# Becoming Sacred to the Consumer

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*Abstract*

*Although sacredness is usually associated with religion, consumer research has shown that everyday things and experiences – and their brands – can become sacred. We describe here how brand sacredness can be initiated through surprising pleasures and then be enhanced and developed through methods such as distinctive packaging, engaging rituals, and appealing or mysterious narratives. We illustrate this process with case studies of four sacred brands and two examples of using the properties of sacredness in social marketing.*

It's probably the case that every company would like to see its brand become liked by consumers. Some companies may even aspire to having their brand be loved – but the brand becoming sacred? That seems more than ordinary brand equity; it seems more than a marketing manager could even hope for.

In this paper, we draw on our recent integrative literature review[1] to describe some of the surprising and perhaps important things that have been learned about sacredness from the perspective of consumer behavior. We then make some suggestions about how one might think about brand development in light of these understandings of sacredness. As illustrations of what is possible, we describe six case studies – four brands that have become sacred and two examples of applications of sacredness to the goals of social marketing.

### What it is to be sacred.
The term "sacred" was introduced to social science by Emile Durkheim in his classic book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.[2] However, it was a

later writer on the topic, Mircea Eliade, who made it clear that sacredness is not just a component of religion. He wrote:[3]

> "There are, for example, privileged places, qualitatively different from all others – a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the 'holy places' of his private universe …."

In 1989, the prominent consumer researcher Russell Belk and his colleagues developed the work of Durkheim and Eliade in an influential paper discussing everyday sacredness.[4] They provided detailed descriptions of mementos, photographs, toy collections, antique cars, vacations, and other consumer products that constitute holy and sacred things in people's lives.

As both authors of this paper are business-school professors, we have had the occasion to directly observe an example of a sacred brand. Our students come to class with their MacBooks, sometimes lovingly hand-decorated, and their iPhones, which of course need to be put away when class starts. Whenever a discussion of advertising comes up, Apple's ads are the best. Headphones? There's nothing better than Air Pods. Product packaging? There's no matching the elegant packaging of Apple products. It's not just that Apple products are popular among students; in their eyes, Apple can do no wrong. It is, what we would consider, a sacred brand.

Although we usually know sacredness when we encounter it, formal definitions of sacredness are hard to come by. In this respect, it might be like humor: we all can recognize the feeling of something being funny, but social scientists have had a great deal of trouble precisely defining humor.[5]

Similarly, sacredness is a feeling. The words "special," "set apart," and even "transcendent" have been used to describe this feeling. When one introspects on things personally sacred, it seems that these things are associated with, tinged by, possessing the aura of, or evoking memories of strong positive emotions (but the feeling of sacredness is not these emotions themselves). It should be noted that Durkheim and others have described a negative side to sacredness, such as the healthy respect we might have for mysterious malicious forces. However, in this paper, we adopt what is perhaps a newer sense of the word, and we will refer to only positive, highly valued things as sacred.

### *Thirteen properties of sacredness.*

Belk and his colleagues, from their extensive reading of research reports and their elaborate field studies (e.g., interviewing consumers during a summer traveling across America in an RV), described twelve characteristic properties of sacredness. We have added to these a thirteenth property, and we can describe these properties in four groups (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Thirteen Properties of Sacredness**

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|---|
| *How sacredness comes and goes* |
| *Hierophany* – sacredness often begins from unexpected pleasures |
| *Contagion* – sacred feelings can spread from things already sacred |
| *Opposition to the profane* – negative experiences can weaken, or "profane" sacred feelings |
| |
| *How sacredness can be enhanced through embodiment* |
| *Objectification* – the sacred is made clearer when put in concrete form |
| *Ritual* – repeated sequences of action can enhance sacred feelings |
| *Sacrifice* – giving up pleasures or choosing discomfort can support feelings of the sacred |
| |
| *How sacredness can be enhanced through social factors* |
| *Narratives* – the sacred is supported by stories passed from person to person |
| *Mystery* – a sense of the unknown enhances sacred feelings |
| *Communitas* – social connection and shared experience support sacredness |
| |
| *Some consequences and the experience of sacredness* |
| *Kratophany* – sacredness could have troubling power |
| *Ecstasy and flow* – often, sacredness involves intense joyful feelings |
| *Commitment* – sacredness supports, and is supported by, brand commitment |
| *Duality* – recognizing that items which are practical could, at the same time, be sacred |

The first three properties relate to how sacredness comes and goes. Typically, the beginning of something becoming sacred is the realization that the thing gives pleasure. The realization might come from discovering the existence of the item, such as seeing a cute rocking horse in a store window; or it might arise while experiencing the product, such as the sense that the lift of your soccer shoes helped you shine in that big game. Sacredness can also come from association with something already sacred, such as having special feelings about a movie enjoyed along with a romantic partner. And sacredness can be dispelled by contact with the profane, such as by seeing a

seam break in those soccer shoes that *had* appeared to be such a wonderful product.

The second group of the thirteen properties concerns how sacredness, once started, can be enhanced by being "embodied," or made more tangible. The sacredness of a brand could be objectified by a catchy name, logo, package style, or colorful image such as the Michelin Man. Or the brand's sacredness could be made more tangible by requiring a distinctive ritual for acquiring, cleaning, preparing, using, or storing the item. When this ritual involves some sacrifice on the part of the consumer, such as spending precious leisure time meticulously cleaning and reassembling the parts of a motorcycle engine, it can further enhance the felt sacredness.

The third group of sacredness properties involves how sacredness can be enhanced through social factors. The telling of stories supports sacredness, such as the story of the brilliant innovator (such as Elon Musk) who early on was able to see the potential in a product. Or the brand could involve things considered mysteries, such as the "secret formula" that gave Coca Cola a unique and appealing taste. Also, simply sharing sacred feelings with others enhances them, such as in the excitement generated at festivals and large spectator-sports events.

The fourth group of the thirteen properties of sacredness includes some of the consequences of sacredness and how it is commonly experienced. A sacred product can be experienced as thrilling, such as in the wearing of a designer dress at one's wedding or being in a front-row seat at the concert of a sacred musical performer. There could be intense commitment to a sacred brand, evidenced, for example, by wearing visibly branded clothing or joining fan-based communities. And the experience could also involve "duality" – that is the recognition that, despite, say, a man's enthusiasm for his sporty z-car, he is also able to recognize that it is just his feelings, not his rational mind, that is at work. In the words of Eliade, "By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself* ..."[6]

### *How to become sacred.*

What can be taken from these thirteen properties is that the process of making a brand sacred can be conceived of as involving two steps. First, create customer pleasures. Then, take steps to build on, develop, and enhance the effects of these pleasures.

Interestingly, the research literature suggests that in creating customer pleasures, certain types of pleasures may be more effective than others. Of particular value may be pleasures that surprise customers, or produce "delight."[7] Pleasures from new technologies, of course, may be surprising. However, surprise can also be created by exceeding typical expectations or

by just being a little hard to find.  Eliade referred to this phenomenon as "hierophany" – the idea "... that something sacred shows itself to us."[8] Unexpected pleasures seem to carry an emotional twist, which makes them feel like they come from somewhere else, outside of us (thus, perhaps creating the religious connection).  This sense, then, sets them on the road to becoming sacred.

Building on these pleasures involves many of the other properties of sacredness.  The pleasures could be objectified by distinctive names or packaging, or they could require actions and sacrifice from the customer.  There could be a sense of mystery about them and they could be enhanced by consumers talking with each other, sharing stories of how they came upon the pleasures of this product.  And the public commitments that sacred brands often engender could serve as additional factors that spread the marketplace influence of the brand.

### *Four sacred brands.*
We illustrate how consumer brands can become sacred with four case study examples, chosen for their diversity.  The first example is the one we have mentioned already – Apple.  Since Apple sells high-tech goods, our next example is a sacred seller of low-tech goods – Nike.  Then, sacredness in retail services – Trader Joe's; and last, sacredness in hospitality services – Starbucks.

*Apple.*  It could be argued that the development of Apple as a sacred societal institution began at a press conference in 2007 with the introduction of the iPhone.  It's "an iPod, a phone, and an Internet communicator," said Apple CEO Steve Jobs.  He continued, "Are you getting it?  These are not three separate devices.  This is one device."[9] The audience's reaction was described as "awe."[10] In the ensuing roll-out of the iPhone, the product produced numerous surprising pleasures of capability (calling, playing music, taking pictures, etc.) and convenience (pocket size and a touch screen).

To help consumers experience these product innovations as hierophanies, Apple used the sacredness property of mystery.  In that initial press conference, Jobs said, "It works like magic,"[11] and Apple's press releases referred to the iPhone as "a magical product."[12]  Further, each subsequent version of the iPhone was brought out in an air of secrecy, in continuing efforts to maintain the brand's sense of mystery and surprise.[13]  And, consistent with the sacredness properties of hierophany and mystery was Jobs' well-known scorn for market research.[14]  It was as if he was saying that the ideas for these products were not from mundane surveys of consumers – rather they were from his gifts of brilliance and insight.

Apple gave great attention to the objectification of the feelings these benefits were creating. Apple products, packages, and marketing communications were characterized by attractive and distinctive graphics. The iPhone, for example, showed "sleek simplified designs, smooth curves and simple lines [that] are instantly recognizable everywhere you go."[15] Apple stores also showed distinctive designs, and the "Genius Bars" objectified technical talent and engendered communitas.[16] Apple also enhanced its brand sacrality with a sense of sacrifice. One early product reviewer described the iPhone as involving a "spartan and simplified user interface."[17] Further, the inconveniences of Apple products – such as the lack of compatibility with non-Apple products, lack of transparency (and thus easy repairability), and of course their high prices[18] – were considered as necessary byproducts, and even evidence, of their special customer-pleasing status.

The sacredness of the Apple brand is indicated by the commitment of its customers – Apple has a virtually unprecedented extent of brand loyalty among hundreds of millions of users.[19] Further, the enthusiasm seems to extend to all of Apple's products, and to each of the new versions of these products as they are introduced.[20]

*Nike*. Nike seemed to first start gaining a strong following in 1987 when it developed the innovative Nike Air Max, a shoe that had an air pocket to reduce cushion loss over time.[21] There was a focus on superior performing products, continual new innovations, global event participation, and product personalization.[22] Nike has objectified these successes with brand graphics, most notably the elegant and distinctive Nike swoosh.[23] In fulfilling customer needs, Nike has also used surprise tactics which align with the sacredness property of mystery to unexpectedly bring back popular shoes from the past.[24]

Nike has enhanced its sacredness by providing consumers opportunities to engage with one another beyond just the purchase of clothing. For example, the Nike+ website allows consumers to upload exercise data, share this data with friends, and engage in a social platform that allows for the exchange of exercise tips and upcoming events.[25] Additionally, offline communities are facilitated through the Nike swoosh, which is in itself sacred to many.[26] For example, college students may see other students on their college campus wearing clothes emblazoned with the Nike swoosh and know they are part of the same community of Nike adorers.

The sacred status of the Nike brand has become legendary. In their book, *Nike Culture*, Goldman and Papson[27] describe Nike using phrases like "hero worship" (p. 47) and "transcendence in the human community" (p. 68). They

see Nike as "a vehicle for spiritually transcending race and class divides" (p. 94).

*Trader Joe's.* As with Apple and Nike, customers of Trader Joe's experience a brand enthusiasm suggesting sacredness. For example, a news article reported that, upon hearing of a new Trader Joe's store opening, one customer was "so excited I'm frothing at the mouth."[28] This excitement is evidenced by Trader Joe's being described as being "the holy grail of retail attraction" and having an intense, loyal following.[29]

In the late 1960's, when 7-Eleven was the typical convenience store, Trader Joe's was started as something that consumers had never seen before: a gourmet convenience store.[30] Its initial innovativeness was quickly objectified by unique style decisions.[31] The spirit of Trader Joe's was expressed in concrete elements of store design that included "cedar-plank walls, a nautical theme, an irreverent sense of humor, workers in Hawaiian shirts who bear the titles captain (store manager), first mate (assistant manager), and crew member."[32] At the same time, there was an aspect of mystery surrounding Trader Joe's. The company avoided carrying national brands. Eighty percent of the goods sold were the Trader Joe's brand.[33] There was sometimes signage around the store with engaging narratives concerning where their products came from, but generally their practices were kept mysterious. Further, the company worked to avoid major news stories about its business practices.[34]

The management of Trader Joe's has developed its sacredness by supporting social interactions between store customers and the quirky, humorous, environmentally-friendly, and caring Trader Joe's employees.[35] Cappiello[36] noted that employees are encouraged to engage and have fun with consumers in unexpected ways – "in some locations, employees hide a stuffed animal among the shelves for children to find. If they spot it, they get a lollipop at checkout." The company also benefits from customer-created social media communities, such as those on Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook, where customers can come together to trade recipes and talk about the latest hierophanous find at Trader Joe's.

Lewis[37] described the commitment of Trader Joe's shoppers being formed at least partially from a salient emphasis on authentic social and environmental values, illustrating the spread from things already sacred. Kowitt[38] highlighted how this commitment is also tied to the sacredness property of sacrifice – committed Trader Joe's customers are willing to sacrifice variety: "customers accept that Trader Joe's has only two kinds of pudding or one kind of polenta because they trust that those few items will be very good." Additionally, Trader Joe's often provides consumers with free

samples to taste. These may be perceived as surprising little gifts to customers, perhaps bringing another sense of hierophany to support the sacredness of this brand.[39] It is noteworthy that Trader Joe's success in becoming a sacred brand was accomplished with only minimal expenditures on media advertising.[40]

*Starbucks.* The first Starbucks coffee shop opened in 1971 with the goal of creating a third place, one that represented "real-life alternatives to television [and] easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life."[41] Given that these third places did not previously exist, this new opportunity served to provide consumers with unexpected, hierophanous new pleasures.

Starbucks has objectified these unexpected pleasures through distinctive atmospherics.[42] There is professional and relaxing lighting, comfortable seating, sounds and smells of beans grinding, products to pick up and touch, and foods and beverages prepared to taste, all of which contribute to this pervasive atmosphere. Further objectification was accomplished through the company's nautical mythology theme, connected (somewhat mysteriously) to the sacred American story of the sea, *Moby Dick*. Starbucks has also benefitted from a connection to sacred social values, such as caring for the environment and responsible sourcing.[43]

Sacred feelings are further enhanced through ritual and sacrifice. Some Starbucks shops even have a sign on the door saying, "take comfort in rituals,"[44] and the shops themselves seem to encourage ritualistic activity: walking into the store, sniffing the aromas, ordering coffee, stating one's name, and waiting.[45] Whereas other retailers might try to describe their products using words that are familiar to consumers, Starbucks has taken the other route, choosing unique terms, such as calling a small beverage "tall" or their largest beverage "trenta."[46] This requires consumers to sacrifice a bit of time and effort to learn these terms.

Starbucks employees are trained to be welcoming and friendly,[47] and the many comforts of a Starbucks shop make it a desirable place for meetings of every kind. This development of the social aspect of the brand is not just in-store but also involves civic engagement through sponsorship of get-out-and-vote initiatives, the Boys and Girls clubs, and other community-service activities.[48]

### Sacredness in social marketing.

It is important to note that marketing influence, including its connection to sacredness, is by no means restricted to profit-making companies. Marketing influence can also be used for the betterment of society, which is often referred to as "social marketing."[49,50] The first of our two social

marketing examples concerns *reducing* the sacredness of something harmful – cigarettes. The second example concerns increasing the sacredness of something beneficial – exercise.

*Cigarettes.* The smoking of tobacco in the U.S. has a long quasi-religious history, being sacred in many Native American cultures[51] and being used as a precious comfort by soldiers and others in difficult circumstances. Starting with the introduction of cigarettes in the 1920's and with their extensive media advertising and Hollywood glamorization, tobacco use expanded to become an esteemed, sacred practice to large proportions of the U.S. public. By the early 1960's, more than half of American men and a third of women were cigarette smokers.[52] However, since then, smoking in the U.S. has been decreasing. By 2000, the proportion of Americans who smoked was around 19 percent, a smoking rate lower than that of almost any other country in the developed world.[53] Our study of the properties of sacredness can help us understand this remarkable social marketing success.

First, there was an increase in the emotional strength of the voices that profaned cigarettes. For years, research indicating that cigarettes caused cancer and other serious health problems had been reported by the media. However, these profaning reports were countered by conflicting cigarette industry studies, and the issue was considered controversial. In 1964, the U.S. Surgeon General held a press conference to release a book-length report, *Smoking and Health*, that detailed the extensive evidence demonstrating smoking's negative health consequences. The reporters at the press conference, and subsequently the public, were stunned by the report's directness:[54]

> "'Cigarette smoking,' the reporters read, the importance of the story gradually dawning, 'is causally related to lung cancer in men; the magnitude of the effect of cigarette smoking far outweighs all other factors.'"

By this unexpected, dramatic announcement, the reputation of the respected federal government, backed by the increasingly sacred health establishment, gave emotional force to the profaning information regarding cigarette smoking.

Then began the process of objectifying this profaning of cigarettes. In 1966, the U.S. Congress passed a law requiring that the following warning message be placed on every cigarette package: "Cigarettes may be hazardous to your health." Never before had a package warned consumers against the use of its contents.[55] Even if one was already aware of the cigarette-cancer

link, seeing the unusual warning was unnerving. Further, over time, these mandated package warnings became stronger.

In addition to the strong and objectified profaning of cigarettes, there were steps taken toward removing factors that maintained the sacredness of cigarettes. In the 1980's, the American Lung Association ran print ads showing celebrity model Brooke Shields with cigarettes sticking out of her ears. This visually profaned cigarettes, perhaps in a way intended to come to mind during smokers' cherished cigarette-handling rituals. There were efforts to remove the mystique of cigarettes, demystifying smoking as a nicotine addiction and a way for nervous people to have something to do with their hands.[56] There were attacks on the social aspects of smoking, such as television ads showing smokers being laughed at by peers.[57] There was even the spooky use of a negative testimonial. William Talman, a well-known television actor, asked that his anti-smoking ads be run even after his death from lung cancer. According to Burns:[58]

> "There was at least one newspaper report of a woman giving up smoking because, seeing Talman on the tube one night and knowing he had passed away, she thought she had seen a ghost, and she was not about to ignore so imposing, if spectral, a presence."

All this not only reduced the positive, sacred feelings about smoking in American society, but actually reversed the polarity of those feelings, making cigarette smoking the object of social stigma.[59]

*Exercise.* For most of human history, vigorous physical activity was simply part of everyday work. However, by the mid-20th Century, advances in automation had dramatically reduced the need to be physically active at work. It has been estimated that in 1960 only about 50 percent of Americans worked in a job that required a level of physical activity considered adequate for good health.[60] Thus, there arose a need for physical activity expressly for the purpose of fitness and health.

It could be argued that the sacralization of exercise began with national political leadership. In 1963, John F. Kennedy changed the name of the President's Council on Youth Fitness to the President's Council on Physical Fitness in order to emphasize that exercise was important for Americans of all ages.[61] This promotion of exercise benefitted from the spread of the sacredness of Kennedy's youthful glamour and charisma. The subsequent national exercise enthusiasm led to the construction of jogging paths, public gyms, and music-based exercise routines.[62] Exercise activities were stimulated by authors such as Jim Fixx, who publicized the idea of the

"runner's high," a strong pleasure that can occur during exercise.[63] Also, it was suggested that pleasure from exercise can come hierophanously, as if one will experience a "flipping the switch" from hating exercise to all of a sudden loving it.[64]

The rising popularity of exercise began to become objectified, as could be seen in everyday language. Distinctive terms such as "aerobics," "health clubs," and "workout" started to become part of Americans' vocabulary.[65] Another objectification was the vast array of exercise-related apparel and footwear that became major fashion trends.[66] Rituals helped maintain the sacredness of exercise, whether they were carried out before, during, or after exercise routines. Many have regarded early morning exercise rituals as critical to maintaining fitness, and Morgan[67] has argued it is one of the top five rituals of highly productive women. The growth of participation in exercise has no doubt also benefited from a sense of sacrifice, which was objectified by the phrase "no pain, no gain," widely popularized in Jane Fonda's 1980's workout videos.[68]

Numerous studies of the relationship between exercise and health have supported the narrative of how exercise makes one better.[69,70] Further, some of these medical connections had mysterious aspects, such as endorphins that many people viewed as body chemicals which, according to sacred medical science, may even contain opioid powers.[71] And yoga, becoming a popular form of exercise, was strongly associated with the spiritual mysteries of ancient Indian tradition.[72] Social aspects of sacredness have been enhanced by subculture communities, such as boutique gyms[73] and the CrossFit regimen.[74]

All this indicates considerable social marketing success in leading people to want something that is good for them. Recent surveys indicate that 23 percent of the U.S. adult population engages in enough leisure-time physical activity to meet medically recommended standards.[75] This percentage is high considering that it is in addition to people who acquire sufficient physical activity from work or from walking or bicycling to work.

Through depth interviews with participants in the "wellness revolution," medical sociologist Peter Conrad not only found evidence of the joy and commitment of sacredness, but also found something more:[76]

> "As one young man succinctly put it, he felt good exercising, but more importantly he felt good about doing it. … As a young woman noted, 'it makes you feel good about yourself when you're doing it for you.' Another stated how running makes her 'like herself better.' … Others noted that they felt more 'confident,' 'energetic,' 'in control,' 'attractive,' and 'cleaner' when they exercised."

He concluded that his respondents felt a "sense of virtue" from exercise. Their experience of sacredness in exercise included not just feelings of euphoria and flow, but also other strong, positive feelings that might even be characterized as religious.

### *Conclusions.*

These six case studies serve as examples of what might be possible through a sensitive understanding of customer feelings. If a brand can create surprising benefits, these can be developed through sacredness properties such as objectification, ritual, sacrifice, and social interaction to produce in the minds of consumers a strong, positive, and enduring mental state. Further, the case of cigarettes illustrates how something undesirable that has become sacred can be profaned, or emotionally reduced, by use of these same sacredness properties. A summary of these six case studies and the relevant sacredness properties can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2. Summary of Case Studies and Sacredness Properties Used**

| Case Study | Sacredness Properties Used |
|---|---|
| *Consumer brands* | |
| *Apple* | Hierophany, objectification, sacrifice, mystery, communitas, commitment |
| *Nike* | Hierophany, objectification, mystery, communitas |
| *Trader Joe's* | Hierophany, contagion, objectification, sacrifice, narratives, mystery, communitas |
| *Starbucks* | Hierophany, contagion, objectification, ritual, sacrifice, communitas |
| *Social marketing campaigns* | |
| *Cigarettes* | Profaning, objectification, demystification, communitas |
| *Exercise* | Hierophany, contagion, objectification, rituals, sacrifice, mystery, communitas, ecstasy and flow |

The possibility of profaning the sacred points to the concern that successful brands should feel about negative publicity. For example, in recent years Nike has been attacked for using sweatshop labor,[77] and Starbucks has been accused of poor treatment of their employees and of the disabled and people of color.[78] An appreciation of the sacred status of these brands should guide their managers toward taking every possible step toward

addressing these concerns and avoiding such profaning influences.

It can also be a challenge to maintain a brand's sacredness properties. For example, after the death of Steve Jobs, the company went through a time of questioning its place and leadership.[79] However, the Apple brand clearly still has an intensely passionate following today, which shows that Steve Jobs was able to imbue an organizational commitment to innovation that maintained the consumer's sense of hierophany and mystery.[80] Both organizations and the key people within organizations can help to develop sacredness, and nuanced care must be taken to not have sacredness depart when sacredness-developing employees leave.

Although one might consider the case examples we have discussed as fortuitous and lucky successes, they do not have to be. Many brands accomplish, or could be guided to accomplish, surprising successes. If these successes are nurtured and developed through the properties of sacredness described here (and discussed in more detail in our integrative literature review[81]), these brands could become sacred to consumers. This illustrates what becomes possible by developing an explicit, sensitive understanding of how things work in the feelings side of consumers' minds.

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