



Mini-miracles: Transformations of self from consumption of the Lourdes pilgrimage



Leighanne Higgins^{a,*}, Kathy Hamilton^{b,**}

^a Department of Marketing, Lancaster University Management School (LUMS), Charles Carter Building, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK

^b Department of Marketing, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde Stenhouse Building, Glasgow, Scotland, G4 0TQ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 December 2014

Received in revised form 1 May 2015

Accepted 1 May 2015

Available online 10 August 2015

Keywords:

Sacred consumption

Transformation

Pilgrimage

Miracles

Ethnography

ABSTRACT

This paper explores transformations of self through pilgrimage consumption. A three year ethnographic study of Lourdes, one of the largest Catholic pilgrimage destinations, reveals the concept of “mini-miracles” to refer to those miracles that occur in and are important to an individual’s life, but are unlikely ever to be officially deemed as miracles in the eyes of the church. Mini-miracles transform selves and in turn draw pilgrims annually and recurrently to consume the Lourdes pilgrimage experience. The findings reveal the existence of three forms of subjectively experienced mini-miracles: physical, social and peaceful, each of which act as intangible word-of-mouth consumption drivers to the Lourdes pilgrimage. Lourdes, as a business institution, should capitalize on the word-of-mouth mini-miracles shared among consumers as a means of building and maintaining stronger networks and relationships within Catholic/Christian communities at both the national and local level.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Caroline, a nurse in Ireland, was asked to volunteer to care for sick pilgrims in Lourdes but with a young family including a toddler going through toilet training she felt this would be impossible. “I could not leave that responsibility to my mum and husband, and go off to France for a week”. That night her child slept right through, “a completely dry night”, which she believed to be “a fluke”, but the next nights were the same and that was it: her child was toilet trained. As Caroline shared, “bang went that excuse, so I blamed not having the finances”. However, a week or so later she moved some boxes and out fell an envelope with US dollars from a trip she had made a few years previously. She exchanged the money and “you will never guess what, it calculated, I kid you not, to the exact penny to the amount I needed to go to Lourdes”. She then asked her mother to look after her children so that she could volunteer in Lourdes. Initially her mum refused, telling Caroline she could not possibly leave them and go “frolicking” in France, so as Caroline put it—“that was that”. However, something transformed her mother’s thinking and the next day she visited Caroline and told her, “that was unfair of me, if you want to go and help people who desperately need help, who am I to stop that? Of course, go.” So Caroline came to Lourdes and has continued to volunteer for over twenty years. Caroline links a “major” miracle in her life to Lourdes: after years of alcohol addiction her husband suddenly quit, a transformation that Caroline completely attributes to her

years of coming to Lourdes and begging Our Lady for the addiction to cease (Based on researcher field notes).

In 1858, in the small and derelict village of Lourdes in France, a series of apparitions seen by fourteen year old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, of a lady believed, and authenticated in 1862 by the Catholic Church, to be Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, led to the growth of one of the biggest Catholic sanctuaries and pilgrimage sites in the world (Fargues, 2011). Pilgrimages are an important context to explore transformation because they are defined as transformational journeys (Gesler, 1996). The limited marketing and consumer research on pilgrimage tends to focus on the “place-directed marketplace” (Scott & Maclaren, 2013) surrounding the pilgrimage site, or the taking of goods away from the pilgrimage site (Kedzior, 2013; Moufahim, 2013). In other words, prior research privileges the tangible good and many questions remain unanswered about intangible pilgrimage experiences. This paper is therefore focused on this research gap and its aims are twofold. The first aim is to better understand the key intangible drivers that draw pilgrims annually and recurrently to consume the Lourdes pilgrimage experience. The second aim is to understand how these drivers encourage a transformation of the self.

Lourdes is a place of divine intervention where transformations are attributed to factors beyond the individual. Respondents regularly share their personal Lourdes story which explained what had initially brought them to Lourdes. The opening account from Caroline offers one example and, in common with other respondent narratives, suggests elements of mystery and magic. Popular understandings of such transformation in pilgrimage sites are often associated with miracles, yet since 1858 only 69 recorded miracles have been authenticated and aligned with Lourdes. Nonetheless, the findings from this ethnographic

* Corresponding author. L. Higgins. Tel.: +44 152410096.

** Corresponding author. K. Hamilton. Tel.: +44 141 5483240.

E-mail addresses: l.higgins@lancaster.ac.uk (L. Higgins), kathy.hamilton@strath.ac.uk (K. Hamilton).

study reveal that the miracle narrative remains central to the Lourdes consumption experience. The key theoretical contribution of this paper is to introduce the concept of mini-miracles to refer to those miracles that occur in and are important to an individual's life, but are unlikely to be officially deemed miracles in the eyes of the church.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the Lourdes context, which is followed by a discussion of academic research in the areas of pilgrimage, transformation and miracles. The findings of an interpretive ethnographic methodology reveal the existence of three forms of subjectively experienced mini-miracles: physical, social and peaceful, which act as intangible word-of-mouth consumption drivers to the Lourdes pilgrimage. This is important because it raises a number of implications for religious marketplaces which need to be branded and marketed like other products and services in order to maintain their relevance within contemporary culture (Einstein, 2008).

2. Lourdes: A contextual overview

Since the apparitions of 1858, the village of Lourdes has grown to become the second largest tourist destination in France and the third largest Catholic pilgrimage destination (Fargues, 2011). With a week's pilgrimage in Lourdes costing £700–£1000 it may seem surprising that this expensive week is consumed recurrently and annually by many pilgrims over their lifetimes. However, for the consumers of this experience, the costs are outweighed by their need to search for hope and spiritual renewal, and even for a potential miracle. Lourdes is a “vast religious complex” (Fargues, 2011, p. 65) consisting of three large basilicas and several chapels, as well as two hospitals, a welcome center, a bookshop, two museums, numerous accommodation options and eating places for volunteers, alongside premises for approximately 300 Lourdes employees. The secular town surrounding this complex is equally expansive, with 208 hotels, 100 restaurants and 220 souvenir shops, providing the equivalent of one shop for every 30,000 pilgrims to Lourdes (Fargues, 2011, p. 65). Consequently, Lourdes, which is seen as a “spiritually based community (SBC)” (Granger, Lu, Conduit, Veale, & Habel, 2014), has clearly become a restructured consumption scape (Urry, 1995) and a “place directed marketplace” (Scott & Maclaren, 2013) where consumers can consume both the sacred offerings of the Sanctuary and the secular offerings of the Lourdes marketplace.

The first miracles of Lourdes occurred in 1858, during the time of the apparitions. As the end of the nineteenth century approached, a “miraculous mood” (Harris, 1999, p. 19) took over at Lourdes, with more and more people claiming to have been miraculously cured of ailments, causing the church to become “notably very concerned” (Fargues, 2011, p. 189) about the claims. Consequently, in 1883 the Sanctuary of Lourdes established Le Bureau de Contestations Medicales (The Medical Bureau), an official investigative office that uses modern medical diagnosis to check the authenticity of curing and miracle claims. The authentication of a miracle at Lourdes is not a quick or easy process, as the Catholic Church took from 1989 to 2013 to authenticate the most recent (69th) Lourdes miracle. Yet, despite the low number of authenticated miracles, “Lourdes in the popular mind means miracles” (Marnham, 1982, p. 196). This is partly due to the transformative nature of pilgrimage, as the following literature section of the paper explores.

3. Literature review: Consuming pilgrimage, transformation, and miracles

The marketization of religion (Haddorff, 2000; Izberk-Bilgin, 2013; McAlexander, Leavenworth Dufault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014; Twitchell, 2005) has blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Pilgrimage sites across the world have become “place-directed markets—sites of exchange created by the crowds drawn to a sacred place... [and] are at least as numerous and certainly as important as those created by marketers or even anti-market promoters” (Scott & Maclaren, 2013, p. 196). Markets surrounding religious sites are

characterized by a plethora of religious trinkets known as “Jesus Junk” (McDannell, 1995; Park & Baker, 2007). These kitsch objects are viewable as “anachronistic, clichéd, derivative, mass-produced, populist and in poor taste” (Turley, 2013, p. 169), with research attempting to understand these markets by classifying visitors into either pilgrims or tourists according to the extent of their market engagement (e.g., Eade, 1992). This focus on consumer goods aligns with other research on religious consumption surrounding religious jewelry (Fernandez & Veer, 2004; Rinallo, Borghini, Bamossy & Kozinets, 2013) or clothing influenced by religious beliefs (Sandikci & Ger, 2010). The experiential nature of pilgrimage consumption remains less well understood and this research therefore complements the existing research by focusing on subjective pilgrimage experiences.

The transformatory element of the subjective experience of pilgrims is described in the following definition offered by Gesler (1996, p. 96):

A pilgrimage entails a journey from one place to another, from one aspect of one's life to another. As a result of this movement, many people experience pilgrimage as a transformation. Religious pilgrimage, in particular, can be viewed as a movement from the profane to the sacred, from everyday life to an encounter with the divine, or from local, conventional religion to a radiant religion experienced in a far-off place.

McCracken (2008, p. 1) suggests, “Transformation is a diverse and a complicated phenomenon.” Transformation within the context of the religious pilgrimage is arguably all the more complex given the involvement of sacred elements that operate beyond the realm of individual agency. In their seminal work, Turner and Turner (1978, p. 11) suggest that as pilgrims draw close to the peak of their pilgrimage experience they receive a “pure imprint of a paradigmatic structure” which provides “a measure of coherence, direction, and meaning to their action.” However, Turner and Turner (1978) largely consider pilgrimage transformation to occur at a communal level as pilgrimage sites give rise to temporal social anti-structural moments of *communitas* wherein the prevailing social structure of the time is cast off along with considerations of age, gender, and social class. This paper complements this communal perspective by prioritizing the subjective experiences of individual pilgrims.

McCracken (2008) discusses the idea of different “transformational routines” in relation to “the set of conventions by which an individual is changed... [they] are the processes by which people take on social ‘shapes of a different kind’” (ibid, xxii). McCracken (2008) identifies four routines: the *traditional*, which refers to the processes of rites of passage, *status*, meaning the processes through which people will augment their social standing, *modernist*, relating to processes which aid people to become more mobile both in private and public spaces, and *postmodernist* processes, which offer multiplicity and fluidity to individuals. McCracken (ibid, xxii) views these routines as being “additive”, as one routine does not “supplant” another. Consequently, all transformations begin in the traditional way and slowly grow, evolve and transform into something more. The routine most relevant to, and evident in, this study is the traditional routine. This is especially so given that this study is investigating a branch of the Catholic Church, an institution often critiqued for its maintenance of 2000 year-old dogmas, and its refusal to conform to 21st century societal norms, thus possessing a traditional “passion for stasis and continuity” (McCracken, 2008, p. 53). McCracken (2008) also indicates the importance of ritual and myth to traditional transformatory routines.

Many visit Lourdes annually and recurrently over their lifetime, with the pilgrimage becoming a consumption ritual (Rook, 1985). In particular, pilgrimages have an alignment with “rituals of affliction” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 11), a term which refers to rituals that are performed as a means of eliminating ailments, dark forces, bad luck and even death, and which generates the idea of “the economy of salvation” (McDannell, 1995, p. 140). An economy of salvation involves the exchange of goods, gifts and donations at shrines, chapels and other religious sites as a means of establishing “a series of obligations between those on earth and those in Heaven” (McDannell, 1995, p. 140).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492937>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10492937>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)