work'. However, when Cova and Cova show that, in the case of pilgrimage, healing rituals involving bandages and plasters facilitate the materialisation of a spiritual experience, they remind us that materiality and bodies do not operate in isolation.

Technology and consumer spirituality

In addition to materiality and embodiment, one paper in the special issue highlights the relationship between technology and consumer spirituality. Kale (2004) argues for the growing importance of technology and cyberspace in consumers' search for meaning and transcendence. In the article 'A Discourse Analysis of Pilgrimage Reviews', Tom van Laer and Elif Izberk-Bilgin contribute to better understanding the role of technology in accessing consumer spirituality by providing an account of the discursive features of online consumer reviews of pilgrimage sites. In particular, they study how pilgrims belonging to the world's five major faith groups (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism) communicate the spiritual and material aspects of their pilgrimage experiences via the online review platform TripAdvisor. Van Laer and Izberk-Bilgin find that pilgrims include analytical discursive features to communicate the material aspect of their consumption experience, but they use narration to communicate spiritual transformation and the experience of strong emotions. Further, the authors reveal that the review ratings are only reflective of the spiritual aspect of the pilgrimage experience and ignore the material aspects. Together, this article offers insights on the irrevocable interplay between the spiritual and the material in the consumer experience of pilgrimage; in particular in a digital context. The digital context, the authors argue, allows spiritual and material aspects of the pilgrimage experience to coexist peacefully within the same review, and, it distributes knowledge, and democratises expertise, of sacred sites to 'any pilgrim with an Internet connection'.

Kale (2004, p. 101) observes '[t]he sheer magnitude and scope of spiritual materials and options available on the information superhighway', and posits that Web spirituality and Web religion will flourish globally, given the Internet's power in overcoming barriers of time and space. The Internet has turned into a vehicle for reaching out to, and accessing, God. Recent consumer research on pilgrimage has discussed the use of

technology in search of spirituality with mixed results. Whereas pilgrims' search for practical information in online forums (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018) as well as online word-of-mouth about sacred sites (Hamilton & Higgins, 2016) can facilitate and promote the spiritual journey, research has shown that pilgrims need to control their technological engagement while travelling to keep the modern world at bay, and thus, be able to truly immerse into the pilgrimage experience (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018). Van Laer and Izberk-Bilgin's study adds to the theorisation of the relationship between technology and consumer spirituality by showing that, in the aftermath of a pilgrimage, narrating and rating the pilgrimage experience in online reviews can extend the spiritual beyond the physical journey.

Future research

In this special issue, we have developed insights into how consumers can access consumer spirituality via materiality, embodiment and technology. These insights suggest future research into 1) each of these three facilitators of consumer spirituality to better understand the systematic processes that allow consumer spirituality to transpire; 2) other access strategies that may be conducive to consumer spirituality, such as place/space; and 3) the relationship between accessing consumer spirituality and (self-) transformation.

First, we discuss potential research avenues with reference to our identified themes of materiality, embodiment and technology as facilitators of consumer spirituality. Consumers' engagement with materiality to achieve spiritual well-being has received the most attention in research on consumer spirituality, as compared to research on embodiment and technology. The three articles in this special issue suggest that consumers need to engage with materiality in the 'right' way to experience the spiritual. Future research should look into the forms, conditions and motivations of consumers' 'right' engagement with materiality. What is the role of rituals and routines in engaging with materiality while searching for a meaning and transcendence? What object-consumer relationships are relevant? What is the nature of these relationships, beyond being liquid or solid? What is the nature of the object, in terms of design and material?

Next, future research on the role of embodiment in facilitating consumer spirituality can explore how increasingly popular bodily consumer practices such as yoga, meditation or fasting allow consumers to access consumer spirituality. Also, what is the role of the different senses in experiencing and accessing consumer spirituality? How does it feel to experience the spiritual via consumption? Do different types of pain induce different types of consumer spirituality? These are only some of the questions that are worth exploring to further unpack the embodied perspective of consumer spirituality.

Finally, with regard to the role of technology facilitating consumer spirituality, the Internet has proven to be a powerful 'channel of delivery for spiritual goods' (Kale, 2004, p. 103) and seekers connect via technology online to share the spiritual with like-minded others (van Laer and Izberk-Bilgin). But how can we understand technology and cyberspace as means to accessing consumer spirituality more systematically? Campbell (2005) suggests the concept of 'spiritualising the Internet' in which she theorises the Internet as 'a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, whereby allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives' (p. 2). Campbell

(2005) identifies four discourses that spiritualise the Internet technology: the Internet can be seen as 'a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life' (p. 9). Future research should explore how markets and consumption play out in these four strategies and how they allow access to consumer spirituality.

Beyond the three facilitators we have identified, future research can explore ways to access consumer spirituality beyond materiality, embodiment and technology. We suggest, for example, places and spaces as a potentially interesting angle to do so. Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran, (2013, p. 14) refer to 'place meaning creation' processes that unfold at sacred sites such as pilgrimages, for example. These processes, they argue, do not only feed into consumers' identity projects but they are also interlinked 'with the physicality [...] and the uniqueness of [the] geographical location'. To produce a 'distinctly 21st century spiritual experience' for New Age pilgrims, service providers at Glastonbury, for example, make use of the place's unique history and landscape (Maclaran & Scott, 2013; Rinallo et al., 2013, p. 14). Thus, future research can explore how consumers engage with spaces and places to access spirituality. What makes a place conducive of consumer spirituality? What is the role of markets in hindering or facilitating 'spiritual magnetism' (Preston, 1992, p. 31) that has been shown to draw seekers to sacred sites?

Additionally, future research can explore the relationship between consumer spirituality and consumers' (self-)transformation. In this special issue, Hemetsberger, Kreuzer and Klien shed light on how the consumption of a body-transforming substance mediates and facilitates processes of self-renewal and re-incarnation. Hamilton and Higgins (2016) show how pilgrims' experience of mini-miracles in Lourdes facilitates the transformation of the self. But is the change of a consumer's persona (body/mind), as Kotler puts it in his commentary, always and necessarily the goal of consumer spirituality? Can it be a spiritual experience for consumers to realise that changing oneself is not necessary? And how would market offerings that offer 'self-acceptance' rather than 'self-transformation' fit into the spiritual marketplace?

Finally, there are, of course, many other research questions with regard to consumer spirituality that we have not touched upon in this special issue, but which are certainly worth exploring. Those questions refer, for example, to the interrelationship among materiality, body and technology in accessing consumer spirituality; to factors (within the market offering, within the market, within the consumer) that hamper accessing consumer spirituality; to the relationship between access strategies and increasingly relevant syncretisation tendencies where consumers mix and match practices from different religious and spiritual traditions; to critiques and important discussions about the politics of consumer spirituality.

Making sense of and researching consumer spirituality

Mick (2017) makes the point that consumer research has been overly reliant on a small set of paradigms, and that those paradigms tend to stem from a Western way of viewing the world. As we seek to develop our understanding of consumer spirituality, we do not want to fall into the same trap. As such, we have two commentaries in this special issue which call for researcher reflexivity and examine how we can understand consumer

spirituality from different paradigms. Taken together, these commentaries suggest that we as researchers need to question our taken for granted understandings of the role that spirituality and consumption take in people's lives, and be open to alternative ways of understanding. This can take the form of approaching consumption from a Buddhist perspective (Phap Hai's commentary on 'A Buddhist Approach to Consumption'), or making sure as researchers we alter our modes of inquiry in varying spiritual contexts (Julie L. Ozanne and Samuelson Appau on 'Spirits in the Marketplace'). As Mathras et al. (2016) remind us, religion is multidimensional, and it is imperative to open our minds to a wide spectrum of dimensions.

Phap Hai, in his commentary on 'A Buddhist Approach to Consumption', introduces us to the quintessential Buddhist way of looking at consumption, which is through the Four Nutriments. The Four Nutriments, which are the delineation of what humans 'consume', are edible foods, sense impressions, volition and consciousness. Notably, the four nutriments include material objects, but also more subtle forms of consumption, such as consuming the world around us via our senses, consuming the world around us via our volition, or motivation to engage in activities or practices, and finally how our consciousness shapes our consumption of the world around us, and in particular how consumption is shaped by habitual patterns of response. As Phap Hai concludes, 'The real power of reflecting on consumption in terms of the four nutriments is we experience the connection between the inner and the outer.' This commentary provides deep food for thought, in terms of how much we experience the world through our consumption of it is shaped by the senses and the nature of our consciousness. The key point is that by becoming aware, we can break the habitual ways in which we consume, and 'begin to see that we don't need even one more thing. We don't need to run after anything external or internal. We are enough' (Phap Hai, in this issue).

Julie L. Ozanne and Samuelson Appau contribute a practically relevant and theoretically informed commentary to this special issue entitled 'Spirits in the Marketplace', in which they call for more academic dialogue and reflexivity on how to understand alternative worldviews and how to develop different approaches to studying the consumption of religion and spirituality. The authors identify and discuss two challenges that researchers often encounter when studying 'spirits in the marketplace': first, handling a taken-for-granted secularist worldview that often prevails in an academic context; second, making sense of spiritual entities – the various demons, gods, witches, angels, necromancers, and others – that are part of the metaphysical world of the people relevant to the study. Based on their own research of Pentecostalism in Ghana, the authors offer four suggestions of how to address these challenges. First, they suggest that consumers' alternative metaphysics should be treated with sensitivity to the socio-historical context. Second, the authors encourage exploring the potential of indigenous methods that may be more culturally sensitive. To illustrate this point, they show how religious testimony offers new insights as a way of knowing that is consistent with their informants' worldview in Pentecostalism in Ghana. Third, they advocate theorising within the frame of the indigenous metaphysical worldviews, such as understanding the religious testimonies as affective performances. Finally, the authors suggest moving beyond researcher reflexivity and advocate action that seeks rapprochement among differing worldviews.

In sum, by drawing attention to, and outlining ways of, increasing researcher reflexivity in the study of consumer spirituality, both commentaries guide researchers in this nascent field to 'question the impact of their religious worldview (or lack thereof) on their relationship with informants and interpretation of research findings' (Bamossy et al., 2011, p. 553).

Future research

Thinking about consumption in a Buddhist way, as outlined by Phap Hai, suggests that future research can examine if and how spiritual practices such as meditation, as discussed in his commentary, changes the nature of how the world is consumed. Pace (2013) and Gould (2006) point out that spiritual consumption can be strategic, to reach higher levels of awareness. That is, there is not necessarily a disconnect between consumption and the quest for enlightenment, a point also highlighted in Phap Hai's commentary, despite the common conception that the Buddhist view of consumption is to try and reduce one's desire to consume. Mick (2017) has suggested that suffering, impermanence and no-self – the cornerstones of Buddhist psychology – offer opportunities to re-think the nature of key consumer behaviour constructs such as ownership, materialism and marketplace morality. What are the benefits to people who are able to break the habitual cycles of consumption, and how is our fundamental understanding of what consumption is challenged by this Buddhist view? For example, consumption is typically defined in the literature as the processes involved when people select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires (Solomon, 2016). But if we expand the horizon of what consumption is, as Phap Hai does in his explication of the Four Nutriments, to include consuming experiences and impressions via our senses and consciousness, it implies that we need to go beyond markets in the scope of our inquiries. In sum, Mick (2017) outlines a future research agenda for the field of consumer psychology based on a Buddhist understanding of the mind. Here, we suggest doing the same for the broader field of consumer culture by drawing on a Buddhist conceptualisation of consumption.

Ozanne and Appau's call to re-consider the suitability of one's methodological toolkit when studying spirits in the marketplace and their suggestion to use indigenous methods, i.e. naturally occurring local ways of knowing (testimonies in the context of Ghanaian Pentecostalism), suggests future research into processes of how to identify these local forms of knowledge. What are the practical as well as ethical considerations when looking for and making use of indigenous methods? Sensitivity to the socio-historical context in which the local knowledge occurs as well as theorising the local knowledge within the frame of the indigenous metaphysical worldviews (rather than within that of the researcher) are important starting points, as outlined by Ozanne and Appau. Researchers of consumer spirituality need to be respectful of the often highly personal pursuits of spiritual seekers, as well as of the potential vulnerability and stigmatisation that can go along with faith, particularly with niche spiritualities/religions. Further practical and ethical guidelines for the research of consumer spirituality will prove valuable to assist the researcher in dealing with the 'uneasy subject position as a social scientist' (Rinallo et al., 2016, p. 430) that they assume among spiritual seekers.

Conclusion

We systematically introduce and unpack the concept of consumer spirituality, which refers to the interrelated practices and processes that people engage in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield 'spiritual utility' (Kale, 2004; 2006, p. 109). That is, the market offerings that are being accessed in consumer spirituality are purposely designed to quench consumers' thirst for meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power. We identify three vehicles – materiality, embodiment and technology – that consumers engage with through interrelated practices and processes to access consumer spirituality. Opportunities for future research are manifold as outlined along the three key themes of the special issue: (1) shaping markets for consumer spirituality, (2) the means for accessing consumer spirituality, and (3) making sense of and researching consumer spirituality. We hope to encourage and advance scholarly explorations on consumer spirituality in marketing and consumer research and beyond to help this nascent body of literature to thrive.

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