

Experience marketing in the service of the “secular religion” of big tech

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Abstract

The article proposes an interpretation of the meaning of experience marketing as a tool in the process of sacralisation of products, and in a broader context – the so-called secular religion accompanying some contemporary big tech organizations.

The article is of theoretical nature and the authors have intended to explain how big tech corporations, in line with the concept of experience marketing (digital platforms, in particular), reinterpret their role in relations with users. The aim of the article is to inspire research on the experience marketing in the digital ecosystem in the context of the sacralisation of an organization, its goals, leaders, employees and products.

The article has adopted hermeneutics as providing an appropriate theoretical framework for analysis.

Keywords: experience marketing; platforms, sacralisation; sacralized products; mythologization

Hermeneutics as a theoretical framework for research

The hermeneutics of management, constituting a convenient framework for looking at the sacralisation process, has been adopted as a research perspective for further considerations, suitable in the analysis of the role of experience marketing in this process.

In the hermeneutic methodology, an organization exists thanks to human intention, and its understanding is possible owing to the synthesis of judgments about it, its leaders and members, strategies, goals and structures. There is no objective knowledge about the organization, because the opinions are based on the adopted values, therefore the understanding of the organization always “becomes” and is never complete (Campbell, 1978; Ricoeur, 1981). Moreover – this issue is particularly important due to the researched problem – it is the discourse on management that imposes inter-subjective thought constructs in the form of organizations, enterprises, environment as well as strategies, structures and cult. Therefore, learning about the organization is the fruit of discourses entangled in social reality. This reality is in turn based on the foundation of language and discourse (Sułkowski, 2009).

What is characteristic for hermeneutics is the desire to understand the analysed phenomenon as it is, and not as it seems in the context of an adopted theory; it is the

assumption that actions or situations can be understood when placed in context, and, conversely, context can only be understood when actions or situations are understood. Assuming this perspective, the concept of experience marketing should be seen in the broader context of the processes of sacralisation in the (non)metaphorical approach to secular religion.

Hermeneutic reflection relates to action in general (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2008), it is open to reinterpretation of the surrounding world, to adoption of different perspectives and it focuses on change. However, it requires critical creativity and the confrontation of different positions as well as putting oneself in the analyzed situation, drawing on intuition and one's own knowledge.

Considering the subject of research, the hermeneutic approach allows for a better understanding of how creative acts of experience marketing evolve in a symbolic context and how they become part of management processes. The framework of hermeneutics harmonizes with the interdisciplinary nature of experience marketing.

Experience marketing – the essence

Experience marketing is “the process of creating, maintaining, enriching and deepening the interaction between the company and the customer by providing memorable experiences that will engage and bind customers emotionally with the brand” (Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2013) p. 53. The concept of experience marketing emerged at the turn of the last and the present century as a response to the evolving demands of consumers of the saturated postmodern markets. These are customers for whom the fulfilment of the promises related to the functionality of the offer is a matter of course and frequently insufficient to evoke a feeling of satisfaction with the purchase and the consumption of the subject of the offer (Waśkowski, 2017; Stasiak, 2019). Possession should be enriched with experiences resulting from symbolic associations related to the brand (Bilton, 2007), from the emanation of the desired lifestyle, the projection of one's own identity, the manifestation of personality and professed values.

The fundamental assumption of experience marketing is the phenomenon of consumers' departure from the ordinary purchase of material goods and services (*manufacturing economy*), which in a sense become secondary, towards activities and experiences related to the purchase of goods (*experience economy*) (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999; Sturm, 2005; Zadykowicz, Gębarowski and Siemieniako, 2019), which is the result of the growing individualism and the need of self-fulfilment (Dziewanowska and Kacprzak, 2013). Thus, there is a shift in the importance from utilitarian exchange to the symbolic one. In the former, the objects of exchange are assessed from the angle of their physical characteristics, availability and price, and its aim is to maximize the participants' own benefits. In the latter, the subject of exchange primarily concerns intangible values (e.g. psychological, social) and the process itself plays a significant role (Bagozzi, 1975; Furtak, 2003).

From the perspective of marketing understood in this way, the company can influence the functioning of the client at the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; LaSalle and Britton, 2003) as well as the social level by offering an experience that is the sum influencing the client's senses, feelings, thinking, actions, and relationships (Schmitt, 1999). On the physical level, the company should create value for the client by influencing possibly all the senses: sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell, using the synergy effect between them (Skowronek, 2012). On an intellectual level, the client can be creatively engaged by being offered cognitive problem-solving experiences. On an emotional level, customer value is built through affective experiences, from mildly positive moods related to brand to strong emotions such as joy and pride. The spiritual dimension



concerns the search for a deeper meaning and purpose in life (Kacprzak, 2017). At this level, an organization may link experiences with beauty, art, creation, self-awareness (LaSalle and Britton, 2003). In the area of activities, building value for customers is associated with involving them in co-production (Kacprzak and Dziewanowska, 2019) or showing them alternative styles of life. Relationships relate to social experiences are based on creating value for clients by providing them with a social identity and a sense of belonging to a group, society and culture.

The company should try to influence customers on possibly the biggest number of levels, preferably on all of those described above. This should result in customers' engagement and the creation of expressive, memorable experiences, and as such, having the power to influence the customers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour.

A constitutive concept of experience marketing involves emotions whose arousal is to lead to building, maintaining and deepening ties with customers, to building their loyalty. The reward will not only concern repeated purchases but also a tendency to recommend products (Westerbrook, 1987; Gołąb-Andrzejak and Gębarowski, 2018; Delińska, 2019). It is this behaviour of consumers described in the role as "ambassadors", or drawing from the language of religion as "missionaries", "apostles" or "evangelists" of the company, that is one of the main driving forces of growth (McConnell, Huba and Kawasaki, 2002). It is also worth emphasizing that the emotional ties between the organization and the Krelient are more difficult to copy and break apart by competitors (Crosby and Johnson, 2007). Proper influence on emotions seems to be the key to affect the client also on the spiritual and social levels (e.g. through sacralisation). Obviously, this is not possible in all types of market activity. However, where such processes can be implemented the reward will involve even stronger ties with customers.

Experience marketing extends traditional marketing tools so that they can influence the customer on all the above-mentioned levels. Meanwhile, it places particular emphasis on influencing the senses and arousing emotions through the appropriate shaping of the material and service elements of the offer, including the physical (e.g. architecture) and social environment (the role of employees, leaders and consumers) as well as the processes of creating and delivering experiences.

Due to their comprehensiveness and complexity, creating the desired customer experiences is possible only when the organization has an appropriate organizational culture (Gębarowski, 2018), accepted by its members who identify with it. The leaders of the organization have an unquestionable role in the creation of the culture. Its elements include myths, and its manifestation relates to the artefacts (buildings (Krawiec, 2018), their equipment), which the customer may also encounter, and which should communicate brand values. Physical aspects are "a visual metaphor for the total offer of the company" (Bitner, 1992). For example, according to experience marketing, the architecture of the enterprise should not be subordinated only to the functions of the organization, but also communicate the personality and "spirit" of the company, influencing emotions.

Secular religion and management

In accordance with the idea of Emil Durkheim ("everything can become sacred"), many new secular religions appear alongside the traditional ones. For here are new ways of the de-commodification of new technologies and marketing strategies of modern business of late capitalism, which have been given new symbolic dimensions. "The saint is alive and appears in consumer culture, often through "sacralisation" of the most secular aspects of the capitalist world, including consumer products, business structures and new media technologies (Davis, 2015).

When religion is used as a mere metaphor – we say, for example, that “football is religion” – sanctity ceases to be a religious term and becomes an anthropological constant. As various manifestations of life are presented in the category of sanctity, the religious aspect can be treated not only as a simple metaphor, what is more, sanctity is not considered from the perspective of human life and experiences, but becomes essential for the interpretation of the functioning of the organization.

In societies where sanctity is secularised (Chaves, 1994), organizations, including corporations in particular, try not only to create their own internal religions, but also to “emanate divinity” onto stakeholders, especially clients. In practice, therefore, it means a process of commodifying the elements of secular religion. Organizations create a system of beliefs and practices and are characterized by an evangelical style of management without taking into account the theological depth and the sociological parallel (Kerfoot and Knights, 1994).

The sources of secular religion should be found in the rejection of traditionally understood metaphysics, also in relation to culture. This new form of religion embraces and emphasizes freedom of choice, by sacralising, as an example, consumption, pleasure, technology or prosperity and becomes the secular sacred. Individualization, personal preferences and self-affirmation are still present in the theological context, but these are intense experiences in line with the location of freedom of choice that count above all, as a centre of cultural value.

However, these experiences are stimulated to strengthen the ties of employees and users with the organization through marketing activities, in line with the concept of experience marketing.

In this context, the role of the users of digital platforms should be indicated. Both from the perspective of critical management theory and in marketing activity, they are no longer passive recipients of the offer of goods and services, but they co-create values on platforms. They are the co-creators of the values loosely connected with the organization, which offers the values. Therefore, the users are – this perspective is particularly vivid in critical concepts – employees of the organization. Consistently, Facebook users, for example, are its employees, because they contribute to its value, although they are deprived of the fruits of their work.

Myth and management

Along with the sacralisation of the organization, its mythologization, present in marketing messages, progresses, covering not only its leader, but also the entire organization, its products and services. In the context of management, the creation of myths is seen as the central process of organizations that, from a symbolic perspective, appear to exist to create myths and symbols and, thus, legitimize actions within those organizations and within their increasingly fluid boundaries, given the active role played by customers/consumers/users co-creating the values.

An important feature of the myth is the encoding of abstract values presented in organizations. Myths then refer to the extraordinary, supernatural phenomena and events that are therefore easy to remember; they create heroes and fill the gap in knowledge and experience. Everything can be mythologized, because people can see extraordinary powers and perfection everywhere (Kerfoot and Knights, 1994). Thus, not only organizations and their heroes but also competences and resources are mythologized.

Micro-narratives, created as part of marketing activities, form mythical thinking about organizations, enable the collective memory to be recovered while the organization itself can



be interpreted as a system of “collective storytelling”, which is a combination of stories told by various stakeholders, where self-narration is one of many others (Boje, 2008).

In a comprehensive review of the myth accompanying the organization, Martin L. Bowles emphasizes that as traditional myths collapse, organizations increasingly serve as intermediaries for the transmission of values, beliefs and meanings. Thus, they replace churches in dictating meanings¹.

Myth is present in the context of social changes, when religious worldviews are supplanted by scientific and economic ones and when mythology loses its sacral associations and gains secular analogies (Bowles, 1989). Gradually, myths about religious leaders are being replaced by myths about business leaders, sometimes merging into a single narrative.

Experience marketing versus secular religion

In this context, while remaining in the service of the sacralisation of the organization and its leaders, experience marketing can co-create mythologizing narratives and, in a broader context, support the formulation of new secular religions.

Without engaging in the analysis of all aspects and tools of marketing, it is worth recalling the concept of brand shaping as interpreted in this context by Martin Lindstrom. He assumes that the more a brand refers to rituals, the stronger its bond with the consumer. The senses get involved with the emotional ties between the brand and the consumer. Just as people have participated in religious ceremonies since time immemorial, so today they accompany the activities of brands. Lindstrom is convinced that branding should therefore involve all the senses, the brand should be sensual, and rituals are the basis of bonding (Lindstrom, 2005).

This role of ties leads to the identification of common areas of the brand and religion, such as a clear vision, sense of belonging, appeal to the senses, source texts, evangelism, symbols and rituals. Also storytelling with narratives of miracles, from the colonization of Mars (E. Musk), the colonization of augmented reality (S. Brin), to the colonization of computing (a unique metaphor) clouds (Amazon, Google).

Real and virtual cathedrals

Tribute to the new god takes place in modern “cathedrals”, with the highest cathedral – Google, an organization whose divine representations are particularly often present in the literature on media, new technologies and management; to recall the most important faith-related Google creators – the technological god, and many other organizations – most secrets, including those of human behaviour, can be discovered through data (Auletta, 2010). In this context, it should be added that the mystical but also communal dimension of secular religions and “corporate cathedrals” becomes closer to the common understanding of transcendence. New cathedrals are created in a virtual space and are built by narratives that mythologize new technologies and glorify the founders/managers of corporations and their products.

For centuries, the tallest buildings of a given era were churches. Contemporary cathedrals of capitalism and consumerism are corporate office buildings (from Frankfurt am Main, to New York’s Wall Street and Shanghai), reflecting the changing nature of what happens to be “divine” (Harari, 2014), and the expression of perfect coexistence of the divine in different orders (religious and secular) includes the skyscrapers of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan.

¹ Suggesting “new creative mythology” Bowles meant the democratisation of work, decentralisation of structures, flexible roles and self-control, to name a few (Bowles, 1989).

Apple stores are an iconic example of combining technological competences with art and architecture. It was their designers (Studio Eight Inc., previously cooperating with Steven Jobs) who proposed that the new roof of the Notre Damme Cathedral, partially burnt in 2019, should be made of ... glass (IK, 2019). There is a reason, after all, this has been the current architectural concept/line of locations where Apple is worshiped. The corporation's "glass cathedrals", uniquely unified by the brand and the architectural concept, dominate the central places of the cult of consumerism in New York (Broadway 57), Paris (Apple Champs-Élysées), Madrid (Puerta del Sol), London (Apple in Regent Street and Apple Store Covent Garden), Belfast (Apple Brent Cross) and many other cities.

Their vision of concept showrooms, satirically named "The Church of Apple", in fact, perfectly reflects what is presented in the distorting mirror on www.iphonesavior.com, which put the following declaration in the mouth of Apple's managing director, Tim Cook: "We have given our customers a place for shopping. What they really want is a place for worship" (Basile, 2012).

It is no coincidence that at the entrance to the satirically described store, there is a stained glass window with the image of Steve Jobs, and in the concept store – as we read on the portal – there is a place for the "Miracle Bar", where Apple Angels offer customers personal care, once a product has ended its life, designed to help them dispose of the aging Apple products and go through the "period of mourning" with dignity. In turn, "clergymen", encouraged to give sermons on iPads with the version of the Apple application – The iBook of Jobs, celebrate services. All of this happens next to the Steve Jobs sanctuary, which would be located at the back of every Apple store (Church of Apple) (Basile, 2012).

Satire successfully illustrates the relationships between the mythologized corporation and its sacralized products (Pinson and Brodahl, 2014) and "followers", and the aforementioned concept stores gain real reference patterns, such as the New York Apple store at Central Park – Apple's main cathedral, which, like a church, mosque or synagogue, embodies and expresses the essence of beliefs through symbolism and ritual, and which is a powerful temple of new technologies, the place where iCloud descends to earth (Basile, 2012). Since Apple means not only products and services, but also a way of life, ideology and belief system, the embodiment of the culture of the 1970s with its assemblage of utility appliances, hippie culture and electronics, where mysticism and microchips are part of the same ecosystem. It is a mystical science fiction culture, an element of Apple's narrative and history from geek to capitalist business Behemoth.

The gigantic glass cube of the New York store is supposed to reconcile the pride of a monolith – where a monolith means a coherent, undifferentiated whole of people, things and a phenomenon – with design minimalism. It is a monument to Apple's aspirations, in which high technology brings you into a state similar to religious ecstasy. Its architecture refers directly to the architecture of Gothic cathedrals – the main churches of bishops – with their soaring architectural components opposing the heavy matter of stone, signalling the transparency of glass, the freedom of cyberspace (Jacob, 2012). What both artefacts have in common is the reconciliation of the church with the work it symbolizes. In both cases (a Gothic cathedral and Apple cathedrals), the architectural structure is exposed "outside" the building. In the Middle Ages, in France alone, starting in 1144, when Saint-Denis cathedral was built (the first church with a gothic frame-buttress structure), a new cathedral was built every 5-10 years and a total of about 80 were built. They were to let the divine light inside the building, but also to illuminate the richness within. And they were to exude knowledge – apart from the cathedrals of the Church, the people were obtuse and stupid – knowledge and power flow through the stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals and through the glass cathedrals of Apple and its devices that are perfect in form and in the embedded technology.



Experience marketing is conducive to achieving this task. As Sam Jacob picturesquely points out, the store staff dressed with studied nonchalance combining the aesthetics of asceticism slides around large wooden tables as if they were not places for product presentation, but planes for self-diagnosis and fine-tuning of your own techno-psyche (Jacob, 2012). It is just Apple's rituals, especially the premieres of new products that transform the mundane everyday consumer experiences into hypnotizing evangelical events. The accompanying sermons referring to their own myth serve to elevate new products to the heights of the pantheon of products. Taken to a pedestal, they shape a sense of community and communion among fans, suggesting that hopes and dreams that go far beyond the material world of product design rest within it. All this so that, in the subsequent acts of faith, thousands of believers unpack Apple's "relics" in social media, following the pattern designed in Cupertino – the headquarters of the corporation (Jacob, 2012).

Ip hones like rosaries: transcendence through products

There are many examples of religious contexts and experience marketing as an iPhone dubbed "Jesus's phone" (Campbell and La Pastina, 2010), because technology is part of everyday experience that is so common that homo technologicus, i.e. a symbiotic creature in which biology and technology have strict mutual impact, would find it hard to survive without technology². The iPhone is thus presented as all-encompassing object, meeting both physical, emotional and spiritual needs anywhere. Offering access to the "divine kingdom of cyberspace", the apotheosis of freedom and freedom of choice, it becomes a metaphor for transcendence and eternal life.

Faith in technology manifests itself in technological mysticism and beliefs. In the digital media ecosystem, its icon is generally a computer, and in the programming environment – an algorithm. They are meant to offer a divine experience and be a means of transcending digital reality.

A well-known short episode of the role of Apple's charismatic leader Steve Jobs, whose management style did not differ from those used by religious leaders, can be added to this set of experiences, but this time presented in a new context of the association of secular religion and experience marketing. It was Jobs's charisma and vision that meant that Apple had dedicated employees as well as users of its products and services.

The myths surrounding Jobs and Apple were told throughout the Apple community (and its products were referred to as iconic) (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, Jr., 1989). It is a myth of the opponent (relations with IBM, and then with Microsoft) – in both cases Apple and Jobs are portrayed as the just good fighting the forces of evil and as the myth of a saviour surrounding Steve Jobs.

In an effort to maintain his countercultural roots, throughout his career, Jobs adopted the characterization of himself as an enlightened rebel against evil empires, and that is what he was perceived to be a promoter of "liberation technology" in the opposition to subordination technology.

As if originating from the catalogue of good practices in marketing, Jobs' conferences about new products, which were characterized by communal "messianic enthusiasm", were unique, multiplied in millions of personal and traditional media reports (Booth and Jackson, 1997). Jobs' charisma was called "a distortion of reality". The term, borrowed from the Star Trek series, was meant to emphasize the magnetic personality and the ability to convince

² The nonchalance of the term and its lack of precision is worth attention. More in: (Warwick, 2016).



people. In other words, the leader of the corporation was not only a point of reference/a centre but also a source of sacralisation processes.

The transcendental properties of Apple products and the discursive construction of these devices as “divine” could be confirmed by their reception by some opinion-forming media. For example, soon after the iPhones appeared, the *Economist* (“Where would Jesus queue”) called them “Jesus phones”, referring to the unique user relationships and seemingly divine status. Similar religious rhetoric surrounded iPad’s market debut in 2010 (Snickars and Vonderau, 2012).

At present, in a smaller scale, analogical processes may be observed in reference to Elon Musk’s corporation, Tesla (*Tesla Is a ‘Religion,’ Techonomy Media CEO Says*, 2021) and its cars (Coren, 2018). They manifest themselves – as in the case of Jobs – in the behaviour of the brand’s supporters and Elon Musk. There are questions for a reason: Have you ever seen an official Tesla event with Elon Musk on stage? People in the crowd completely lose control of themselves – you can hear screams, fanatical encouragement and crazy clapping, even though what is shown on stage often does not justify it.

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