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Digital consumer spirituality

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Abstract

Technology is increasingly changing consumers' relationship with spirituality. This chapter develops the concept of digital consumer spirituality. Digital consumer spirituality is defined as the interrelated practices and processes consumers engage in when consuming digital market offerings (products, services, spaces) that yield spiritual utility. This chapter brings together existing consumer research addressing digital consumer spirituality and reveals four practices that consumers engage in to access spirituality via the digital: (i) prosuming online spiritual communities, (ii) sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship, (iii) searching digitally for the spiritual, and (iv) constructing spiritual identities via the digital. Based on this analysis, an ambitious future research agenda is set out, suggesting significant research questions for each practice identified. Finally, this chapter identifies key emerging digital technologies and suggests how they will shape the growth of digital consumer spirituality, namely (i) transhumanism and (ii) robots and other advanced machines.

Keywords

Digital Consumption; Consumer Spirituality; Religion; Marketing

Technology is increasingly changing consumers' relationship with spirituality. Contemporary witches meet on social networking sites to organize their meetups (Montell, 2018), Buddhists use digital devices to facilitate their spiritual rituals and community building (Kineke, 2020), and Orthodox Jews broadcast spiritual activities via apps (Altmann, 2017). In particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic, spiritual seekers all over the world find solace in online spaces

as it is challenging to engage in traditional physical ceremonies (Tozer, 2020). Thus, consumer spirituality, “the interrelated practices and processes engaged in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield spiritual utility” (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a, p. 391), is increasingly accessed via digital technologies. The impact of the digital on the spiritual, and vice versa, has grown alongside the rise of the Internet over the past three decades (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). This relationship has intensified with the rise of app culture and other emerging digital technologies. Consequently, marketing researchers are increasingly interested in the role of digital technologies in consumers’ quest for experiencing the spiritual, and a research field at the intersection of digitality, spirituality, and consumption is taking shape (Kale & Kamineni, 2003; Kale, 2004; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Cleveland et al., 2013; Llamas & Belk, 2013; Muñiz et al., 2013; Belk, 2014, 2017; Kamarulzaman et al., 2016; Kaur, 2016; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a; Van Laer & Izberk-Bilgin, 2019; Belk et al., 2020, 2021).

Whereas early research in this field has focused on understanding the impact of globalization and technology on consumers’ spiritual lives in general (Kale & Kamineni, 2003; Kale, 2004; Cleveland et al., 2013; Llamas & Belk, 2013), more recent studies are beginning to explore how consumers engage with a variety of digital practices, products, services and spaces in their search for spirituality specifically (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz et al., 2013; Belk, 2014, 2017; Kaur, 2016; Kamarulzaman et al., 2016; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a; Van Laer & Izberk-Bilgin, 2019; Belk et al., 2021). Belk and Tumbat (2005), for example, study Macintosh fans and how they develop extreme religious devotion toward the Apple brand and thus sacralize profane realms of life (Belk et al., 1989). Kaur (2016) reveals how spiritual tourists and service providers can benefit from a technology-enabled customer relationship management model that provides customized spiritual experience and increase business profitability of spiritual destinations. And Kamarulzaman et al. (2016) explore the role of social networks in mediating and connecting Muslim communities in their search for halal food, and how such Internet-based interactions can influence marketing systems, religious identity, commitment, community construction, and quality of life. Together, this body of research shows that both the digital and the spiritual are irrevocably connected in consumers’ search “for meaningful encounters with one’s inner self or a higher external power” (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a, p. 391). Yet, we lack a systematic understanding of *how* they intersect; that is, of the different ways consumers engage with digital technologies to access the spiritual.

Following Husemann and Eckhardt’s (2019a) call to further investigate technology’s role in facilitating consumer spirituality as a critical vehicle to access the spiritual, our research question is: How do consumers use digital

technologies to access or experience the spiritual? To answer this research question, we develop the concept of “digital consumer spirituality,” which we define as the *interrelated practices and processes consumers engage in when consuming digital market offerings (products, services, spaces) that yield spiritual utility*.

In our conceptualization, we refer to the term spirituality, which dates back almost 2,000 years to St Paul and comes from the Latin root *spiritus*, meaning breath – the breath of life (Hemetsberger et al., 2018). We follow Kale’s (2004, p. 93) definition of spirituality as “the engagement to explore – and deeply and meaningfully connect one’s inner self – to the known world and Beyond.” Spirituality contains, then, specific boundaries, such as (i) the *inner self* as the core of thoughts and feelings guiding our behavior and connecting us to our essence; (ii) the search for *meaning* and purpose in life; (iii) the *interconnectedness* that is the ultimate unity of all being, transcending the mundane material realm; (iv) and the *beyond*, as the premise of the existence of supreme power, being, or force (e.g., God, universal spirit or consciousness) that provides a purpose for everything and everyone (Kale, 2004).

Our conceptualization of digital consumer spirituality does not exclude religious practices associated with traditional religious institutions, such as Islam or Catholicism, and their doctrines. We follow current thinking that religion is a vehicle – one of the most important ones – nurturing spirituality for many individuals by providing a road map to understand and express their spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988; Kale, 2004). For instance, in Islam, spirituality is the focal point of the religion, and religious rituals are a fundamental part of an individual’s relationship with Allah (Nasr, 2013). Therefore, we use the broader term spirituality instead of religiosity to refer to the practices we address in this book chapter (Kale, 2004).

Digital consumer spirituality addresses the consumption of offerings now available online that yield spiritual utility (Kale, 2004). We understand spiritual consumers have an unprecedented array of online offerings from which to choose a product mix that satisfies their spiritual utility (Kale, 2004). Some of these offerings are designed to achieve the spiritual realm (e.g., religious apps for meditation), and others are modified to attend to individuals’ spiritual needs (e.g., Facebook spiritual communities). This complex array of offerings creates a market more fragmented that impacts long-established religions while also allows consumers to be exposed to religions besides their own (Kale, 2004). Finally, not any type of online consumption that involves spirituality falls under the concept of digital consumer spirituality; only the consumption practices of market offerings available in the digital (online, in apps, and other digital devices) that meet consumers’ spiritual necessities (e.g., getting information on their spirituality or deepening their spiritual identity on digital spaces).

We draw on a framework developed in religious studies by Campbell (2005), which explains how the digital creates opportunities for facilitating religious faith. This framework allows us to identify and classify existing consumer research addressing digital consumer spirituality. We identify four practices that consumers engage in to access spirituality via the digital: (i) prosuming online spiritual communities, (ii) sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship, (iii) digitally searching for the spiritual, and (iv) constructing spiritual identities via the digital.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we introduce the concept of digital consumer spirituality, which captures consumption phenomena at the intersection of spiritual and digital consumption and extends our understanding of consumer spirituality into the digital realm. Second, we identify four practices that consumers engage in to access the spiritual via the digital. Finally, we provide a research agenda at the intersection of technology, consumption, and the spiritual to encourage novel scholarly explorations in two main domains: (i) transhumanism as a religious movement and (ii) the consumption of robots in spiritual settings.

A framework for understanding digital spirituality

Campbell (2005) provides a framework to understand how the Internet is shaped, employed, and sometimes rejected by religious online users. Her framework includes four narratives. First, spiritual users can experience the digital as a medium that creates opportunities for “spiritual networking,” or transcendent encounters, with God, the divine, or other spiritual seekers. Second, the digital is considered a sacramental space, a “worship space” where online users conduct traditional or new religious rituals. Third, online users can comprehend the digital as a tool for promoting spiritual activities, such as a “missionary tool.” The digital then becomes a dynamic resource for encouraging certain practices, such as organizing events or converting spiritual seekers to a particular religious belief or tradition.

Finally, technology can be used for affirming spiritual life and “spiritual identity.” In this last narrative, the digital serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion, in which individuals subscribe to common beliefs and practices.

We draw on this framework to shed light on consumer research at the intersection of spiritual and digital consumption. Whereas Campbell (2005) focuses her analysis on religious users’ motives to access the digital, we explore consumers’ practices of how they engage with it. Additionally, we extend her framework by including

spiritual consumption beyond religious consumption, which involves less organized and institutionalized forms of searching for meaningful encounters within or beyond oneself. Finally, we expand Campbell's (2005) contextual background by addressing a wide range of digital technologies used for spiritual consumption beyond the Internet, including social networks, smartphone apps, and other digital technologies and devices. Based on our analysis, we reveal four practices that consumers engage in to access spirituality via the digital: (i) prosuming online spiritual communities, (ii) sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship, (iii) digitally searching for the spiritual, and (iv) constructing spiritual identities via the digital, which we outline in detail next, and which are summarized in Table 28.1.

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Digital spiritual consumption practices

Prosuming online spiritual communities

The first digital spiritual consumption practice we identify is prosuming online spiritual communities. In this practice, consumers engage with the spiritual by digitally seeking out like-minded others in online communities. Witches, for example, meet on Instagram (Montell, 2018), and Candomblé believers form Facebook groups or online gatherings (Capponi & Araújo, 2020). Community is a key aspect of spirituality. For instance, Turner (1969) unpacks the notion of *communitas* in the context of religious pilgrimage. He shows that the powerful experience of a homogenous, non-hierarchical, and united sense of community is key to accessing the spiritual. But how can consumers access this community in the digital age?

Consumer research demonstrates that digital spaces may be particularly suited for promoting interactions and community building in sacred contexts (Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Muñiz et al, 2013). Muñiz et al. (2013) argue that online consumers are more likely to form groups based on their preferences and interests compared to offline, which facilitates the construction and maintenance of spiritual communities. Kale (2004) posits that some digital technologies, especially discussion forums, have become the primary way of bringing together spiritual seekers. Indeed, Higgins and Hamilton (2016) observe that consumers' expression of their lived spiritual experiences and suffering in online forums enhance their well-being.

Beyond online discussion forums, other digital technologies, such as social media, mediate and connect religious communities and markets (Kamarulzaman et al., 2016). Reviewing halal restaurants on social media sites is a serious activity for many Muslim consumers, for example, not only for themselves but as a service to the Muslim community (Kamarulzaman et al., 2016). Social media sites help Muslim consumers to access their spiritual communities to jointly navigate the difficulties of accessing spiritual products. Also, online spiritual communities operate in the spirit of co-creation and prosumption. Members communicate by sharing text, reviews, testimonials, prayers, and audio-visual content. Narratives can be emotional and transformational when expressing both spiritual and material experiences (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; van Laer & Izberk-Bilg, 2019).

Future research

To further unpack the processes and dynamics underlying the practice of prosuming online spiritual communities, future research can investigate (i) the interaction between online and offline community engagement, (ii) potential negative aspects of online spiritual communities, as well as (iii) the management of these communities. As proposed by Cappellini and Yen (2016), online spaces tend to be the product of online and on-site social interactions and a community's identity develops jointly in both. Research has been done to uncover such interactions in the Islamic religion, and findings show that online communities normally import their cultural values, norms, and traditions, but they can become more flexible in their thinking due to the anonymity and lack of social cues (Al-Saggaf & Begg, 2004). Yet, we need to understand how other spiritual communities engage with online and offline spaces. Future research should explore the following: How do spiritual consumers engage in online and offline interactions to build and maintain their communities? How do offline communities strengthen their sense of togetherness via digital platforms and vice versa? To what extent do online spiritual communities differ from traditional offline communities? How do both online and offline community interactions co-operate to create meaningful experiences for spiritual consumers?

Secondly, future research can examine potential negative aspects of online spirituality. Recently, online communities have increasingly emphasized the negative aspects rising in the digital: polarization, radicalization, fake news, toxic viral memes, misogyny, bots, and the problematic algorithms shaping the social space of online communities (Lovink, 2019). In addition, such communities can be heavily regulated, censored, and controlled in countries such as China and some Arab states, meaning online and offline communities are under social-political

regulations and constraints. Future research can focus, for instance, on the emergence of radical online communities and the link between conspiracy and spirituality, or the so-called “conspirituality” (Ward & Voas, 2011; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). How does the digital facilitate the emergence of spiritual radicalization? How are fake news and toxic viral memes created and distributed among and against spiritual communities?

Thirdly, future research can investigate the role of community management in facilitating a spiritual experience for its members. Higgins and Hamilton (2016) reveal in the context of religious pilgrimage that sharing stories about mini-miracles in online forums can create useful word-of-mouth marketing, potentially leading to the resurgence of larger, traditional pilgrimage communities. Moreover, the authors show how, despite some specific groups and churches that run forums and blogs, no alignment exists between such groups and religious institutions (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016). These findings suggest the need to create management strategies for such online spiritual communities. How do service providers in a spiritual marketplace derive economic or spiritual value from online communities? What are the management strategies that these service providers can use to manage online communities and facilitate their spiritual experience?

Sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship

The second spiritual digital consumption practice we identify is sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worshipping (Belk et al., 1989). In this practice, consumers use digital spaces and devices to perform worshipping rituals in attempts to sacralize the brands, products, or services that they consume to access the spiritual. Kale (2004) describes this remote worshipping as a deterritorialization process or the disembedding of cultural phenomena from their physical territories. It is an inevitable consequence of globalization that directly impacts the way individuals consume spirituality in a digital world. For Kale and Kamineni (2003), this deterritorialized consumption of religion is also a consequence of the rapid rise of the Internet. Thus, at the macro level, we can understand what leads to the proliferation of digital spirituality, especially worship practices.

Consumer research has shown two ways in which consumers can sacralize via digital worshipping. First, consumers use digital worshipping to sacralize profane brands and products. Belk and Tumbat (2005) demonstrate how consumers express extreme religious devotion to brands. They show that consumers use digital platforms to develop and share religious narratives around the Apple brand and its creator. Similarly, Muñiz et al. (2013) investigate the LEGO brand and how consumers use online discussion forums to display their sacred devotion to the brand. The

authors reveal that passionate consumers of the LEGO brand experience an almost visceral intolerance against cloned Lego products when discussing their inauthenticity online with like-minded others. Furthermore, Belk et al. (2021) argue that technological products can be seen as a deity that people worship both online and offline. Modernity has enchanted technology through reimagining it as miraculous and wonderful, consequently providing a shiny new God for humankind to worship (Belk et al., 2021).

Second, consumers can manifest or enhance the sacredness of spiritual services through digital worshipping. For instance, spiritual platforms such as pilgrimages' websites offer an array of Multimedia Flash presentations, real-time webcams, 360° panoramas, streaming audio and video, chat rooms, web forums for prayer, and e-mail addresses for pastoral care. They offer virtually every service that would be traditionally available in a pilgrimage site or a physical facility for communal worship (Kale & Kamineni, 2003). Spiritual consumers can participate proactively in these digital worshipping activities (i.e., partaking in prayer or meditation) when expressing their spirituality online. Together, research exploring how consumers sacralize brands, products, and services through digital worshipping contributes to current debates on the impact of the digital in the spiritual marketplace (Kale, 2004) and fosters our current understanding of how the digital became a solution to create possibilities for worshipping, adoration, and spiritual engagement in times when consumers cannot access the physical space.

Future research

Research at the intersection of digital consumer spirituality and worshipping practices is incipient. Future research can explore (i) digital marketing strategies for spiritual services, (ii) consumer emotions in digital worshipping, and (iii) the authenticity related to digital worshipping practices. First, research is needed to explore how spiritual service providers can systematically facilitate digital worshipping practices to enhance consumers' spiritual experience. How do service providers design digital worshipping activities? What is the role of social media in facilitating worship practices? What are the best technologies to facilitate worshipping? We encourage further research to explore institutions' role in shaping spirituality and adoration practices in the digital.

Second, future research can explore the role of emotions in consumers' digital worshipping practice. Higgins and Hamilton (2019) investigate the physical experience of therapeutic servicescapes in the pilgrimage context, and they find that such settings are suitable for the display of emotional suffering. Pilgrim consumers find significant value by sharing such emotions in-site. But how exactly do consumers display emotions in digital spaces designed for

spirituality? What do they feel when worshipping in the digital when compared to the physical? To what extent does the digital facilitate or constrain emotions when worshipping?

Finally, future research can explore digital technologies' authenticity in spiritual consumption, especially for worship practices (Scheifinger, 2012). Campbell (2005) argues that religious institutions and consumers can interpret digital technologies as God-given or Devil-given to decide whether to adopt them or not. Such findings open a discussion about the authenticity of digital technologies and spaces and their suitability for facilitating worship. Which digital technologies are experienced as more or less authentic? Which digital technologies are considered suitable for the practice of digital worshipping?

Searching digitally for the spiritual

The third digital consumption practice we identify is searching digitally for the spiritual. This practice refers to consumers' efforts to use digital technologies to search for, and seek out, information about spiritual market offerings and experiences. The sought-out market offerings and experiences can exist in either the offline or the online realm. One of the critical consequences of religion's marketization is the proliferation of spiritual and religious market offerings (McAlexander et al., 2014). In a spiritual marketplace, individuals search for spiritual market offerings that will quench their thirst for meaningful encounters with their inner self or a higher external power (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a). More and more, we see consumers navigating through the digital to search for spiritual market offers and experiences in hopes of meaningful encounters.

Consumer research on searching digitally for the spiritual has received academic attention (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz et al., 2013; Belk, 2014; Kamarulzaman et al., 2016; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b; van Laer & Izberk-Bilgin, 2019). This research shows how consumers navigate the digital to access information about spiritual sites that exist in the offline realm (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b; van Laer & Izberk-Bilgin, 2019) and enhance consumers' spiritual experience in a physical site (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019a, 2019b; Van Laer & Izeberk-Bilg, 2019). In the form of testimonials or reviews, the online consumption of information is relevant to improving spiritual consumers' subsequent physical experiences. For instance, Husemann and Eckhardt (2019b) find that pilgrims search for practical information in online forums that will help them to experience their subsequent pilgrimage journey more meaningfully. Van Laer and Izberk-Bilg (2019) also investigate technology's role in accessing consumer spirituality when analyzing pilgrims' online reviews of their pilgrimage experience. The authors

argue that user-generated content about spiritual sites provides information beyond traditional texts or opinions of clerics, impacting consumers' spiritual experience in the world's best-known pilgrimage sites.

Lastly, on the one hand, consumers engage in digital searching for spiritual market offers that are offline/analog in nature. For instance, Kamarulzaman et al. (2016) investigate social media's role in facilitating halal food consumption. The authors analyze how social media can serve as an essential tool for overcoming obstacles to finding and verifying halal food sources. On the other hand, consumers also engage in digital searching for spiritual market offers, which are increasingly converted into a digital format. For instance, in Islam, many religious practices are being digitized, such as the "Ramadan Diet app" that optimizes fasting, an Islamic browser, and a Tasbeeh app that helps prayer to be easier and faster. Nevertheless, the digitalization of practices can also have some constraints. Meditation practices are widely discussed in Islam as to whether they are compatible with the religion's values, with some technologies such as Sufi meditation apps being an exception (Mirahmadi et al., 2005).

Future research

Most of the research on searching digitally for the spiritual focuses on market offerings that exist in the offline realm (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz et al., 2013; Belk, 2014). Consumer research can explore digital searching for spiritual market offers that are tied to the online realm. Future research can investigate how consumers search for and consume digital spiritual goods and services such as e-courses on spirituality, high-tech meditation, or even the digital shopping of crystals, tarots, and incenses. How do consumers relate to, and interact with, spiritual goods online? How do consumers experience spiritual goods and services online? Are there differences between spiritual novices and experts?

Future research can also explore spiritual movements that exist entirely in digital spaces, such as hyper-religions (Possamai, 2012), net-religions (Enstedt et al., 2015), or cyber-religions (Obadia, 2017). For instance, Possamai (2012) describes the term "hyper-real religion," referring to religions developed as consumer trends in postmodernity. Such movements are rooted in popular culture movies, such as Star Wars and the Matrix, with followers engaging with religious-like movements called Jediism and Matrixism (Possamai, 2005). Consumers of hyper-real religions tend to consume products for gaining and enhancing sensations. The popularity of hyper-real religions is driven by pop-cultural movies, books, or events which help us understand the connections between neoliberal capitalism, globalized consumer culture, and spirituality. Future research can investigate the development

of hyper-real religious movements in late capitalism and how it impacts the experience and consumption of spirituality.

Finally, consumer research can also explore how the digital might affect spirituality. Researchers can investigate the digital beyond being “a tool” to meet one’s spirituality only, but its impact in altering the spiritual experience.

Researchers can ask: Does the digital enable the spiritual experience? How is spirituality transformed due to the digital? What are the negative impacts of the digital on the spiritual experience?

Constructing one’s spiritual identity via the digital

The fourth spiritual digital consumption practice we identify is constructing one’s spiritual identity via the digital.

This practice refers to consumers engaging with digital technologies to bolster one’s spiritual identity. Religion is an essential part of life for some people’s identities, and religious beliefs can affect individuals’ consumption (Mathras et al., 2016). Accordingly, spiritual marketization can influence consumers’ identities either positively or negatively (McAlexander et al., 2014). Spirituality in the digital can also be a means for individuals’ construction of identities in that digital consumers can find virtual spaces to develop their religious identity and encounter their selves.

First, consumer research that explores the practice of constructing one’s spiritual identity via the digital focuses on spiritual consumption in minority groups. This research focuses on the ways in which the digital facilitates spiritual consumption for those who may find it challenging to participate and express their “true” spiritual selves in traditional physical spaces. Kale (2004) observes that minority groups who may feel displaced in traditional settings consume and engage with digital spaces and media to express and develop their spiritual identities. Examples include the consumption practices related to the White Crane Journal, an eclectic quarterly e-zine devoted to gay men’s spirituality, or the online Conference for Catholic Lesbians (Kale, 2004).

Similarly, Kamarulzaman et al. (2016) discuss the role of digital technologies such as social media in facilitating identity affirmation. The authors show that social media can aid newly arrived immigrants and travelers in constructing a complementary spiritual identity to the cosmopolitan persona by providing a sense of home during mobility. Furthermore, the authors argue that the digital allows immigrants and travelers to adapt and construct their spiritual identities within their spiritual communities, and to align those spiritual identities with the world around them.

Second, consumer research on the practice of constructing one's spiritual identity via the digital has begun to explore the idea of "being" digital rather than "consuming" the digital. Society is moving from the consumption of products as expressions of our identity (Belk, 2014) to the consumption of technology, enabling identity transformation (Belk, 2017). For example, Belk (2017) argues that humans and machines are moving toward one another in a cyborg movement. Mechanical prostheses or biological alterations like Botox injections promise happier, longer, and more spiritual lives (Belk, 2017). Such identity transformations, which relate human spirituality and soul with machines and technologies, are increasingly prevalent in our society.

Future research

Consumer research can investigate consumers' spiritual identity construction in three domains: (i) the negative effects of the digital on identity construction, (ii) consumers' affiliation with new spiritual movements online, and (iii) the construction of liquid identities via the digital. First, consumer research can explore how age and gender are being negatively shaped by digital spiritual consumption. Younger generations that are more culturally embedded in the digital (Bosch et al., 2017) are witnessing alarming movements such as "*jihadi* brides" in Europe or "love *jihad*" in India, which is an Islamophobic conspiracy theory developed by Hindus, claiming Muslim men target Hindu women to convert them to Islam (Gupta, 2009). Therefore, how does the digital shape adolescents' spiritual beliefs? How can the digital be a threat to women through spiritual discourses and behaviors? What are other negative aspects of digital consumer spirituality?

Secondly, more and more, people affirm their spiritual identities by denying affiliations with traditional religions; instead, they engage with new representations of God or gods, such as Neopaganism (Rinallo et al., 2016). Often the Internet is the first port of call for building awareness and becoming part of an alternative spirituality. YouTube blogs or social networks kickstart their spiritual identity transitions. Future research can explore these conversions and transitions in the digital space to understand how consumers negotiate and move between their past and future spiritual identities.

Finally and relatedly, consumers increasingly move back and forth between spiritual ideas and directions, embracing liquid spiritual identities (Bauman, 2000). For instance, Rodner and Preece (2019) find that consumers in Brazil move between different religious belief systems to assemble their own religious identities. Similarly, Kale (2004) observes this form of "syncretism" (Kale, 2004, p. 102) and illustrates it by showcasing a new Japanese religion that

mixes elements from Shinto and Buddhism. The idea of spiritual syncretism – in vogue for hundreds, even thousands of years in some regions and only for a few decades in others – will only intensify given escalating migration and ever-increasing access to technology (Kale, 2004). Future research can explore the development of liquid spiritual identities. How do consumers navigate and negotiate contrasting spiritual beliefs and identities? What is the role of the digital in facilitating this simultaneous practice of different religious beliefs and rituals?

The future of digital consumer spirituality

We are only at the beginning of understanding phenomena at the intersection of the digital, spirituality, and consumption. New technologies are continuously being developed, opening new avenues for human spirituality. In this chapter, we have shown four practices that consumers engage in to access spirituality via the digital, and we suggested future research questions for each of them. In this final section, we seek to broaden research horizons and suggest avenues in the field of digital consumer spirituality that go beyond the four digital consumer practices we identified. The following two emerging digital technologies will shape how consumers access spirituality via the digital in the future: (i) transhumanism and (ii) robots and other advanced machines. Consumer research can benefit from an increased focus on these emerging areas, as they will profoundly affect how spirituality is experienced in the future.

First, we suggest that transhumanism and its impact on digital consumer spirituality deserve academic attention. It is a movement that promises to unite technology, science, and spiritual transcendence to provide humans with eternity. Transhumanism's social and philosophical movement deals with the fundamental nature of reality, knowledge, and existence (Vita-More, 2019). Based on manifestos developed in Silicon Valley, transhumanism merges technological and biological evolution with a body of fervent believers and gives birth to a new atheist religion (Smith, 2018). The historian and transhumanist Yuval Harari believes that as humans we need new fictions to bind us together, and religion is the most important invention we created for this purpose (Harari, 2017). He believes that transhumanism has the power to fill our search for godhood in a future, to an extent that humans will no longer need God.

It is not our intention to present a detailed account of transhumanism (for this please, see Chapter 4 of this handbook; Botez, 2017; Botez et al., 2020; Lima et al., 2020; see *Journal of Marketing Management's* special issue

“Transhumanisms, Geneticised Markets and Perfectible Consumers”). However, we are interested in how this emerging philosophy can shape digital consumer spirituality (Belk, 2017). In a future world where humans may not die anymore due to repeatedly renewing our bodies through cloned organ replacements and our minds being eternally saved and uploaded to computer programs (Smith, 2018), how will humans consume life, time, as well as essential and superfluous goods and services, sacred or profane? What kinds of products are already being marketed by transhumanists to enable spiritual consumer experiences? What will the spiritual supermarket (Redden, 2016) in transhuman times look like?

Secondly, robotics and society’s robotization is an emerging technology that opens up promising consumer research questions. Despite considerable accounts in consumer research on artificial life and robotics (Belk, 2020; Belk et al., 2020, 2021), there are many unexplored avenues at the intersection of robots, spirituality, and consumption. For instance, the existence of robots as priests may sound far-fetched, yet it is happening now. In 2017, robots were hired to perform Buddhist funeral rites in Japan (O’Leary, 2018). Since then, humanoid robots have been replacing more and more Buddhist priests, resulting in priests looking for part-time work outside the temple (O’Leary, 2018). But how does a robot perform sacred rituals? How do consumers experience robotic-mediated spirituality? And how can robot priests adapt to a religious culture?

The development of theomorphic robots, or robots shaped in god-like characteristics, may impact the way consumers engage with the spiritual. Trentini (2019) introduces the idea of theomorphic robots and explores how different religious traditions experience this technology, reacting to, and accepting, such new technologies. Robots are already active in different religions: DarumaTO-2 is a theomorphic social companion robot for Buddhists, SanTO is a robot that assists Christian prayers, and finally, BlessU-2 is a robot that delivers Christian blessings in five languages (Trentini, 2019). Consumer research can explore spiritual consumer-robot relationships and how consumers accept or reject their robot worshipping companions. Also, how does robot-mediated spirituality impact the notions of community building? Consumer research can investigate robots’ ability to guide and unite spiritual communities and whether consumers can relate to robots as spiritual leaders.

Conclusion

We introduce the concept of digital consumer spirituality, defined as the interrelated practices and processes consumers engage in when consuming digital market offerings (products, services, spaces) that yield spiritual utility. We bring together existing consumer research addressing digital consumer spirituality and identify four practices that consumers engage in to access spirituality via the digital: (i) prosuming online spiritual communities, (ii) sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship, (iii) digitally searching for the spiritual, and (iv) constructing spiritual identities via the digital. Several suggestions for future research are outlined as well as future research ideas at the intersection of digital consumer spirituality and emerging digital technologies, namely (i) transhumanism and (ii) robots and other advanced machines. We aspire to encourage scholarly investigations on digital consumer spirituality in marketing and consumer research to foster this fascinating and growing stream of research.

Table 28.1 Digital Consumer Spirituality

Practices	Illustrative consumer research	Future research avenues
<p>Prosuming online spiritual communities</p> <p>Consumers engage with the spiritual by digitally seeking out like-minded others in online communities</p>	<p>Muñiz et al. (2013)</p> <p>Muñiz and Schau (2005)</p>	<p>1. Interaction between online and offline community engagement</p> <p>How do spiritual consumers engage in online and offline interactions to build and maintain their communities?</p> <p>2. Negative aspects of online spiritual communities</p> <p>How does the digital facilitate the emergence of spiritual radicalization? How are fake news and toxic viral memes created and distributed among and against spiritual communities?</p> <p>3. Management of online spiritual communities</p> <p>How do service providers in a spiritual marketplace derive economic or spiritual</p>

		value from online communities?
<p>Sacralizing brands, products, and services through digital worship</p> <p>Consumers use digital spaces and devices to perform worshipping rituals in attempts to sacralize the brands, products, or services that they consume to access the spiritual</p>	<p>Kale and Kamineni (2003)</p> <p>Belk and Tumbat (2005)</p> <p>Belk et al. (2021)</p>	<p>1. Digital marketing strategies for spiritual services</p> <p>How do service providers design digital worshipping activities? What are the best technologies to facilitate worshipping?</p> <p>2. Consumer emotions in digital worshipping</p> <p>What do consumers feel when worshipping in the digital as compared to the physical?</p> <p>3. Authenticity</p> <p>Which digital technologies are considered authentic for the practice of digital worshipping?</p>
<p>Searching digitally for the spiritual</p> <p>Consumers use digital technologies to search for, and seek out, information about spiritual market offerings and experiences</p>	<p>Husemann and Eckhardt (2019a)</p> <p>van Laer and Izberk-Bilgin (2019)</p> <p>Kamarulzaman et al. (2016)</p>	<p>1. Digital searching for spiritual market offers that are tied to the online realm</p> <p>How do consumers relate to, and interact with, spiritual goods online?</p> <p>2. Spiritual movements that are born and raised entirely in digital spaces</p> <p>How do hyper-real religious movements impact the experience and consumption of spirituality in late capitalism?</p> <p>3. Digital beyond “a tool”</p> <p>Does the digital enable the spiritual experience? How is spirituality transformed due to the digital?</p>

<p>Constructing spiritual identities via the digital</p> <p>Consumers engage with digital technologies to bolster spiritual identity</p>	<p>Belk (2017)</p> <p>Kale (2004)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identity construction in younger generations How do these technologies shape adolescents' spiritual beliefs? 2. Consumers' affiliation with new spiritual movements online How do consumers negotiate and move between their past and future spiritual identities? 3. The construction of liquid identities via the digital What is the role of the digital in facilitating the simultaneous practice of different religious beliefs and rituals?
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Source: Own elaboration.

Further reading

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