

Sacred Services: How can knowledge from social science relating to the sacred inform the design of service experiences?

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ABSTRACT

Service design must negotiate the challenges of intangibility, co-production and temporality in the design for experience. The field currently uses tools and concepts such as customer journeys and touchpoints to assist in this task. However, other fields have the potential to inform the service design process as it seeks to focus more and more upon the customer experience.

Theory relating to the sacred speaks essentially of the intangible where extraordinary experiences are co-produced in communities through myths and time based ritual structures.

This paper undertakes a theoretical comparison between relevant theory from social science relating to the discourse on the sacred and theory relating to service design. The paper demonstrates the potential for sacred theory to inform service design, and presents some examples from contemporary society in which the sacred is evident in service provision. This shows that there is potential from combining the two fields as part of the service design process and delivery, and identifies a potential to operationalize this theory into new service design tools. Areas for further research are identified that can help introduce theory on the sacred, myth and ritual into service design in a more operational way.

Keywords: service design, sacred, ritual, intangibility

INTRODUCTION

Service design is a relatively new field (Clatworthy, 2011; Schneider, Stickdorn, Andrews, & Lawrence, 2010). However, the theory relating to the sacred presented in this article dates back over one hundred years, beginning with the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim (Cladis, 2008).

Service design uses design method to make tangible intangible offerings through the orchestrating of performances, scripts, touchpoints, artifacts and cues in time based sequences at sequestered places. The aim is to facilitate favorable service experiences for customers that differentiate these services beyond their core offering.

The sacred is experienced, communicated in a shared community through the orchestration of rites, ceremonies and rituals, sequenced and repeatable performances that give structure to time, creating passageways through experiences that can allow for social and/or emotional transition. Rituals are often the performance of myth, where the intangible is made tangible through performance, the symbolic, physical artifacts and the sequestered places where they are staged.

Little has been done in examining the potential relevance of sacred for service design. Clark (2006) suggests the use of rites of passage as framing for co-design settings, but does not introduce broader sacred themes nor connect them to service design. Chase and Dasu (2001) express the importance of ritual in the service encounter but fails to suggest how this might be done. Cook et al. (2002) refers to Chase and Dasu arguing that ritual allows for social scripts that alleviates participants from the strain of thinking, which, as this paper will demonstrate, only touches on one element of what rituals do. Finally Nakamura, Tschirky and Ikawa's paper of 2008 links the tea ceremony to service design, constructing a three axis model to deconstruct the tea ceremony. However, this model does not include aspects of myth, sacred or ritual from the social sciences, and therefore does not bring the areas closer together. The tea ceremony would be a good example to deconstruct in terms of service design and aspects identified from the social sciences, but as yet, the two fields have not been bridged. This supports the need for further crossover work in the area.

The similarity between service design with its expected outcomes and the sacred are convergent, and it is therefore valuable to explore as to whether our understanding of the sacred could be used in service design. Indeed, new service design tools might be constructed to operationalize this material offering new opportunities for the field of service design.

This paper will examine this convergence and discuss what sacred theory might offer service design. It will do this by comparing both fields and highlighting areas where elements of sacred theory might potentially offer, through further research, practical improvement to the practice of service design by operationalization.

ARTICLE STRUCTURE

The paper will proceed with a description of service design based around the notions of Intangibility, Co-production and Temporality, which will be the basis for comparison and discussion later. It will offer a description of the sacred arguing the interdependence of Community, Myth, and Ritual for the sacred experience, concluding with a summary that connects sacred to notions of Intangibility, Co-production and Temporality. It will offer examples of the sacred structures manifest in two consumer settings. Finally it will conclude with a discussion of the potential of sacred theory for the further development of service design.

WHAT IS SERVICE DESIGN?

Service design uses the tools of design to facilitate processes that can create an “action platform” (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011) for desired service outcomes where the service designer contributes with “a set of modeling techniques for service experiences” (Holmlid, 2009, p. 2). Using frameworks to assist the service designer in this process to allow it to be more “concrete and controllable” (Koivisto, 2009)

What service design brings to service innovation is a unique user view that constructs the service experience from this perspective (Holmlid & Evenson, 2008; Koivisto, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010). Here therefore service design is concerned with the user experience beyond that which can be referred to as the “Core Service Offering,” which in Koivisto’s words is the “primary need of the customer” or the reason to buy the service. However the service designer must consider other needs of the customer in the service journey that might be existentially more fundamental and relate to issues such as belonging, esteem or fairness etc. (Cook et al., 2002). What

is at stake is how the supplementary services that embellish the core service offering may allow for differentiation of the service and deliver the potential for extraordinary service experiences.

Service design has several unique design challenges and characteristics, here described as Intangibility, Co-production and Temporality. Based on service marketing’s IHIP (Intangibility, Heterogeneity, Inseparability, Perishability) characteristics of services (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1981) they attempt to speak of these themes more in the language of service design. Despite the questioning of the validity of the IHIP characterization (Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004) they still form the basis of much service framing. In what follows, each of these three characteristics will be described, together with a list of common service design tools used for each. These tools are by no means exhaustive but are intended to give an overview of relevant processes employed. They are taken from *This is Service Design* (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011), *Design for Services* (Schneider et al., 2010), *250 essential Methods for Service Design* (Curedale, 2013), and *Designing Services with Innovative Methods* (Koivisto, 2009).

Intangibility: Service design makes the intangible tangible through the use of physical evidence such as the sequestered service space (Zeithaml et al., 1981) touchpoints, evidencing of experience, metaphors such as theatre and performance (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Schneider et al., 2010) and cues that also prompt scripting for both service staff and customer alike (Cook et al., 2002).

Touchpoints: help make the service experience take physical form through points of contact

Customer journey: helps to understand the intangibility of the customer experience as they move through a service experience

Co-production: Service design sees customers as collaborators in both designing the right service, but also in the co-production of the experience its self (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). The co-production of experience happens between customer and service provider through “situated actions” and in turn service experiences are formed by this physical context combined with the mood and wider socio-cultural context of the customer and organization. Along with the customers own cultural baggage which informs the potential outcome of the service exchange (de Ruyter & Bloemer, 1996) comes mood, which is less constant and where the customers response to the service staff’s performance again

demonstrates the need for consciously orchestrated interactions between cues, physical context and scripting. Here we see the significance of the role of the customer and influenced also by other customers in the service environment (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011), where good inter customer interaction can in fact contribute increased positive customer experiences (Martin & Pranter, 1989; Voss & Zomerdijk, 2008) particularly when there is a shared commitment or brand loyalty (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

Cultural probes and user diaries: give service designers insight into the direct cultural context of the customer

Emotional map: breaks down customer responses to service encounters into sensorial and/or emotional responses.

Emotional blueprint: maps emotional responses throughout the customer journey

Service mood board: creates a visual representation of the mood of the service space, journey and/or experience that will impact the experiential outcome for the customer

Temporality: Service design actively designs with time (Koivisto, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010), using time structuring tools and frameworks such as customer journeys to control or at the least make time tangible for the life of the service (Koivisto, 2009). Using a service time-line as a framework assists the service designer to make sense of this temporality, creating touchpoints of experiential delivery that creates sequences and dramaturgy to the service's

life, heightening the experience through a sense of expectation (Schneider et al., 2010). Here the aim is to give structure to the experience, hoping that the tempo of this structure is balanced to avoid boredom or alternatively stress (Cook et al., 2002; Schneider et al., 2010). Within this structure, through touchpoints the value of the service is consumed, evaluated, experienced in the moment (Miettinen & Koivisto, 2009), this being value-in-context where "value is temporal, because time becomes an important dimension" (Kimbell, 2010, p.3)

The customer journey; allows for the service designer to design with time and visualize time in sequences

Visual service scripts; like the customer journey but allows for a more visual representation through the timescale of the service.

Table 1 gives an overview of the mechanisms of service design with the characteristic of Tangibility, Co-production and Temporality.

WHAT IS THE SACRED?

"A thing is sacred because it inspires a collective feeling of respect that removes it from the realm of the profane [everyday]" (Cladis, 2008, p. 96).

This section framed primarily by social science, though taking a bricolage approach draws also on relevant theory from the humanities.

Durkheim the atheist believed it was the community that created the sacred and this paper positions sacred firmly as a secular phenomena, as religion

Service design characteristic	Service design's role	Service design does this by designing	Employs
Intangibility	Makes intangible tangible	Touchpoints Evidencing Cues Physical space Performance	Touchpoint cards Customer journeys
Co-production	To design from the users perspective	In co-design with users To create channels for users to co-create desirable experiences Physical spaces Dramaturgies & Scripts Cues & Props	User diaries Cultural probes Emotional Maps Emotional Blueprints Service mood boards
Temporality	Uses time as design material	Dramaturgies Routes through the service Service moments	Customer journeys Visual service scripts

Table 1. Service design overview

only is one context where the sacred is experienced (Rook, 1985). Many support this view and this paper will refer in part, not at least as a contemporary counterweight to Durkheim, to two papers using a sacred lens to deconstruct consumer behavior which grounds this perspective. "The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior" (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1987) and "The Cult of Macintosh" (Belk & Tumbat, 2005) consider how "consumption has become a vehicle for experiencing the sacred." And how "the ritual substratum of consumption and describes properties and manifestations of the sacred inherent in consumer behavior." The papers also address how "consumers sacralize or desacralize dimensions of their experiences" (Belk et al., 1987, p. 1).

This section will argue that the sacred experience can be a potentially positive, heightened and memorable one. It will try and show how the sacred experience is constructed between ritual, myth and a participating community.

Sacred Experience

Belk, Sherry et al summarize the characteristics of the sacred experience as "ecstatic," existential, "joy," "outside of self," "peak experiences," like the "enchantment" of "love, hope, ambition, jealousy" (Belk et al., 1987, p. 7-8). Where these experiences when shared with others can raise the spirit in what Durkheim calls "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 2008). Furthermore some rituals would also seem to "foster enduring episodic memories ... in some cases exhibiting all the features of classic "flashbulb memory" (Whitehouse, 2001, p. 178).

The community is central to the sacred experience (Belk et al., 1987; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Durkheim, 2008; Fry, 2011). The community that gathers itself around that which is agreed to be meaningful relies on mechanisms that in essence creates the core of the community and in addition make the intangible substantive through symbolic action and narrative. This is the symbiotic relationship between community, ritual and myth. We will examine each in more detail.

Community

Durkheim's core argument is that the sacred is the expression of the community. Where the sacred experienced by the group is not external but generated, or to use a service design term, "co-produced" by the group (Durkheim, 2008). And how we strive for community, where there is still a strong "contemporary desire for belonging, and its spiritual meaning and significance" (Knott, 2004, p. 76).

Knott sites Maffesoli to argue that in our postmodern "time of the tribes" the concept of community is long detached from a definition of relating to "locality" but relating to faith. This is not the faith as in religion but the faith in shared ethics, aesthetics, customs and values. But sharing these values can also create interdictions, controlling and regulating what is deemed as acceptable behavior and act to exclude those who don't conform (Geertz, 2004). But as Durkheim (2008) suggests, communities can also raise individuals above themselves and in certain setting allow for status equality referred to by Turner (1995) as "communitas," where "communitas has its own social structure and social norms, based on its own traditions, values, rituals and mythologies" (Collins, 2012, p. 6).

Myth

The myth and the community are inseparable concepts for Jean Luc Nancy. It is the myth that communicates the will of the community and the community that communicates the will of the myth. In "[c]ommunicating itself, it brings into being what it says, it founds its fiction" (Nancy, 1991, p. 56). For Nancy "myth and myth's force and foundation are essential to community and there can be, therefore, no community outside of myth" (Nancy, 1991, p. 57). What this suggests is that the myth becomes its own reality through its communicating of itself and as community is in itself its own myth, it too is brought into existence.

But what is a myth? Segal somewhat reductively defines myth "as simply a story about something significant" (Segal, 2004, p.5); however, for a community it is the something significant that binds it and creates a shared commitment (Durkheim, 2008).

Campbell (2008) goes beyond a concept of myth as a story of something significant and sites Freud to build the argument that myth is not a fictitious narrative but a metaphor for some form of truth. An account of truth that is as valid as any other. This paper therefore considers myth not as lies but as symbolic metaphors that allow us to make tangible the abstract.

For Barthes (1973) the myth is the symbolic signifier of meaning that contains a whole system of values, understood and read through its communication. Here it is worth returning to Durkheim whose view of the symbolic is of making the intangible tangible, whether by myth or by the physical totem; the sacred is manifest in the "intangible substance" (Durkheim, 2008, p. 191).

Ritual

Ritual is intrinsically linked to myth. Through ritual myths are performed and given a “physical” expression, with ritual becoming more efficacious in combination with myth and vice versa (Eliade, 1961).

For Turner ritual actions are “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place and performed according to set sequence” (Turner, 1961, p. 36), acting as rules of conduct that prepare one to experience or indeed come in contact with the sacred (Belk et al., 1987). Bell suggests that the strategy of “ritualization” creates action that is “designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian [mundane] activities” (Bell, 1992, p. 74).

But rituals are also a form of communication, as ways to express inward emotion, meaning and a reaffirmation of values (Geertz, 2000) that are often held through the community, strengthening the conviction of these values through enactment to be performed for those in the community as well as for those outside. In this way rituals often need an audience, clear scripts, clear roles and symbolic artifacts to assist in the action (Rook, 1985).

On a grand scale Van Gennep (1960) describes ritual in terms of “rites of passage” where the ritual construction allows the subject to make movement from one social state to another through set, sequential structures. Rites such as baptisms, coming of age, and marriage create the spaces of Separation, Transition and Reincorporation. Here the subject is disconnected and removed from their current social status, placed into a state of status ambiguity or “liminality,” then finally they are reincorporated into society with their new social identity.

Eliade also refers to rituals as passageways, but to an alternative emotional plane. This plane is not temporal in so far that it connects to the context of the now but connects to “primordial time” that exists outside of our cognitive perception of the now (Eliade, 1961). In this way, what ritual does in effect is lift the subject out of their profane (everyday) context and into an alternative consciousness. This “sacred time” is not dependent on the temporal time that existed before it as the subject is lifted and reconnected to the primordial, independent of the previous time based context.

However Eliade goes on to explain that time can also be experienced within the meta-ritual of the calendar year that moves and renews itself throughout the year (Eliade, 1961). This gives structure to the year, where time isn’t perceived as linear but cyclical, connected to reoccurring celebrations like Easter or Christmas, where time repeats itself in ritual. Within these bigger structures, smaller ritual acts exist (Whitehouse, 2001) where these smaller ritualistic performances strengthen and reinforce the meta-level rites that they exist within (Rook, 1985). The Catholic Church is a good example, from micro rituals such as hand washing within the structure of the weekly performed ceremony of the mass, which in turn exists within the meta-ritual of the liturgical year (Catholic Encyclopedia, 2012).

Given that the sacred is the intangible made tangible through myth and ritual and that the sacred experience is co-produced in the community in ritualized settings, where the ritual gives structure to the temporal; it is possible to use the same structure to analyze the relevance of sacred theory as for service design in the last section. Table 2 shows this convergence.

THE SACRED IN CONSUMER SOCIETY

This section will offer two short examples of how sacred structures in secular consumer society manifest themselves in product and service offerings. It is not suggested that these examples have been orchestrated actively with the sacred in mind, however they are included to show how sacred experiences manifest themselves already in these settings.

Apple

Belk and Tumbat’s 2005 paper “The Cult of Macintosh” argues that customers of Apple demonstrate typical human responses to the sacred that in turn facilitate unparalleled devotion and attached value to the brand and heightened experiences of the product. Some go as far as to tattoo the Apple logo onto their bodies to demonstrate this devotion (Kahney, 2006), aping the actions of early Palestinian Christians who tattooed themselves with the cross as a shared totem of faith (Cladis, 2008).

Through a series of constructed myths, a community of Mac devotees understands the brand and their relationship to it. They construct “Hero Myths” surrounding Steve Jobs, reflecting Campbell’s “heroic journey” narrative analysis, and “Satanic Myths” for figures such as Bill Gates.

Sacred characteristics	Community's role	Myth's role	Ritual's role	Employs
Intangibility	To define and create the myths and rituals that represent the intangible	Symbolic metaphors of the intangible.	Making physical through action and performance Using object and artifacts Using sequestered places	Myth and Ritual
Co-production	Defines what is sacred through the community. Collective effervescence Communitas	Communicating what is defined as sacred To bind the community and to represent its reality	Creates passageways to emotional states Creating passageways to transformation Reinforces what is defined as sacred	Community
Temporality	Playing out role in time based ceremony		Gives structure to time and understands time on many levels Offering sequences to time Offering sequences to the calendar	Rituals

Table 2. Sacred Overview

These myths create a deeper account of why, for them, Apple and its founder are so special. It goes beyond functionality of the product but creates a new way to experience and understand the brand values.

Through interviews with Mac devotees we also hear of witnesses and evangelizing – spreading the good news of salvation through transcending corporate capitalism. Where the sense is that Apple is motivated, not by the desire to make money, but by the desire to bring to the world truly “neat stuff” (Belk and Tumbat 2005, p. 213).

Ritual themes are also apparent on meta to micro levels. Apple stores create ritualized and near church like spaces (Collins, 2012), with new store openings having all the trappings of ecstatic ceremonies and as the way a Mac is packaged allows for ritual enactment, some go as far as inviting friends to unpacking ceremonies (Kahney, 2006).

Finally by the time the iPhone was launched in 2006 Mac devotees appropriated mythologies and symbols from religion to communicate their feelings towards the impending technological release, referring to the new phone as the “Jesus Phone” (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010).

Memphis

In the example of Memphis we see a secular destination made special by an Elvis faithful turning it into a pilgrimage center (Alderman, 2002).

What might be described as the Elvis pilgrimage is a collection of designated places in Graceland including the meditation gardens, the tomb, the jungle room, with rites such as the morning vigil and

writing on the wall by the gates (Alderman, 2002). Beyond the Graceland complex there are other essential visits that should be undertaken; a stay at the Heartbreak Hotel, to stand at the x-marked spot where Elvis recorded at Sun Records, to visit Lansky’s clothes shop, with other sites vying for position like his birthplace in Tupelo and Lauderdale Courts where he lived as a teenager (Davidson, 1985).

For many the experience of visiting Memphis and Graceland is defined by the myth of Elvis, a myth that is controlled and managed by the Presley estate (Alderman, 2002). Through the myth, rites and sequestered sites the tourist gleans meaning, Alderman suggesting that Graceland has become a “Pilgrimage landscape” a phenomenon that does “not simply emerge but undergo what Seaton (1999) calls sacralization – a sequential process by which tourism attractions are ‘marked’ as meaningful, quasi-religious shrines” (Alderman, 2002, p. 28).

The emergence of the Graceland tradition is a relatively new one gathering momentum after Elvis’ death in 1977 (Alderman, 2002) and arguably – like in the case of Disneyland – it becomes an “authentic manifestation of local [American] culture” (Doss, 2008) and in turn offers meaning and value to the Elvis community.

DISCUSSION

The two examples presented here show that the sacred is present in modern “designed” service solutions and that it offers a means for the users to experience stronger emotional attachments and more meaningful service experiences. It is unknown whether this was actively considered during the

design process or an accidental outcome. It does, however, show the potential of sacred and services when combined.

Operationalizing theory

But is it possible to design the sacred? This is arguably not the case directly, but as with service design which creates the channels for experience to be had, it may be possible through the community to design and orchestrate rituals and ceremonies that are able to connect to myths that in turn create the channels for “sacred” or at the very least “special” experiences.

Hobsbawm in the introduction to *The invention of tradition* (Hobsbawm, 2012) argues quite clearly that traditions, rituals and myths can be invented and designed where none existed before. Roper (2012) underlines this by using the example of the Scottish kilt to be a relative modern innovation and indeed designed by an English Quaker for his Scottish workforce. However through a process that privileged a mundane piece of everyday cloth, not at least through myth and its ritual wearing, the kilt is now seen as an ancient cultural expression of Scottish pride and belonging. Also Kong and Yeoh (1997) argue that the strategy of creating ritual has been used by the Singaporean authority to unite the country behind a myth of nationhood and unity. On a more modest scale, but no less important, literature relating to child adoption offer practical ways to design ceremonies and rituals (Lieberman & Bufferd, 1999; Mason, 1995) to help build trust, assist with transition and to build new family traditions.

This suggests that rituals and myths can be designed and/or used to cultivate mundane artifacts, actions or customs into meaningful traditions.

Further work

So further research could proffer a model for designing with the material presented in this paper. This raises questions as to what this material really offers and what it could mean for service design.

In regards to Intangibility it may offer a broadening of the definition of the term touchpoint if framed by the concept of “intangible substance.” Touchpoint chains along a service journey would acquire new significance for customers as symbolic meaning. This might mean that touchpoints should transcend their functional origins and serve an extended purpose of emotional functionality to connect to other deeply held needs and values.

But then who would decide the form of these new kinds of touchpoints and what would their form be? Currently the designer gives form to these points of contact, but in the theory presented here, the intangible substance is something that is generated out of the community, in some way collectively co-produced. This might make it difficult to find these forms or at least add a layer of complexity where the customer would need to find a way to materialize a form of the collective will. Maybe due to service design’s tradition of co-production it might have the tools to aggregate this sort of material. Maybe new tools for this might be developed too, to aggregate myths and the aesthetics and feel of these substances.

Perhaps touchpoints would need to be redefined as nonphysical; as a myth, as a complex ritual or even one as simple as a handshake.

And what of the co-producing community? Can collective effervescence be experienced remotely? Must the group always be present to create these experiences? To perform the ritual together, to express the myth, to perform for those inside to others outside?

And what of temporality? What would this material bring to our concept of time in the service journey? Currently we understand it as a linear movement, but what would a service journey look like when planned as a series of cyclical events over weeks, months, seasons, years; repeating themselves and reaffirming their meaning through repetition? Could these cycles be disrupted consciously, by rites of passage that create new dramaturgies and high points through a service life or even customer’s life? What kind of services could use these time schematics? Life Insurance? Loyalty schemes? What frameworks must we design to work with this kind of complexity?

How could we use the emotional and social transitional structures of Van Gennep to construct transformative experiences that change us? Is it the job of service design to change people? Which services would benefit from these kinds of structures? Hospitality? Tourism?

What kind of services would benefit from integrating sacred theory into service design? Would it be useful for just hedonistic services or could more functional services be lifted from their quotidian nature? Can the sacred be used in business

to business services (b2b), for example, or does it require emotional investment and desire from the customer?

Finally, what should the boundaries of a service design project be when involving the sacred? It seems clear that the sacred operationalized would require more of a company than just adapting the touchpoints and the journey. It might involve a closer link to the service brand and the company identity. How then, should the service design process relate to this seemingly larger project boundary?

How could the sacred service experience be measured? How could an organization evaluate the success of the efforts used on developing sacred services? How do customers articulate this, when asked?

CONCLUSION

The theoretical comparison that this paper presents demonstrates that there are comparable themes between service design and sacred theory, and that the study of the sacred offers rich and varied material that could expand the content and practice of service design. The examples provided demonstrate further the potential of combining the two fields as part of the service design process and delivery, and identifies the potential for further work to operationalize this theory into new service design tools. But what this work implies is that there is a whole untapped resource of material for service design for the creation of truly extraordinary experiences. "Effervescence," "joy," "ecstatic," "enchantment," terms relating to the sacred experience, here is truly the potential for new service experiences for customers given that this material could be understood and used by service design. However, as has been shown, there are multiple unknowns regarding how and in what way this can be done. The paper shows the potential, but there is still a great deal of research needed to identify the best way to combine the two areas. Hopefully this paper could motivate others to contribute to what could be an interesting area of study.

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