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## **Can Retail Liminal Space/Places Transcend Gender Segmentation?**

### **Abstract**

Transcendent Customer Experiences (TCEs) transform a customer's self-identity and imbues them with quintessence: a sacred feeling toward the brand, product and experience. Although TCEs need not happen in a sacred place, they occur in spaces of non-geographical liminality. The ordinary world seems to fall away, replaced by an authentic connection between actors in a *communitas*, or community of sacred feeling. In the last thirty years, marketers have been further developing consumer religiosity as a sales strategy. This paper explores questions regarding the affect on gender and gender neutrality in consumer religiosity, especially as it applies to liminal space/places in retail environments, and proposes questions for further investigation.

### **Introduction**

Join us at the Apple Retail Store, the unique gathering place where people come to discover Apple products. Show your passion and expertise as you connect customers with our products and help integrate products into their lives. Be a part of our team and change the way our customers work, play, create, and communicate.

- From the Apple retail store staff recruitment web page

Apple Computer is a textbook case for exploring consumer religiosity (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Kawasaki, 1991). Apple followers, or Macheads as they are sometimes called, are known for both their one-eyed, fanatical devotion to Apple and their evangelistic tendencies in attempting to convert others to the brand (Shelly, 2008). Apple has leveraged their following at various times during the last thirty years. One way they do this is with the attention surrounding the opening of a new Apple retail store. Since 2001, Apple followers and fans attend Apple retail store openings in the same way fans attend rock concerts, with long queues and fervor attracting media

attention. No other consumer electronics store opening attracts so much devotion and attention.

The Apple retail store phenomenon has also correlated with another interesting fact. Apple is, by far, the number one technology brand for women (Top Tech Brands for Women, 2009). Although all products have an experiential component, even goods-based products (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), Apple has been recognized as a tech brand who retail experience focuses less on selling the product, and more on selling the experience. In other words, Apple operationalises value co-creation (Lusch, Vargo, & Wessels, 2008); in everything they do, including their approach to retail.

Their approach to retail confounds the typical consumer electronics servicescape. The crowded, warehouse/hardware-store style approach of most large consumer electronics retailers is eschewed (Hornby, 2008; Martin, 2011). Apple's approach creates a geographical hub for novice and experienced users of the products, with the most experienced users (staff) "Geniuses" whose purpose is to serve others in need (Aaker, 2012).

Apple's retail store concept is an example of a liminal space/place designed to elicit a Transcendent Customer Experience (TCE) in a specific geographical (retail) location (J. W. Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). From a religiosity perspective, this is akin to a church, a liminal space/place with its own hierarchy and fellowship, set aside from ordinary life. As the excerpt from the employment section of the Apple website illustrates, the role of the sales assistant at Apple is to facilitate

transformational experiences, much like clerics do in a traditional religious environment.

Religious studies literature suggests that women, who have often been on the fringes of religion, are reshaping religious space/places to suit their modern lifestyle (Roof, 1993). However, there is little research on gender in consumer religiosity, particularly in product categories where women are emerging as key market segments, such as in consumer electronics.

This paper builds on literature from anthropology, religious studies, Consumer Culture Theory and Service-Dominant Logic to pose questions of gender and gender neutrality in liminal space/places. The author proposes that religiosity and consumer religiosity are parallel experiences and therefore the learnings arising from religious studies literature can form the basis for further investigation in to consumer contexts relating to religiosity and like behaviours. By drawing on concepts from religious studies, anthropology, psychology, and marketing a more comprehensive perspective of consumer religiosity can be investigated.

### **Consumer Religiosity**

Consumer religiosity has two meanings in marketing literature. One meaning is the religious affiliation of consumers, usually studied in reference to the effect of consumers' behaviour regarding purchasing or ethical consumption. This meaning is not the one that applies in this paper.

This paper deals specifically with the consumer religiosity where consumers' affiliation to products are as much a part of their identity and cultural life as religions traditionally have been (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; A. M. Muniz & Schau, 2005). For those unfamiliar with consumer religiosity, the dedication to a brand or product experience as much as a spiritual experience seems at best odd, and at worst blasphemous.

However, studies based in Consumer Culture Theory demonstrate that some consumer experiences are so transformative that they become transcendent, and exhibit the qualities of religious experiences. A Transcendent Customer Experience (TCEs) is devotion akin to a religious affiliation (Belk, et al., 1989; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). This comparison between consumer religiosity and traditional religiosity parallels the mythmaking, ritualization, celebration and devotion usually reserved for religions (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; A. Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; A. M. Muniz & Schau, 2005). The comparisons between traditional religious behaviour and consumer religiosity are from a cultural perspective, with similar methodologies to anthropology and sociology (E J Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk & Wallendorf, 1990; Belk, et al., 1989; A. M. Muniz & Schau, 2005; J. Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

The industry example most examined in the literature is that of Apple Computer, Inc, or as it is now known, Apple. This paper will also seek to use Apple as an example of consumer religiosity to illustrate a few points; however it should be noted that examples of consumer religiosity in academic literature has ranged from cars and

consumer electronics (A. M. Muniz & Schau, 2005; Rao, 2002) to collectibles (Belk, et al., 1989) and food (Pendergast, 2000).

### **Liminal Space/Places**

A liminal space does not have to be a geographical place; it is a conceptual space where the ordinary world falls away, and the hierarchies of everyday life are no longer applicable. Entering the liminal space is usually ritualised, and once within that space another hierarchy applies (Turner, 1969). This new hierarchy is based on the structure of the *communitas*, or fellowship within the liminal space. The *communitas* has its own social structure and social norms, based on its own traditions, values, rituals and mythologies (Carse, 2008; Porter & McLaren, 1999; Turner, 1969).

A place is a geographical construct (Gieryn, 2000). It is not a conceptual space, but an actual, physical place in which activities happen. Places exert their influence over those within it. In a marketing context, this is often referred to as a servicescape (Bitner, 1992). Religious servicescapes are constructed to become liminal spaces where the ordinary world falls away, and authentic connection with the sacred and within a fellowship of peers is possible. There are usually traditions involved in entering and exiting liminal spaces/places, where one sheds one's everyday identity and embraces the new sacred hierarchy, and then, when exiting, one prepares oneself again for the profane world (Turner, 1969). When places are constructed in order to enhance liminality (such as a mosque) then they are liminal space/places.

One example of this kind of liminality space/place in traditional religion is the cities of Mecca and Medina and their role in the *Haj* pilgrimage. The Haj is a pilgrimage

that each Muslim person is compelled to complete at least once in their life. It is also the largest annual tourism experience in the world. In order to participate in the event, pilgrims must first demonstrate they are of the Islamic faith. First-time pilgrims are required to attend classes to ensure they understand the rituals and meaning of the journey (A record number of pilgrims arrive for the Hajj, 2008).

Once in Mecca and Medina, the pilgrims change into uniform garb, shedding the trappings of their ordinary life (nationality, socio-economic status, etc) and engage in sacred rituals for several days. When they travel back to their home countries the *Hajji* (returned pilgrims) has been transformed in a spiritual way; albeit not in a physical or material one (Collins & Murphy, 2010a).

Gender roles in traditional religious spaces/places are often more strict than gender roles in everyday life. Even in the early Christian era, the apostle Paul provided instruction that religious places are specifically male-oriented, symbolizing the male body of Christ. Women were, and in some cases, still are discouraged from breaking boundaries, and marginalized from central activities (Øklund, 2004). During the Haj pilgrimage, there are gender-neutral traditions and activities as well as gender-specific ones. Interestingly, Islam makes no distinction between gender on whether someone should complete the pilgrimage in their lifetime. Both men and women are compelled to become a Hajji. However there are certain restrictions in terms of intermingling of the genders and on activities during the pilgrimage, once one is in the sacred space/place, that differ based on religious tradition (A record number of pilgrims arrive for the Hajj, 2008).



When investigating consumer religiosity, the question of place over space is rarely explored. Firms create places for their customers to interact with staff and products. These places are deliberately designed for consumption. Often they are stores, but they also may be as small as kiosks (like an ATM machine) or as all encompassing as tourism destination (like Legoland). Some places are designed specifically for a market segment, often based on gender. Consumer electronics is one such type of retail place.

### **Consumer Electronics Places and the Goods-Based Paradigm**

Before Apple ventured in to having their own retail places, they licensed other stores to sell their products in a bricks and mortar environment. These places were often large retailers (megastores) with internal, dedicated sections designed to Apple specifications—lots of square footage and few products on display.

Apple delved into their own retail places at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when they were struggling to find appropriate retail places in consumer electronics megastores. Megastores were struggling to provide the specs Apple required. They were more strongly utilitarian, with a price-based approach. Apple, with its unique hardware/operating system, higher price point and lower market share, could not compete. Moreover, Apple was about to introduce a major product, the iPhone, and could not afford to have it overshadowed by the plethora of other phones on the market (Martin, 2011).

Apple products, especially the new lines, had to stand apart in a retail environment. The specifications required by Apple CEO Steve Jobs were too demanding for a

megastore. The products had to all be functioning. The customer in the store had to have the room and the ability to interact with the product experience. Apple was already battling to have their own branded retail islands in larger, crowded hardware or warehouse type retail places (Hormby, 2008).

The reason that megastores were not going to deliver what Apple needed was because they generally operated on a hardware store or warehouse outlet model. Displays had computers latched to utilitarian benches with boxed product shelved nearby.

Assistants were mostly male and were knowledgeable about the product hardware/software more than product experience. Sales per square footage were not bringing in enough revenue; so floor space with was packed more product. The retail outlets in consumer electronics were in a race to the bottom: it was not how the product looked or felt; it was about the specifications for the price (Hormby, 2008).

This good-based paradigm flew in the face of what Apple was about; and their products were not going to be delivering TCEs in that kind of place.

Goods-based paradigms arise out of economic theory, where value is embedded in to good upon their manufacture. The possession of that value is the primary incentive for exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). So, for example, a laptop has value built within it, and that value is inherent in the laptop itself. When a customer buys the laptop, the customer is recognizing that value. They exchange money for the product in order to possess the value created by the laptop manufacturer. When visiting large retailers such as Dick Smith (an Australian consumer electronics retailer) or Best Buy (an American consumer electronics megastore), one of the most important features is the

hardware specification of the laptop. The value arises from what manufacturer has built in to the model, and is the key difference between one computer and the next. Computers are tethered to shelving and crammed in, so that as many models as possible can be displayed. They are shelved similarly to other consumer goods, like groceries or hardware. And many of them will not be functional, as there is an assumption that the customer already knows how to use the operating system or what the computer can do based on the written specs. Many customers are going to run an identical operating system anyway, Windows, and therefore there is no requirement for them all to work.

Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) proposes a different perspective, which is built organically on the marketing discipline, rather than borrowing from another discipline. S-D Logic proposes a service-based paradigm of consumer co-creation exists in all products. Every product is produced with the *potential* for value creation, actualized only when the product is in use by the consumer. Value is recreated each time the product is used. The consumer experience is so strongly tied to the value that they cannot be separated. Therefore the consumer is essentially co-creating value each time they use the product with the other members of the value chain (Collins & Murphy, 2010b; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Apple has been used as an example of product design from an S-D Logic perspective (Eric J Arnould, Price, & Malshe, 2006). Apple designers seemed to always be aware that a product experience is a phenomenological experience, socially and psychologically constructed, as well as witnessed through all the available senses.

Apple required their approach to retail to reflect this: it focuses less on the consumer electronics and more on the consumer electronics experience.

Products are on large tables, not shelves. They are spaced apart widely enough that the customers comfortably use them for more than a few moments. All products are operating, connected to the internet, fully loaded with software. Hardware specifications are discretely tagged. No extra boxes of stock are on display; sales assistants obtain the items for the customer from a hidden storeroom. Stock variety is limited. There are no markdowns, sales or price driven point of sale incentives. Sales assistants are not hired for their technical expertise; rather they are hired for their ability to communicate the Apple experience to customers and facilitate a transformative (hopefully transcendent) customer experience. Sales assistants match customers in demographic, with a variety of genders, ethnicity and ages. The staff-to-customer ratio is higher than in other consumer electronics stores, not only to facilitate service, but also to introduce the product experience to novice users more effectively. Staff tend to be Apple evangelists themselves, with their own TCEs they can share (Stewart, 2011; Useem, 2007).

By taking a service-dominant approach, Apple also neutralises the traditional male dominance of the consumer electronics retail space. This experiential, service-dominant approach is more appealing to women (Arlini, 2011). Dell, by contrast, attempted to capture a female market through producing a line of pink products and offering them to customers with a ribbon--a deliberate strategy to feminise their consumer electronic product and broaden their audience; the attempt was met with

scorn by consumer electronics and marketing pundits and ultimately failed (Learned, 2009).

Apple has created a retail liminal space/place with the intent that the customer will lose themselves in the technological experience and transcend their everyday, ordinary existence through the product (Ameli, 2009). Apple captures more of the female market through their service-dominant approach.

### **Can Liminal Space/Places Transcend Gender?**

Segmenting markets by gender is a common strategy. Does demographic segmentation work effectively in a consumer religiosity context? If a producer creates a liminal space/place where product experience is the focus, can producers transcend targeting to gender stereotypes? Traditional religious liminal space/places often have rigid gender roles; how can taking the liminal space/place approach transcend gender in those environments?

An agenda for further research in this field should focus strongly on retail spaces that transcend, rather than cater to, segmented markets by creating a liminal space/place focused on the product experience. Such an investigation can have several stages.

#### *Step 1: Identifying producer-created liminal space/places*

What are the key components of a liminal space/place? Although Turner (1969) identifies liminality as a concept pertaining to religious ritual, he does not break the liminal experience down to essential components. Much of the research literature on

liminality is produced in works using qualitative methodologies. These works deliver an illustration of liminality in space/places.

Surveying religious and retail space/places through a literature audit and identifying the key components of space/places would be the first step toward developing a conceptual framework of how the space/place is effective in a retail context.

*Step 2: The affects of liminality on the consumer*

Once retail space/places have been identified, interviewing consumers and their perceptions of liminal space/places provide a method of triangulating findings in the literature with research data tied to this particular investigation. Are liminal space/places truly transcending a segmented market? In the Apple example, is the level of comfort, connection and fellowship the same for women as it is for men in the retail experience?

*Step 3: Success beyond segmentation*

The third step toward investigation of retail liminal space/places is to focus on industries where there is a dominant market segment, and then to measure for the success of minority segments within that retailer. For example, Apple is in a male dominated industry—both amongst producers and consumers. And yet they fare the highest amongst women as a consumer electronic retailer.

How would Nike do with women? Do their high concept stores transcend the gender stereotypes of the masculinity of athleticism? How does McDonald's McCafe concept approach gender and age segmentation? By identifying retailers and measuring their

popularity, or success by segment, one can measure the approach and test their effectiveness.

### **Research Limitations**

Researching liminality, especially in a commercial context, is not a straightforward endeavor. The methodologies required are a mix between the qualitative and quantitative, and with techniques from business and the social sciences.

Moreover, some of the key aspects of liminality do not lend themselves to measurement easily, and borrowing scales from other disciplines, such as psychology, is required. Readapting existing scales from one discipline to another can be limiting if not executed thoughtfully.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the research agenda set forth in this paper is to investigate liminality in retail space/places as a strategy to transcend segmentation. This paper questions whether a consumer electronic company can release a pink computer and expect to pick up a female market.

Any approach using consumer religiosity is going to be a more difficult approach. Consumer religiosity, like traditional religiosity, requires one to play the long game; to create an authentic brand and be true to it; and to acknowledge that producers do not control the product or the product experience, they share it.

However consumer religiosity can be a grass roots, long-term brand position creating momentum. However, the approach must have authentic roots in a service-dominant perspective to be effective. It is only a service-dominant perspective that delivers space for a connection with the customer through the co-created consumer experience.

Retail places relying only on segmented marketing are embedded deeply in the goods-based perspective incompatible with the phenomenological consumer experience.

Liminal retail space/places encourage the customer to connect with the product experience in a meaningful, personal and authentic way. The latter is the approach consistent with consumer religiosity. The latter approach also can take some of the limitations of traditional religiosity, such as fixed gender roles, and redefine liminal spaces to be more inclusive and more fluid.



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