

Web-based forums and metaphysical branding

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Abstract This paper introduces metaphysical branding as an original, overarching concept binding together discrete data themes when analysing online evaluation of the best-selling album in jazz history – *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis. There are five constituent elements of metaphysical branding arising from the data (rite of passage, believers, non-believers, self-improvement, and ritual). The paper uses a netnographic approach involving analysis of online textual discourse posted on a music-rating website. Postings indicate that consumers are not just passively responding to marketing communications, but are actively co-creating transcendent meaning. Dissemination of quasi-religious motifs invests *Kind of Blue* with self-perpetuating, life-cycle extending meanings. Metaphysical branding has potential applications in the marketing of goods and services requiring prolonged cognitive effort in striving for aspirational self-improvement (e.g. through pursuit of the arts or university education) or prolonged dedication and devotion (e.g. to a sports team).

Keywords metaphysical; branding; netnography; sacred; jazz

Introduction

Web-based forums have become increasingly important for marketers and consumers regarding the transparent exchange of brand-specific experiences and perceptions. They provide marketing researchers with the opportunity to enhance their understanding of key themes concerning the needs and motivations of online consumers. For example, in a netnographic study of an online community dedicated to coffee-related discussion, Kozinets (2002) identifies four cultural themes that emerge (distinction, consumption webs, commodification concerns, and religious devotion). His discussion of the latter theme reveals how sacred metaphors and biblical language convey ‘the joyful mindset of the coffee connoisseur’ through which a community of coffeephiles seeks ‘the elusive, religious experience, the exhaustive apotheosis of espresso moments’ (p. 69). The present study is designed to contribute to the evolving netnographic literature through theoretical elaboration of the recurrent theme of religious devotion in order to form a multifaceted, overarching concept entitled metaphysical branding. Rather than analysing the extent to which unsolicited religious references may passively emerge in online consumer postings, it focuses specifically upon a product that has actively used a metaphysical

theme in its marketing communications. It acknowledges the potential of such marketing communications to encourage a more intensely spiritual relationship between consumer and brand.

Interactive online communications via web-based forums provide the opportunity to share experiences and foster a sense of community (Hewer & Brownlie, 2007). In this context, the current study examines online forum evaluation of the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue* (1959, Columbia Records), the most commercially successful jazz recording of all time. Marketing literature has recently demonstrated an increased academic interest in jazz. For example, research has evaluated the role of jazz as a specifically urban genre (S. Oakes & Warnaby, 2011) and as a managerial metaphor (e.g. Dennis & Macaulay, 2003, 2007; S. Oakes, 2009). The current paper addresses a gap in the literature by introducing the original concept of metaphysical branding and examining its key constituent elements arising from the data (rite of passage, believers, non-believers, self-improvement, and ritual). The paper considers how metaphysical branding has contributed to the phenomenal success of *Kind of Blue*. This iconic recording has sold well in excess of four million copies, and continues to sell more than 5,000 copies per week worldwide (<http://www.cannonball-adderley.com/sheet/book12.htm>).

The current study analyses an extensive range of *Kind of Blue* postings drawn from a music-rating website that publishes the authors' personal thoughts and opinions, frequently revealing their underlying behavioural motivations. Such analysis is appropriate in this context, since Jones, Spigel, and Malecki (2010) argue that no market relies more heavily on online social networks than cultural products like fashion, art, and music. Consumers may read postings for information and entertainment, but organisations increasingly use them to enhance consumer research and marketing communications (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Organisational managers typically regard brand-specific postings as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of consumer motivations and forge closer relationships with existing and potential customers. Such online word-of-mouth communication involves a networked co-creation of narratives that has the potential to alter marketing meanings (Kozinets et al., 2010). The symbolic value of a brand is frequently used as shorthand by online consumers to communicate a sense of identity to others (Schau & Gilly, 2003). In disseminating word-of-mouth communication regarding personal preferences and evaluations, such consumers may imbue discussed cultural products with additional symbolic meaning that is subsequently communicated to the online reader (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). In the context of the current paper, consumers posting online ratings and comments regarding *Kind of Blue* become cultural intermediaries with powers to shape interpretation and aesthetic response to the music, as well as potentially influencing purchase decisions.

Huang, Shen, Lin, and Chang (2007) discuss motivations for posting online comments, highlighting the need for escapism and life documentation. Self-presentation of social identity in order to impress others is a key motivating factor identified by Leung (2003), while Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) report motivations of self-improvement, community belonging, and emotion management through catharsis. Drawing upon a review of the sociology literature, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) discuss how online brand communities demonstrate three core components involving shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Regarding online evaluation of music, the

communication of musical consumption experiences and preferences contributes to the construction of individual and collective identity (Larsen, Lawson, & Todd, 2010). Music makes up part of the cultural sign systems that peer or friendship groups use to differentiate themselves from each other (Nuttall, 2009). Conspicuous musical consumption may offer heightened personal or social prestige by virtue of 'access to privileged social networks' and 'cultural honour' (Warde, 2005). Consumers may also purchase music for its symbolic meaning and evocation of narratives, feelings, fantasies, and experiences (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

Metaphysical branding

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) identify secularisation of religion and sacralisation of the secular as two contemporary societal processes. Focussing upon the manifestations and properties of the sacred inherent in consumer behaviour, they discuss how research in the sociology of religion highlights a key distinction 'between what is set apart and regarded as sacred and what is regarded as profane or ordinary' (p. 2). In discussing contexts where the secular has become increasingly sacralised, they identify the solemn rites and expressive symbolism that may be attached to diverse forms of consumption. For example, although unconnected to formal religion, consumers may set apart, revere, and treat as sacred 'flags, sports stars, national parks, art, automobiles, museums, and collections' (p. 2). Museums may become temples for worship, closely akin to a religious experience, while art galleries may provide sacred and transcendental aesthetic experiences (Rentschler, Jogulu, Kershaw, & Osborne, 2012). Sacralisation of the secular takes place when goods and services are imbued with sacred meanings and their consumption becomes a vehicle for exploring the sacred (Belk et al., 1989).

Previous research (H. Oakes & Oakes, 2012) identifies persuasive use of the religious iconography of metaphysical discourse in Arts Council websites marketing 'high' art forms including opera and ballet. While fans of bands may communicate intense, quasi-religious, emotional experiences with the music as a form of devotion (Beaven & Laws, 2007), the current study considers the extent to which explicitly stated sacralisation of musical consumption may flourish in anonymous online postings that foster the co-creation of metaphysical meaning. In this context, consumers co-create brand meaning by 'carefully reading and interpreting brand-related communications, adding their own personal histories, and continually delving into definitions of the brand's authenticity' (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003, p. 28).

Kavanagh (1994) defines metaphysics as meaning 'beyond or above the physical; it is concerned with the supernatural, that which transcends the physical world that we can see and touch' (p. 37). Traditional metaphysical philosophers (e.g. Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza) were concerned with questioning the meaning of life, the true nature of reality, and addressing man's place 'within the cosmos in his relation to other kinds of things and to his creator' (Carr, 1987, p. 1). Metaphysical discourse embraces the concept of absolute sacred truth including 'infallible' assumptions and beliefs requiring no further verification (H. Oakes & Oakes, 2012). It relies on arguments from authority that are guaranteed by transcendent beings (or an equivalent substitute). It is a discourse in which man is regarded as a secondary entity whose existence depends upon God. Metaphysical philosophers created complex systems of knowledge based on internally coherent concepts from which an entire

system was derived by logical deduction, typically reducible to a single concept such as belief in God (H. Oakes & Oakes, 2012). Such systems with their apparent logic may be difficult to question, even though they cannot be tested or verified in reality. Similarly, metaphysical branding involves the implanting of quasi-religious brand attributes in marketing communications that seem to be logically related to a product and resistant to question. While a religious community typically operates as a communications network facilitating the development and transmission of norms (Essoo & Dibb, 2004), metaphysical discourse embraces absolute norms that prescribe specific behaviour and unquestionable beliefs. Web-based forums intensify the development of metaphysical belief systems as participants interpret quasi-religious ideas attributable to marketers, but also feed off and develop the ideas of fellow participants in a form of viral co-creation, reinforcement, and reinvention of the metaphysical brand itself.

Metaphysical branding identifies a process of communicating the brand experience as consisting of quasi-religious, spiritually uplifting, esoteric, aspirational, enlightened, unquestionably desirable attributes. Visual artists (e.g. Caravaggio) historically created images of holy figures that have subsequently become massively profitable commodities (Drummond, 2006). The religious iconography of metaphysical discourse as applied to music is identified and analysed in the current study data with reference to its likely impact on long-term profitability in terms of *Kind of Blue* album sales. Text on the CD cover communicates the metaphysical by depicting a spiritually uplifting experience in listening to the album. For example, the liner notes state: 'If you're going to heaven, you might as well go first class all the way'. *Kind of Blue* was originally released in 1959, but the metaphysical theme is also underlined in some subsequent Miles Davis studio albums (e.g. *Seven Steps to Heaven*, 1963) and posthumous compilation albums (e.g. *Bird of Paradise*, 2002).

While the concept of 'heaven on earth' pulses through many marketing campaigns such as those for Hawaiian holidays (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002), the concept of metaphysical branding is broader than this. It identifies how purchase and consumption of the branded product potentially provide an access point for consumers seeking to move along a pathway of self-improvement. Online word-of-mouth communication is a particularly important part of this process, since any critical comments regarding the sacred product may be 'infallibly' regarded by the online community of devotees as sacrilegious, heretical, or ignorant philistinism. The online acolytes identify and reinforce the transference of key positive attributes from the branded product to the consumer. Online brand communities have the potential for creating powerful, transcendent, and transformative experiences for their consumers, frequently involving religious and magical metaphors and imagery (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Such metaphors and imagery allow consumers to understand, structure, and share their experiences. 'Online consumers create tales of their own that build on the brand, emphasize its uniqueness, personalize it, and demonstrate to others how they can individualize the brand' (Brown et al., 2003, p. 23). They 'manipulate and hybridize marketer-created brand narratives and work them into their lives' (Muñiz & Schau, 2005, p. 738). These hybridised narratives may serve to sacralise the brand and reinforce the values of the online brand community and the bond between its members.

In their analysis of fan postings on the website of rock band New Model Army, O'Reilly and Doherty (2006) discuss how consumers post comments revealing how

their online fan relationship with the band helps to create for them an uninhibited and quasi-religious emotional sanctuary. A further online religious metaphor describes fans' association with the music as a blessing. The online brand provides a metaphorical frame allowing participants to 'narrate passionate conversion stories' (O'Reilly & Doherty, 2006, p. 140) regarding the significance of music in their lives. Metaphysical branding provides perceived status benefits for those seeking to convey their knowledge and good taste through conspicuous consumption, and also stimulates cognitive effort on the part of the uninitiated consumer in contributing towards self-improvement. The current study illustrates the interconnections between art, branding, and consumption, and seeks to establish the influence of metaphysical branding for consumers of the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*.

Music consumption

Successful musicians may be regarded as brand managers promoting themselves and their creative output in the competitive cultural sphere. Miles Davis was visually distinct from most other jazz musicians in the 1950s through his conspicuous consumption of designer brands, including various expensive Italian suits and European sports cars, thus reinforcing his celebrity image (Williams, 2009). When considering affiliation to the Miles Davis brand as reflected in the purchase of his most famous recording, ownership of the album inevitably acknowledges how brands are imbued with stories that consumers use to construct their own identities (Hirschman, 2007). Williams (2009) elaborates further upon the status of Miles Davis as an iconic brand:

When people buy a record, they think they're buying the sounds. But of course, they're buying all the other stuff as well. Miles Davis hasn't remained popular for so many years only because he made great records; it's because he has a cultural position. (p. 246)

Miles Davis appeared in ads for various products (e.g. Honda scooters) and implemented brand extension into other musical genres (e.g. rock) and visual art forms through the sale of his original paintings and sketches. His *Kind of Blue* album has appealed widely to jazz aficionados as well as to the non-jazz consumer. Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) discuss how art has become marketised by being valued in terms of attendance figures, box-office receipts, and unit sales. By such measures, the success of *Kind of Blue* is indisputable, appearing ageless and invincible (Cook, 2005).

Prior to the release of *Kind of Blue*, the bebop style of jazz was prevalent with its complex harmonic structures and fast tempi. However, Miles Davis took jazz in a completely new direction. *Kind of Blue* marked the start of a new era of what is now termed 'modal jazz'. The music on *Kind of Blue* was far removed from bebop in the sense that it was based on minimal chord changes. It was a much more relaxed and less frantic approach to improvisation. Although regarded as an innovation in modern jazz, its minimalist use of modes provided a retrospectively metaphysical link to the historical use of modes in medieval church music that was used to create a meditative atmosphere perfect for worship. According to Cook (2005), Columbia records invested heavily (for a jazz album) in the initial marketing of *Kind of Blue*, which subsequently appealed to a new segment of the market, as people who had not listened to jazz prior to its release took an active interest in the music. The album has

enabled Davis to leave 'a sonic residue that has pervaded all of music, not just jazz' (Niles, 2009, p. 14). Williams (2009) discusses how it is often the only jazz album people own, and may sometimes be the only representative of jazz in the CD rack at small airport retail outlets.

Music is intricately bound up within the realm of the subjective and the personal. Conspicuous consumption of recorded music is capable of shaping and renewing individual identity, as well as forging a sense of communal identity with other owners of the same recording. In this context, 'identity comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover' (Frith, 1996, p. 275). Music consumption 'can be used as a means of transcending the limitations of our own place in the world' (Stokes, 1994, p. 4). Ownership of albums such as *Kind of Blue* becomes part of the cultural text that shapes sign systems by allowing groups of consumers to differentiate themselves from other groups (Nuttall, 2009).

Holt (1995) discusses how 'spectator sports offer an effective vehicle for building affiliation through the totemic symbols of team, ballpark, and players' (p. 10), thus contributing to a sacralising process. Likewise, a group interaction of music fans that focuses on a central icon frequently serves as a basis for sacred experiences (Belk et al., 1989). The conspicuous ownership of an iconic album may thus be used to communicate extra-musical, symbolic meaning (Frith, 1996) and is frequently used as a resource to elaborate self-identity. Bourdieu (1984) discusses the competitiveness of cultural consumption, suggesting that it is often used as a means of indicating class differentiation, since art is acknowledged as a social symbol of education and good taste. Furthermore, Hesmondhalgh (2008) highlights how cultural omnivorousness has become a benchmark of 'highbrow' taste. Although ownership of just a single jazz album would be inadequate to be granted full membership as an acknowledged jazz aficionado, it is possible that a copy of *Kind of Blue* in a record collection may represent a form of omnivorous cultural tokenism that effectively ticks the jazz box for those seeking peer approval and affiliate membership of an esteemed cultural congregation. In this context, the aesthetic experience of a work of art (*Kind of Blue*) may be viewed as a token evoking a general impression of the more universal genre (jazz) from which it is derived (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985). While the Miles Davis brand is applicable to the full range of his musical output as band leader, including albums fusing jazz with other musical genres, *Kind of Blue* retains a distinctive brand identity of its own due to its unique and iconic status in jazz.

Method

Netnography 'adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications and uses information publicly available in online forums' (Kozinets, 2006, p. 130). The current study uses a netnographic approach based on analysis of online textual discourse posted on a music-rating website (Rateyourmusic) which is a form of Internet message board involving posting of comments regarding music that allows others to reply. Postings are uploaded in a reverse-chronologically ordered, diary-like format. The Rateyourmusic website was founded in 2000 with the intention of allowing users to create an interactive forum for rating music (e.g. albums, singles, and videos). Rather

than using a more specialised jazz review website (e.g. <http://www.allaboutjazz.com>) that typically appeals exclusively to jazz fans, the Rateyourmusic website was chosen because it attracts music fans across a broad spectrum of musical genres. Indeed, many of the *Kind of Blue* postings are from fans of other genres with minimal knowledge of jazz. The current study acknowledges the importance of evaluating perceptions of *Kind of Blue* outside of the narrowly defined community of jazz aficionados. Kozinets (2006) identifies the value for consumer communities of web-based forums such as Rateyourmusic, revealing how they 'offer one of the best places to find consumption-related topics' (p. 131), and provide a counterbalance to corporate communication. In consumers' stories, brands may encourage quasi-religious devotion and provide netnographic understanding that is useful in terms of branding strategy and positioning (Kozinets, 2006).

The current research involves observational netnography involving no interaction between the researchers and this online community. Langer and Beckman (2005) propose that such distanced observation should be the norm for netnography due to its unobtrusiveness, thus enhancing authenticity. They also establish the benefits of conducting netnographic studies without seeking participant consent on sensitive topics in order to ensure that the intervention of the researchers does not contaminate the findings. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Beaven & Laws, 2007), the current study proposes that Internet message boards are established public-communication forums, and any requests for consent prior to analysis of public postings are unnecessary and potentially intrusive.

A netnographic approach is used to gather online data from consumers evaluating *Kind of Blue*. Data analysis responds to the plea of Kozinets (2006) to extend content analysis by providing 'penetrating metaphoric, hermeneutic and symbolic interpretation to reveal netnographic data's profound insights' (p. 134). As a method, netnography is particularly appropriate in this context, since it can provide information on the metaphorical meanings, symbolism, and consumption patterns of online music consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). The total downloaded data amounted to 176 single-spaced pages of 12-point-font text that represented approximately 54,500 words and consisted of 531 postings. The *Kind of Blue* postings were uploaded by consumers between 25 January 2002 and 9 January 2012 to the music-rating website http://rateyourmusic.com/release/album/miles_davis/kind_of_blue/

While qualitative data-analysis software packages provide benefits in terms of data classification and coding, netnographic data in the current study were analysed manually, acknowledging that software packages 'inevitably involve trading off symbolic richness for construct clarity' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). Consistent with established netnographic procedure (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets et al., 2010), the authors of this paper read all of the 531 postings separately and pre-classified them into topics designated as either relevant or irrelevant to the research area. The relevant postings were analysed further in order to identify appropriate themes for our avenue of investigation (metaphysical discourse), after which we coded the postings into initial themed categories. Sometimes this involved separate extracts from the same posting being put into different categories. After multiple rounds of in-person discussion, agreement was reached on a final list of metaphysically themed categories, with relevant extracts selected to illustrate each of them: rite of passage, believers, non-believers, self-improvement, and ritual.

Netnographic findings

The frequency of metaphysical statements is clearly identified. For example, the word 'heaven' is associated with the music by 16 separate postings. In the following discussion of the themed netnographic findings, the uploading date of each posting is provided, but the username is deliberately excluded.

Rite of passage

Numerous users indicate that this was the first jazz album they had ever heard, suggesting it is a rite-of-passage entry-level album for novices seeking access to the art form. The sacred ritual upon which the rite-of-passage metaphor is based concerns the pilgrimage or sacred journey (O'Guinn & Belk, 1989), revealing how people may create personal rites of passage to construct new, more desirable identities using appropriate activities and symbols (Schouten, 1991). The following postings indicate that *Kind of Blue* has been the starting point for listeners deliberately wishing to experience jazz for the first time. It marks the beginning of a redemptive pilgrimage to a holy place, an aspirational pathway towards spiritual and aesthetic enlightenment. The album symbolically gives birth to appreciation of the genre:

The mother of all jazz albums, at least that is what critics say. This is the first jazz album I ever really listened to. (4 July 2010)

The sense that the album provides a starting point is communicated in a quasi-baptismal metaphor, while acknowledging that its ownership may represent cultural tokenism for many consumers:

It's a decent place to start, but too many people just stick their toe in the water with this release and ignore the ocean of amazing music that it can lead to. (15 March 2009)

Some users acknowledge that they are not converts, but rather devotees of different musical genres. They may have bought the album as the natural starting point in seeking to diversify their musical taste. Alternatively, through tokenistic representation of jazz, they may simply be seeking to impress people with their eclectic appreciation of musical quality:

I admit it. I am the rock music fan with one jazz album and naturally, this is it, (6 July 2004)

O'Guinn and Belk (1989) reveal how the sacred world of the Heritage Village religious theme park is separated from external profanity by passing through a gate and portal to cross a sacred threshold. In contrast, the current data frequently refer to a metaphorical rather than literal gateway, as the album provides a metaphysical doorway for the novice listener:

Hearing this album, my first jazz album, was an open door into this hallway of the universe. (20 October 2009)

The absolute norms of metaphysical discourse are indubitable beliefs which are presented as beyond question and true for all time. Such norms are evident in prescriptive remarks identifying ownership of this album as the compulsory starting point on the journey towards enlightened awareness and musical understanding:

Greatest jazz album of all time. No question!! The VERY beginning of any jazz music collection. (14 January 2005)

Many users attempt to communicate their good taste and expertise, imposing pressure upon readers to acquire the album. O'Reilly and Doherty (2006) identify distinctions between online fans in categorising them as members of an elitist, exclusive club or as members of an inclusive family. Many *Kind of Blue* postings suggest more of an emphasis upon exclusive club membership with ownership of the album as an essential prerequisite for those seeking to become serious music fans:

A billion-star masterpiece record that serious music fans must own. (6 April 2006)

The normative pressure to purchase the album is applied to fans of other musical genres:

If you are a rock fan who's looking to get into some jazz, start with this album. (14 May 2008)

Believers

The concept of sacred consumption and references to a heavenly listening experience are expressed regularly throughout the data by passionate believers:

Late-night heaven. (4 May 2011)

This album is heavenly. (9 January 2012)

Regarding the 'heavenly' metaphor, it is acknowledged that 'when a metaphorical link is taken for granted after constant repetition, the inherent tension between source and target is relaxed and it becomes a dead metaphor with little impact' (S. Oakes, 2009, p. 467). However, the metaphor of music as heavenly reward is not simply stated by numerous users, it is extensively elaborated upon, thus suggesting that the metaphor genuinely reflects a passionately intense, spiritually uplifting musical experience:

It makes me feel like I am in a place where I want to be, surrounded by pure bliss. (2 May 2011)

Many postings convey evangelic online recommendations of the music with quasi-religious connotations:

A holy relic that I also happen to love. (2 May 2010)

The believers venerate the recording and document its status historically through narrative:

A hallowed monument in the history of jazz. (1 December 2008)

Something of a canonised classic. (18 November 2008)

The creation of Adam and Eve is given a new interpretation:

God first created Miles Davis, and he then created man and woman out of a couple of his trumpet notes. (4 May 2008)

O'Guinn and Belk (1989) reveal the tendency of the sacred to resist change, thus reflecting the apparently everlasting status of *Kind of Blue* as the most successful jazz

album of all time. Religious motifs act as a narrative structure investing the brand with powerful, self-perpetuating meanings (Muñiz & Schau, 2005), thus extending its life cycle:

This is an immortal album. (11 November 2006)

In an increasingly secular society, the evidence highlights consumers' deep-seated need for the mystical:

I understand that this is supposedly one of the most influential jazz albums ever made – the Holy Grail, so to speak. (19 February 2005)

Ripped from the collective soul of mankind. (21 August 2006)

The invocation of these themes underlines the human need for community and religious affiliation as mystical religious language, narrative, and philosophy are applied to a clearly secular situation (Muñiz & Schau, 2005):

I consider *Kind of Blue* to be to music what the Buddhist or Hindu 'Om' are to mysticism. (2 March 2004)

Non-believers

Holt (1995) discusses how sports fans may achieve distinction among their peers by revealing an iconoclastic view rather than merely repeating an accepted majority position. Similarly, a minority of dissenting voices take an iconoclastic stance in criticising *Kind of Blue*, conveying a sense of the deliberate destruction of a religious icon. Such frustrated listeners who are unable to enjoy the music respond with blasphemy:

I know I'm blaspheming here, since Miles Davis is a legend and this album in particular is hailed as such an amazing classic, but I honestly don't get it. (2 August 2009)

This album is without doubt, one of the most overrated albums ever, mostly produced by condescending jazz enthusiasts who cry blasphemy at anyone who dares provoke the sacred gates to jazz heaven. (13 February 2009)

Previous netnographic research (Brown et al., 2003) reveals the polarisation of bitter brand sceptics and true believers, each demonstrating a sophisticated level of interpretation of marketing cues regarding a brand's authenticity. Questioning the unquestionable quality of this album is acknowledged as heretical:

It all adds up to a good, but not great album. Hence three stars. I know it is heresy. (3 August 2008)

I'm a heretic. Why? Because simply, I can name a dozen jazz albums I prefer to this one. (10 December 2006)

However, conversion to the 'true' faith is still possible for heretics:

I used to think this album wasn't that special, but I've been converted. (23 July 2008)

For those unwilling or unable to be converted, the dissenting voices of such non-believers are firmly addressed by members of the online community. With music of

‘infallibly’ guaranteed quality, brand adherence is normative and those who do not conspicuously consume it may be regarded suspiciously or even disrespectfully:

If you’re not a fan of *Kind Of Blue*, you’re not a fan of jazz music at all. (26 August 2007)

The following posting is critical of cultural tokenism, but also demonstrates that the online community is aware of the shallow insincerity of those who merely pretend to be true believers:

The jazz album for those who don’t even like jazz, but know that to keep this on their coffee table will make them look cool. (24 March 2007)

Hogg and Banister (2001) identify how consumers are aware of their desired versus their undesired self in conspicuous product consumption, and discuss how the communication of ‘good taste’ requires a thorough knowledge of what constitutes ‘bad taste’ as a navigational cue. Anybody who does not like the album (thereby questioning the ‘infallible’) is considered to have ‘bad taste’ and is subject to ridicule or threat:

You must have the musical sensibility of a cucumber not to be deeply moved by this beauty. (24 February 2009)

If you hate this album, then you must be executed. (8 August 2011)

Self-improvement

While the rite-of-passage postings are associated with identification of the album as a starting point for novice jazz listeners, the self-improvement postings typically involve statements at a more advanced stage in the process of understanding and enjoyment. Previous research identifies how religious affiliation may enhance an individual’s emotional experience, self-esteem, and psychological well-being (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990). Likewise, the drive towards self-improvement inherent in metaphysical branding is evident in the way the album is used to project an identity conveying wider knowledge of the arts:

Miles Davis’ blue period with some cubism thrown in by Bill Evans. (1 February 2011)

Diligent attempts at aesthetic self-improvement are reported in the postings, some of which lead to success, others to failure. A quasi-spiritual search for faith and enlightenment is evident:

Soon I may be able to properly enjoy Jazz. My understanding of it is growing. (24 June 2011)

For some listeners, patience and perseverance eventually lead to revelation:

But now I do get it. After its umpteenth-millionth repeated listen – I finally get *Kind of Blue*. (30 December 2010)

Some comments convey the dedication of religious asceticism:

There will be parts in it where you might feel like just giving up and walking away. Still, if you keep on trying, and you keep at it, then you'll come out feeling renewed and with a feeling of great accomplishment. (14 April 2007)

Spiritual salvation is possible for the faithful who persist:

Very personal and very deep album. If you don't get it at first, just hang on. It can actually change your life. (23 May 2005)

However, for other listeners, the quest is ultimately futile:

Nothing helps. I want to have good taste, respectable taste, but I would be lying if I said I liked it. (11 July 2010)

Ritual

The term ritual may be defined as an expressive and symbolic activity repeated over time and involving 'reenactments of sacred prototypes' (Rook, 1985, p. 254). Such behaviour is dramatically scripted and performed by individuals occupying specified ritualistic roles. For example, numerous *Kind of Blue* tribute bands faithfully perform tracks from the original recording with each musician playing the role of a founder member of the band. Since the release of the *Kind of Blue* 50th anniversary box set, it has made fresh appearances in the album charts in various countries, supported by a *Kind of Blue* 50th Anniversary Tour in 2009 featuring the only surviving band member – drummer Jimmy Cobb. In this context, the sacred past (the initial recording of the album) is recoverable through rituals that symbolically re-enact the original recording sessions and live performances in 1959. While the box set is heralded by the faithful, its release six months in advance of the anniversary of the original recording sessions is considered by some to lack ritualistic reverence:

On Sept. 30, 2008, Sony Legacy released its most lavish presentation of *Kind of Blue* in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the album. The release is slightly preemptory as the two original sessions occurred March 2 and April 22, 1959. (5 December 2008)

The urgent desire of fans to buy the anniversary box set and tickets to see this band in 2009 underlines the importance that brand communities place upon appreciation of the history of the brand, thus enabling true believers to differentiate themselves from opportunists, enhance their cultural capital, and reinforce their membership status (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). From a sociological perspective, rituals 'prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of . . . sacred objects' (Durkheim, 1915, p. 56). The *Kind of Blue* 50th Anniversary Tour ritualistically conveys the audience into a sacred time 'by evoking what Durkheim calls a nostalgia for paradise' (Belk et al., 1989, p. 12). The symbolic value of the anniversary of the release of *Kind of Blue* is underlined by postings revealing commemorative political support at the highest level:

I see a motion was passed in the House of Representatives in the USA to mark the 50th anniversary of the release of this album with a unanimous score of 409-0. (12 October 2011)

Kind of Blue symbolically rejects the quasi-scientific, modernist impulse in jazz that seeks to quantify and revere technical improvisatory ability that crams as many

notes as possible into each bar of music, opting instead for the magical attraction of ‘cool’ understatement. Online recommendation provides a form of metaphysical discourse that ‘infallibly’ guarantees to the listener qualities such as ‘coolness’. There are numerous postings that reinforce individual identity and knowledge, indicating that the music has symbolic meaning in terms of being perceived as ‘cool’. Associated with this perceived ‘coolness’, the value of listening to the album in its original format (vinyl) is stressed in a form of ritualistic celebration of the original recording. Some of these comments have been carefully and poetically crafted, while others use street language to identify with their peers:

I'm a metalhead true as day, but I don't care what anyone says . . . I feel really f****ng cool when I throw this on. Get it on vinyl or die. (7 January 2011)

Rituals function as conventions that focus on shared brand consumption experiences involving scripted interaction with other brand users (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In a ritualistic manner, other users identify the functional benefits of using conspicuous consumption of the album to create a ‘cool’ ambience while interacting with friends:

Put *Kind of Blue* in your living room, and you'll have the perfect ‘cool’ mood for a nocturne conversation with a small group of friends. (22 January 2010)

Such rituals facilitate interpersonal interaction and ‘serve to include or exclude individuals from kinship and community membership’ (Rook, 1985, p. 253).

Discussion and conclusions

Metaphysical branding is identified as an overarching concept that binds together the discrete themes in the data, and is likely to be of value in marketing a wide range of creative arts through stimulating the desire for aspirational self-improvement. The numerous metaphysical postings suggest an innate consumer need for the metaphysical. While the metaphysical discourse resulting from the *Kind of Blue* listening experience may have a marketing origin, it is eagerly shared and perpetuated by the users who incorporate extensive religious metaphor into their comments. Postings indicate that the consumers are not just passively responding to metaphysical discourse in the marketing communications of the album, but are actively sacralising Miles Davis and *Kind of Blue*, thus reverencing the metaphysical by co-creating transcendent meaning in their lives. This provides evidence of the extent to which brand stories circulating within brand communities may frequently emanate from commercial text, but also suggests that these stories are subsequently embellished by the online consumers, thus blurring the distinction between marketer and consumer (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Sacralisation of the secular enables consumers to experience the kind of extraordinary meaning previously attained primarily through religion (Belk et al., 1989). Holbrook and Zirlin (1985) discuss the continuum from hedonic to profound consumption of the arts that echoes the distinction between pleasure and ecstasy. Consistent with data gathered in the current study, their description of profound aesthetic experience contains extensive metaphysical discourse involving a feeling of spiritual transcendence that ‘transports the soul’ into a ‘state of spiritual exaltation’ (p. 35).

Belk et al. (1989) suggest that sacred aspects of consumption are less likely to be demonstrated in experimental or survey research contexts due to their interactive nature. Likewise, disclosure of overtly religious discourse is not in evidence in previous telephone interview research with classical music fans (O'Sullivan, 2010), and may be even more unlikely in face-to-face interviews with music fans of any genre due to taboos regarding public discussion of spirituality. However, the current research reveals how brand-related religious discourse appears to flourish in the anonymous confines of online discussion groups. Comparable to the anonymity of the Catholic confessional box in which the discussant confessing sins cannot be seen, thus encouraging more frank exposition, the anonymity of online discussion groups provides an ideal context in which to nurture the exchange of metaphysical discourse. While traditional word-of-mouth communications rarely use brand-specific metaphysical discourse due to fear of embarrassment, web-based forums create marketing opportunities to harness and disseminate metaphysical branding discourse. This is an important managerial implication, since data in the current study show how religious motifs have invested *Kind of Blue* with self-perpetuating, life-cycle extending meanings.

Consequently, it is likely that anonymised web-based forums involving interaction with extensive metaphysical discourse may nurture a more intense brand relationship. Findings reveal the power of such metaphysical discourse to affirm belief and trust in the brand. They identify the quasi-religious guilt of those who do not fully appreciate the album and have major doubts regarding its exalted status. The data highlight the way in which brand advocates act as metaphysical enforcers to apply motivational pressure on non-believing dissenters, thus encouraging them to repent, convert, and move along a pathway of self-improvement. The euphoria of those who eventually become believers after considerable effort is shared online with the brand community, thus disseminating motivational rewards. The findings also reveal how ritualistic behaviour reinforces and celebrates brand values.

Analysis of the online postings reveals a fresh motivational insight regarding the niche jazz consumer market. Motivations for purchasing the album include the accumulation of cultural capital and esteem through the rite-of-passage entry to jazz appreciation afforded by ownership of *Kind of Blue*. Metaphysical discourse involving absolute norms is evident in the prescribing of *Kind of Blue* as the compulsory starting point for those new to the genre. Religious imagery and metaphor appear on numerous occasions in the data set. For example, those who cannot fully appreciate the album acknowledge themselves as heretics, while adherence to the 'infallibly' guaranteed brand is normative and those who dislike the album or do not have a copy of it in their collection are often derided.

Triggered by the allure of metaphysical branding, ownership and symbolic consumption of *Kind of Blue* appear to reinforce and project a sense of individual and collective identity, thus supporting its continued commercial success and retention of iconic status more than 50 years after its release, and explaining why huge numbers of consumers with minimal interest in jazz have bought a copy of the album. There are parallels with some of the recordings of saxophonist John Coltrane (a key member of the Miles Davis band on *Kind of Blue*). For example, regarding his album *A Love Supreme* (another of the best-selling jazz recordings of all time), spiritual aspiration themes underpin the musical concept and are evident in the titles of all of the four Coltrane tracks (*Acknowledgement*, *Resolution*, *Pursuance*, and *Psalm*). Similar to *Kind of Blue*, meanings encoded in Coltrane's music may be used as a cultural

resource for consumers to shape aspirational self-identity (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). However, given the incredible sales figures of *Kind of Blue*, it is possible that the segment of consumers concerned with cultural self-identity continually purchase it generation after generation, regardless of changes in musical fashion, simply because it is the best-selling and most highly rated jazz album of all time.

Future research could examine how metaphysical branding may thrive in the marketing of goods and services requiring prolonged cognitive effort in striving for aspirational self-improvement (e.g. through pursuit of the arts or university education) or prolonged dedication and devotion (e.g. to a sports team). For example, many postings in the current study identify *Kind of Blue* as a 'cool' album with attributes likely to reinforce self-image and impress peers, while at the same time encouraging efforts to nurture proactive self-improvement. In this context, research could examine how the marketing communications of a university may use web-based metaphysical branding to convey a 'cool' image for the university, while highlighting aspirational career benefits requiring long-term academic commitment. Such research could also incorporate the intrinsically metaphysical appeal apparent in the rite-of-passage university graduation ceremony that demonstrates mystery, ritual, and the sense of reaching a desired destination after much commitment and sacrifice.

The concept of metaphysical branding could be developed by examining its application in the marketing of successful CDs, musical downloads, and live performers in a variety of musical genres, including the charismatic deities of pop and rock music. Metaphysical branding research would also be extremely valuable when considering the global marketing of soccer teams that typically engenders quasi-religious, worshipful devotion and unquestioning, lifelong brand loyalty in its fan base. From a managerial perspective, such research could consider how brand attitude may be enhanced by using various forms of marketing communications to trigger the metaphysical imagination with persuasively aspirational rhetoric supported by appropriate visual and verbal images. These images could typically use religious metaphor to depict the rewards of post-purchase consumer dedication and commitment in terms of long-term aesthetic, cultural, educational, or sporting fulfilment. Within these diverse brand contexts, future web-based forum research could analyse the ways in which marketing communications may encourage and influence online brand-specific metaphysical discourse and assess the extent to which online forum consumers may co-create and develop metaphysical themes.

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