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## The monastic product's biography, a sacralization wave

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### ABSTRACT

Between its monastic origin and its merchant destination, the monastic product is moving from clergy to laity. What happens to this movement during the purchasing act? Imbued with work on the biography of things, this contextualized question is framed by Kopytoff's theory, and extends it by focusing on the purchase, when clerical marketers meet secular consumers. We mobilize the literature about the sacralization process in consumption, enriched by the concept of *communitas*. An ethnographic methodology is deployed in the French monastic context and its various sales outlets. Findings show that the purchaser, when buying, is (re)joining communities which possess the sacred *communitas* characteristics. Incremented to previous work on gift-giving in such a purchase, they enable to show the re-sacralization process of the product. We conclude by replacing the usually linear continuum between sacred and profane statuses by a sinusoidal sacralization wave.

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## Introduction

You know, people stop at the store. The store is the first, and often the only place where people are in contact with us. They discover our products, taste them, and understand little by little that behind these banal products expresses a whole way of life turned towards the prayer and a very particular way of making them. That is why it is very important that one of our brothers is at the register, he is the link between our worlds, and he explains. It's the same on the Internet or in the shops in town, the products are hyphens between monasteries and people. For us, trade is not only about making a living, it is also about meeting the outside world, and allowing people who do not know us to come to us. (Brother N, cellarer, July 2013)

Contemplative monastic orders integrate work into their life of prayer, as ordained by the *Ora et Labora* monastic pace of life stemming from the Rule of Saint Benedict (Nursia de VIth century). Today, in France, their presence in society has become discreet, but their links with the contemporary world through the setting up of commerce is most real. To survive autonomously, monasteries produce and sell both religious and today's consumer products, becoming dynamic actors in the food and cosmetic sectors. The communitarian roots of monastic life have a repercussion on the entire gamut of their marketing actions, decided, and organized in a collective manner by the various community orders. This research has

been inspired by the mesh between the monastic suppliers, communitarian organizations of consecrated individuals removed from worldly goods, and the secular consumers living in the materialistic society. As Brother N. said, the shop is the first touch point with visitors. By placing their handmade products in the merchant sphere, monks and nuns launch an opportunity to create bonds with secular people. But, by operating in the profane competitive food and cosmetic marketplace, they engage also a process of de-sacralization of their products. What happens then? We seek to understand whether, depending on the types of sales outlets, the purchasing act has an influence on the movement of the product between the sacred and profane spheres.

This research set in the context of the French monastic ecosystem. It takes place in the heart of the quadripartite overview of marketing and consumption of spirituality and religion (Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran 2012a), and is focusing on the moment the two key agents meet, monastic marketers on one hand and secular consumers on the other. We adopt the cultural and contextualized perspective of consumption (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) by exploring a field of research fed by religion (McAlexander et al. 2014). By unveiling the economic facet of the monastic contemplative life, we are enriching recent works on management within the clergy (Jones 2016; Tanner 2017), and responding to encouragements for rigorous and methodological research in MSR (Tackney et al. 2017). We complete research on the marketization of religion, whose ties with commerce are still taboo and questionable (McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock 2011), especially when religious practice is perceived as a marketed experience (McDaniel 1986; Usunier and Stolz 2014). Religious tourism is the subject of studies mainly focused on pilgrimages to holy places (Zaidman and Lowengart 2001; Sharpley and Sundaram 2005; Haq and Jackson 2009; Krešić, Mikulić, and Miličević 2013), whereas movements of meanings have been outlined when commodities are sold as religious support objects (Zaidman 2003, 2007). Lastly, we refer to the seminal work of Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) which gives us precious keys to understand how the processes of sacralization and de-sacralization can impregnate various moments of consumption, such as the purchasing moment. While studying the moment of purchasing food and cosmetic products sold by the French Christian monasteries, we enrich these works, and, giving due consideration to contexts, we transpose Johns' contextual theory (2006) from organizational behavior to consumption. This article thus belongs to Consumer Culture Theory research (Arnould and Thompson 2005), which sees micro, meso, and macro-contexts (Everett, Pieters, and Titus 1994) as experience amplifiers (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Paquier and Morin-Delerm 2016).

To frame the question on the movement of monastic products between sacred and secular spheres, we are imbued with work on the process of transforming objects throughout their biography. In Kopytoff's filiation (1986), we ask the question of the successive statuses of the object, and of the transition points in its biography: "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What are the recognized ages or periods in the thing's life?" (Kopytoff 1986, 66). We frame the research with Kopytoff's theory about the singularization/commoditization process and its parallelism with the sacralization/de-sacralization process, and extend it by studying the purchasing moment, a transition point little explored from this angle. To address this gap, we investigate the precise moment, when the monastic consumer good, originally sacred, then commoditized by its clerical makers when offering it for sale, is purchased by secular people. This work is focused on the product within its spatio-temporal context composed by the shop at the moment of the purchasing act, and

the objective of the present article is to understand what happens to the monastic product during its passage through the shop when it is purchased.

We supplement Kopytoff's theoretical framework with the concept of *communitas* (Turner 1990), one of the 12 properties of a sacred phenomenon (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). The prism of *communitas* is triply relevant here: firstly, it resounds in echoes with the communitarian roots of the monastic world (Nursia de VIth century); secondly, it corresponds to the social interactions in retailing and purchasing experience (Baker 1986; Moisió and Arnould 2005; Lemoine 2008); thirdly, it is linked to previous work which shows the impregnation of gift-giving rituals in purchasing monastic products (Paquier 2015). Indeed, the analysis of the purchasing experience of monastic products through the prism of *communitas*, incremented to these results on gift-giving, could reinforce the thesis of the re-sacralization of the monastic product by the purchaser.

Thanks to a progressive and five years long ethnographic immersion in the monastic ecosystem, and comprehensive interviews with 86 secular purchasers in various types of shops, data show that the monastic products purchaser, when buying, is (re)joining five types of communities, which possess *communitas* characteristics (Turner 1990). These findings enable to affirm that the purchasing moment is a key transition point in the product's biography, when *communitas* plus gift-giving ritual, two main sacred characteristics, re-sacralize the product (Sherry 1983; Kopytoff 1986; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Turner 1990). Finally, we offer the image of the "sacralization wave," which illustrates the sinusoidal oscillations in the biography of the monastic product, successively de- and re-sacralized. From a theoretical point of view, our sacralization wave is a continuation of research about the biography of things (Kopytoff 1986) through their alternating and intertwined sacred and profane statuses (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). This research shows the products' biography, which follows a sine wave pattern through time oscillating between singularization and commodification and reveals that the key transition points in the products' biography result from interactions between various actors and contexts that provoke status changes. In the highly specific context of the French monastic ecosystem, these status changes are closely related to sacralization and de-sacralization, and are sometimes paradoxical, with sacred persons de-sacralizing the product and profane persons re-sacralizing it.

The article is divided into five parts. The first frames the questioning by literature about sacralization processes in consumption, enriched by the concept of *communitas*. The second part presents the monastic context as a communitarian business ecosystem. The third part is dedicated to our ethnographic methodology deployed in monasteries and various distribution channels. In the fourth part findings show that the monastic product, when sold, is de-sacralized, and, when bought, is re-sacralized. Finally, we discuss and conceptualize these findings, opening a path to contributions and future research.

## **Sacralization and *communitas* in consumer research**

To frame our reflection, in a first subsection, we firstly highlight the process of sacralization in consumption through Kopytoff's lenses, and we focus on the purchasing moment. Secondly, we raise the concept of *communitas* as a trigger of sacred property.

### ***The process of sacralization in consumption moments***

The sacred world has long been seen as untouchable, timeless, and removed from ordinary secular matters (Durkheim 1912; Fallding 1967). Porosity between sacred and profane worlds has progressively imposed itself (Wunenberger 2010), revealing that sacred elements can be de-sacralized if losing certain of their separate characters, and that profane elements can become sacred through hierophania (Eliade 1987; Willaime 1995; Bolle de Bal 2011). This dual movement is characteristic of de-sacralization of religious matters and of sacralization of the profane world (Acquaviva 1979; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). In a market society, relationships between sacred and profane can be in opposition, in absorption, or ambiguous (Haddorff 2000). We are imbued with this third non-dichotomous vision, when “neither is the market totally profane, nor religion is totally sacred” (Jafari and Süerdem 2012, 65), and which analyses consumption as a seat of spiritual experiences (Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran 2012a; Poulain, Badot, and Camus 2013), even sacred ones (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Rinallo et al. 2012b). We firstly use Kopytoff’s lenses (1986) to analyze the porous processes of sacralization and de-sacralization in consumption, and continue by focusing on the purchasing moment.

### ***Sacralization and de-sacralization in consumption through Kopytoff’s lenses***

Navigating simultaneously in technical, social or economic biographies, the object evolves on a continuum between singularity and commodity, both owning respectively sacred and profane characteristics (Kopytoff 1986). This back-and-forth movement between the two poles calls for clarification of their respective characteristics: in consumer research, the sacred is defined as extraordinary, unique, and powerful, whereas the profane is ordinary, mundane, and without ritual and myth (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). The non-dichotomous approach of the Kopytoff’s continuum reveals the two directions of the object’s movement, from commodity to singularity, and from singularity to commodity (Jafari and Süerdem 2012).

When “commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere” (Kopytoff 1986, 68), sacred properties can be attained through rarity, pilgrimage, quintessence, gift-giving, collecting, or *communitas* (Kopytoff 1986; Belk 2012). Then, sacredness in possession and consumption is perpetuated thanks to the maintaining of the separation of sacred from profane, and sustaining of rituals (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Belk 2012; Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2014). In the other direction, the movement toward de-sacralization happens when the object loses part of its mystery (Nisbet 1966) “through habituation, forgetting, or encroachment to the profane” (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, 21). This encroachment to the profane is particularly intense when the object is decontextualized, contaminated by tangibilization, and commoditized by entering the merchant sphere (Shoval 2000; Jafari and Süerdem 2012). Commoditization process is achieved when the object “can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart” and “is the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular” (Kopytoff 1986, 68). The appearance of a price tag accentuates the passage from sacred object to profane commodity: by becoming interchangeable and comparable, it loses its incommensurable singularization (Kopytoff 1986; Karpik 2007). But according to the source from which money is obtained, and according to its destination, “money has a profane life as well as a

sacred life” and “can serve God or Evil” (Belk and Wallendorf 1990, 61). Thus, it is less the use of money than the loss of singularity, which de-sacralizes the commoditized object.

Our questioning about the movement of the monastic product between sacred and profane spheres is inscribed in Kopytoff’s thought, as “sacralization can be achieved by singularity” (74). We therefore adopt the idea of an unsealed continuum between the sacred and the profane spheres, and understand that the sacred expresses itself in the world of consumption, even though the latter bears the most profane characteristics (Hirschman 1988). These two initially over-lapped spheres maintain porous, ambiguous, even blurred relationships studied mostly through the prism of the sacralization process in various moments and contexts in consumption.

### ***Sacralization during the purchasing moment***

The purchasing moment is a key transition point in the product’s biography (Kopytoff 1986). It has been shown that the sacred is infusing into shopping behaviors, when shopping includes ritual practices mixing sacrifice and gift-giving (Miller 1998). When the shopping experience’s place is separated from every day’s life, rituals and entering the elite tribe sacralize the moment and the place (Cardoso, Pinot, and Badot 2013). By studying the sacralization of initially profane commodities sold to the visitors-pilgrims during the “sacred time” of their “sacred journey” to the “sacred place” *Heritage Village*, O’Guinn and Belk (1989) confirm the infusion of the sacred into commercial settings. Finally, in a religious practice context, the purchase of piety objects and tourist services in holy places has been studied: for religious objects which contain sacred power in the eyes of traditional and New Age subcultures (Zaidman 2003), as well as for religious goods sold in pilgrimage places (Zaidman and Lowengart 2001) or for franchised religious tourism infrastructures (Shoval 2000), it has been shown that, despite their commodification, these products and services can maintain part of their sacredness thanks to their religious practice finality. Infusion of sacred features into the shopping experience (Miller 1998), infiltration of franchised commodification into religious services (Shoval 2000): the moment of purchase can be a seat of transition between the porous spheres of the sacred and the profane (Kopytoff 1986; Wunenberger 2010).

By analyzing the purchase of originally sacred products still unexplored, we extend these researches on the process of sacralization of objects in the intersection of religion and consumption. The specificity of our study lies also in the fact that we are not interested in objects or services that necessarily support prayer, but in food and cosmetic products sold as every day secular commodities. Given these characteristics, we try to understand the movement of the originally sacred monastic product once it has entered marketplaces.

### ***Communitas during the purchasing moment***

As an echo of the community life of the monks and nuns offering these products, we are interested in the achievement by purchasers of a possible state of *communitas*, which we know is characteristic of a sacred phenomenon. We specify the concept as an acute form of liminal community, then present the communitarian dimensions in consumption, and finally show that the purchasing moment has not yet been studied through the prism of *communitas*.

### ***Communitas, an acute form of liminal community***

We raise the concept of *communitas* here, property of a sacred phenomenon (Wunenberger 2010), and a type of social anti-structure within which individuals live a liminal experience of camaraderie and equality qualified as utopic (Turner 1990). Between separation and integration, liminality is the second step of each rite of passage (van Gennep 1909). Liminality is thus characterized by transition, equality, anonymity, lack of status, generosity, silence, social openness, and, especially, by *communitas* and sacred: “*Communitas* is introduced through the interstices of the social structure, in liminality ... It is held almost everywhere as sacred or holy” (Turner 1990, 125). *Communitas* is the state of communion experienced by individuals who live at the same time a ritual situation, “a moment in time and out of time” (Turner 1990, 97), on the threshold of a social structure they will join. This companionship is characterized by an unstructured, undifferentiated community in a state of transient deprivation and humility which, in many respects, recalls the foundations of the contemplative and begging monastic life (Chadwick 1985; Berlioz 1994). *Communitas*, a liminal state, is thus an acute form of community.

The community, unlike society, is the seat of affective and spatial proximity, where the collegial prevails more on the individual, and where relationships are authentic and not calculated (Tönnies 1922). Within the community, individuals develop social relationships, they share common ground and distinguish themselves from individuals who are outside the community (Cohen 1985). These common criteria can be tangible (location or activities) or intangible (ideas or motivations), and communities can be physical or virtual (Rheingold 1993). Four components of the sense of community have been established by Peterson et al. (2008, 62): membership, or “a feeling of belonging”; shared emotional connection, or “a feeling of attachment or bonding rooted in members’ shared history, place or experience”; reinforcement, or “a perception that members’ needs will be met by the community” like benefits received from other members of the community or from the community itself; influence, or “a sense that one matters, or can make a difference, in a community and that the community matters to its members.” On the basis of these works, the state of *communitas* is an acute form of spontaneous, transitory, egalitarian and utopian community, with respect to which membership, shared emotional connection, reinforcement and influence are engaged. This clarification of the *communitas* concept in relation to that of community leads us to analyze the communitarian dimensions in consumption.

### ***The communitarian dimensions in consumption***

In marketing, consumer communities concern a firm, an activity or a brand (Breitsohl, Kunz, and Dowell 2015). Brand communities are consumer groupings which develop practices and ties around a brand, a product or a service (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Quinton 2013). They bring social as well as utilitarian benefits (Breitsohl, Kunz, and Dowell 2015), all the more so when they are articulated around socially responsible programs (DeVincenzo and Scammon 2015). Internet and social media favor the development of virtual communities pivoting around brands, firms, practices or knowledge (Homburg, Ehm, and Artz 2015; Wiertz and de Ruyter 2015), and facilitate co-innovation (Le Nagard and Reniou 2013). As social phenomena echo chamber, marketing becomes tribal, carried by post-modern consumers seeking common ephemeral emotions, ceremonies, idols, rituals, icons, and cult objects (Maffesoli 1988; Cova and Cova 2001; Bauman



2004; Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). Online communities can henceforth be perceived as tribes, caught in a viral dynamic (Kozinets 1999).

In parallel, the concept of *communitas* has been mobilized for studying extraordinary consumption experiences, defined as hedonic activities that “provide temporary and local exit from the modern market” (Tumbat and Belk 2010, 46). Guided river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002) ... these are long lasting experiences that exacerbate romantic utopic aspects of the communal life (Tumbat and Belk 2010). Extraordinary when it stands in an abbey shop just after the visit, more ordinary when it happens on the Internet or in town, the purchase of cosmetic or food monastic products can be analyzed by the yardstick of the concept of *communitas*. To this end, we mobilize the literature on social interactions during the purchasing experience.

### ***The purchasing experience and its social interactions***

The purchasing moment is the very heart of the consumer experience gained within the sales outlets, be they physical or virtual (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2002; Roederer 2012), and we know that each channel possesses its own assets, offering a spectrum of complementary experiences (Vanheems 2012). During the purchasing moment, the experience felt by the purchaser is influenced by the three components of store atmosphere, which are ambience, design and social factors, such as interactions with other shoppers and interfacing personnel (Baker 1986; Lemoine 2008). We focus here on the communities formed by the shopping companions and by the interfacing personnel, firstly in physical, and secondly in virtual stores.

In physical stores, the presence or absence of shopping companions, their number, and their identity have an influence on the experience felt by shoppers (Debenedetti 2003). In the case of a strong congruency between the shoppers and the experience felt, the presence of family members limits the pleasurable aspect of shopping (Borges, Chebat, and Babin 2010). It also has been demonstrated that shopping companions can partially replace store assistants, thanks to their comments and advice (Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger 2011). The interfacing personnel is identified as one of the key players of the re-enchantment of distribution, the only one capable of a real dialog centered on shoppers' practices, and to procure “positive interaction” and “warm hospitality” (Bouchet 2004, 68). The sales staff is an image vehicle, enabling the consumer to identify with the retail store, brands, or products (Press and Arnould 2011), and is the sense bearer for the clients (Joy and Li 2012). A true player of the representation given within an experiential framework, which is the sales outlet, the personnel lends an attentive ear to the consumer-agents, providing them a certain number of cultural resources (Moisio and Arnould 2005). Finally, the interaction with the store assistants is one of the activities of shopping (Jain and Bagdare 2009), and the real or virtual incarnation of this staff represents the greatest difference between physical and virtual channels.

In virtual channels, interfacing personnel are replaced by technological tools which allow for social interaction either with back office personnel or with other web surfers: FAQ, on-line assistants, virtual agents, avatars, animated conversational agents, chat rooms, and links that connect to social media (Lemoine 2012; Ben Mimoun, Poncin, and Garnier 2016). Among them, the virtual conversational agents are those who strongly correspond

to the interfacing personnel in physical stores, because they are guiding the web surfer and improving its productivity (Charfi and Volle 2011; Ben Mimoun, Poncin, and Garnier 2017).

In synthesis, works on the purchasing experience highlight the creation of punctual social interactions with shopping companions and interfacing personnel, but don't show if and how other communities are eventually joined. Our work aims to complete these approaches by asking the question of entry into (a) community (ies) by monastic products purchasers.

We have seen that the moment of purchase can be studied as a key transition point in the product's biography, which looks as a continuum between singularization - sacralization/ commoditization - de-sacralization poles (Kopytoff 1986). We also noticed that the moment of the purchase by laypersons of consumer products made by clerical persons has never been investigated, in particular from the point of view of the sacralization/de-sacralization process (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Finally, sacred property of *communitas* has never been mobilized for the analysis of ordinary consumption experiences such as the purchase of food and cosmetic products. In the present research, we seek to understand what happens to the monastic product during its passage from the workshop to, and through, the shop, when moving from the religious hands of the monk to the secular hands of the purchaser. This objective is divided in two research questions: (1) When offered for sale in the shops, is the monastic product moving from sacred to profane sphere? (2) In his buying experience, is the purchaser joining communities, and do these (re)joined communities possess the sacred characteristic of *communitas*? Before deploying the empirical step, let us describe the specificities of the French monastic context.

## **The French monastic context**

To present the current context of this merchant meeting between the clergy and the laity, we propose first our contemporary managerial reading of The Rule of Saint Benedict (Nursia de VIth century). We then present the communitarian and multichannel distribution implemented by the French monasteries.

### ***A managerial reading of the communitarian Rule of Saint Benedict***

From the VIth century onwards, the first Benedictine communities, then the Cistercian, Trappist and other contemplative orders, were constructed, following the precepts of the Rule of Saint Benedict de Nursia (Kieser 1987; Le Goff 1994). Their main concern was to differentiate their way of life from the eremitism: through coenobitism, they preferred to encourage the communitarian life more than a solitary life in the desert (Berlioz 1994). Through the process of spiritual and material stripping, leveling, suppression of social and clothing distinctions, reduction of all to the same status, humility, and disinterest, the Rule of Saint Benedict concretizes the state of permanent transition of the Christian religion, for whom the Christian is an eternal pilgrim (Hervieu-Léger 1999). In this sense, it institutionalizes, by normalizing it, a certain state of *communitas* (Turner 1990).

Today, the sales of products or services represent a vital revenue for the French monastic communities, which are under a dual pressure: firstly, the donations and vocations are waning, secondly, the expenditures are waxing with the aging of the populations and buildings, and with the investments required for the implementation of craft workshop manufacturing conformity. To survive, the monasteries have to reach a delicate balance between the

**Box 1.** The Rule of Saint Benedict: our managerial and marketing reading.

The Rule of Saint Benedict, written in the VIth century, nourishes even today contemplative monastic organizations, and is remarkable for its modernity. It governs the entirety of situations experienced within a monastery, framing, among other aspects, the governance of the community as well as the place work takes in monastic life. A truly quality guide, The Rule of Saint Benedict advocates participative governance seeking “recourse to The Council of the Brothers” (Ch.3) and of the “elders” (Ch.21). The monastery must “be equipped in such a manner that one can find everything necessary: water, a mill, a garden” (Ch.66) and must guarantee the sustainable preservation of the surrounding resources. This preoccupation with sustainable development is a strong feature of today’s monasteries and abbeys. Work enables monks to live their human condition and nourishes their prayers, it is the antidote to “idleness, enemy of the soul” (Ch.48), and assures the community’s revenues. A quintessential pillar of monastic life, work is subordinated to the exigencies of prayer, which underlies the motto “Ora et Labora.” The implications on the production rate are immediate, the “monastery craftsmen will undertake their work in total humility” (Ch. 57) and “will be truly monks when they labor with their hands” (Ch.48). As a result, the products are traditionally crafted and distributed through the channels sharing the requirements of The Rule: “those who will be involved in the transaction will take utmost care to permit no fraud whatsoever” (Ch. 57). As regards the communication, the “observing of silence” (Ch.6) manifests itself by the absence of advertising discourse. It is, finally, in choosing to deploy an above-the-market price strategy that monasteries today, facing the global economic reality, contradict to some extent The Rule, which declares that “in pricing, that the evil of greed must not insinuate itself either, but that one should always sell slightly cheaper than merchants worldwide” (Ch.57).

professionalism indispensable to their manufacturing and commercialization procedures, and the absolute priority accorded to the *Ora et Labora* monastic pace of communitarian life dictated by The Rule of Saint Benedict (Nursia de VIth century). The managerial and marketing reading of this multi-secular communitarian rule of life enlightens us on the current monastic marketing practices (Box 1).

### ***A communitarian and multichannel distribution***

The communitarian spirit nourishes not only the interior spiritual life of cloisters, but also the monasteries’ acts of supplying, craft manufacturing, and selling. To ensure a better communication and distribution of their products, French monasteries chose to group together to create *Monastic*, a collective brand, and build closely meshed distribution channels. The abbeys are the central piece in this mesh: in their stores they offer an assortment composed of their own products and those of other abbeys. This mutual commitment is the same when they decide to create their own merchant websites or become members of their collective online sales outlet, *Les Boutiques de Théophile*. Limited in production capacity by the fact that their organization is turned toward prayer as a priority, abbeys have low quantities to supply secular dealers. A selective and concerted distribution is thus implemented. Indeed, monastic products use a multichannel network set-up and controlled by the monastic suppliers, and composed of religious or secular outlets, physical or virtual, in town, or located in abbeys (Paquier 2015). These collective strategies enable the monastic ecosystem to act as a shock-absorber to environmental threats.

Our research is situated in this monastic business ecosystem, nourished by a communitarian sense inherited from the multi-secular and cenobitic precepts of The Rule of Saint Benedict, adapted to the present consumer world, and encapsulated in French secularized society.

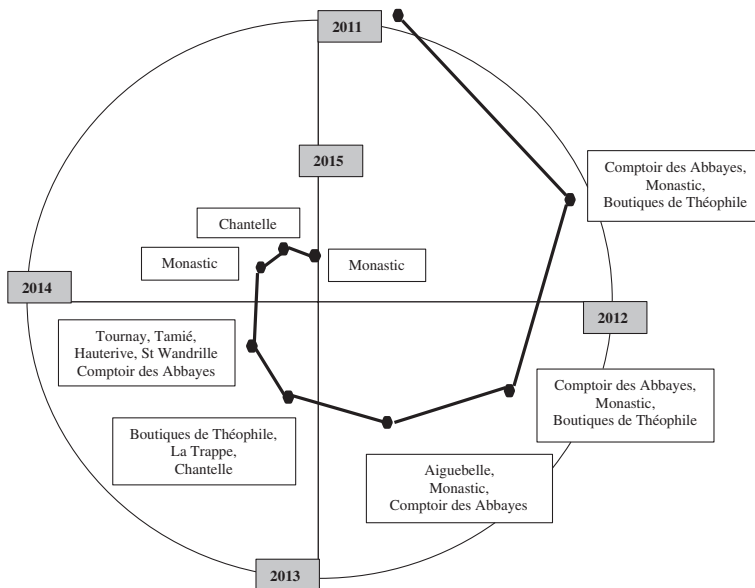
## Methodology

### *A progressive immersion for an ethnographic design*

Due to its cloistered nature, the monastic world can be investigated only from the interior. To understand the state of mind and the practices of the cellarers, we firstly operated a progressive immersion from the margin to the heart in the monastic ecosystem between 2011 and 2016 (Figure 1). Simultaneously, to understand the content of the experience felt by the secular buyers of monastic products, we adopted an ethnographic method in the various types of shops. Ethnography is particularly adapted to research on distribution and purchasing experience (Badot et al. 2009; Cayla and Arnould 2013), by allowing a deep understanding of contextualized purchasing experiences (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Sherry 2008; Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Responding to Johns' call, "the elements of omnibus context are addressed in adequate detail" (Johns 2006, p.403): cellarers and purchasers are studied (who?) in monastic workshops and various types of sales outlets (where?), during immersion periods (when?), to understand how the monastic product oscillates between the profane and sacred sphere during its biography (why?).

### *Data-gathering*

We spent immersive weeks in various abbeys.<sup>1</sup> These periods were propitious to personally feel the monastic rhythm and silence, to observe the production, commercial, and accounting concerns of the monks and nuns in the cloistered manufacturing workshops and in the shops, to participate to some tasks (displaying the products in the Tamié store, finalizing an accounting table at Chantelle, coating fruit jellies with sugar in Tournay), and to have many verbal and non-verbal exchanges with the cellarers who welcomed us. As a guest, then as



**Figure 1.** The progressive five years long immersion in the monastic ecosystem. Source: adapted from Rinallo (2011).

a speaker, we also participated twice a year to training seminars organized by the *Monastic* association. Thanks to these immersive periods, we collected an abundance of understanding, field notes and verbatim that contribute much to the analysis of products biography.

Simultaneously, to understand the purchasing experiences, we interviewed purchasers in the three types of sales outlets most used by monasteries. In physical religious stores located within monasteries, 41 respondents were questioned live *in situ* after their shopping tour (9 in Chantelle, 5 in Aiguebelle, 17 in La Trappe de Soligny, and 10 in Tamié). In a physical secular outlet, 30 purchasers were questioned at the *Comptoir des Abbayes* (Paris), after their shop browsing and purchasing. And for the religious virtual channel, 15 preselected respondents were interviewed either face-to-face or by phone after a browsing and purchasing session on the marketplace *Les Boutiques de Théophile*. We questioned 86 purchasers in total, going as far as semantic saturation in each type of sales point. Most of the interviewees belonged to the Christian culture, and were either practicing or non-practicing Catholics. Very few of them were atheist, and no one from another religion (Appendix 1). The interview guides enabled the highlighting of functional and hedonistic components of the experience felt at the time of purchasing, taking into account the specificities of the shopping according to the sales outlet, whether physical or virtual (Appendix 2). The individual semi-guided interviews, for an average time of 15 min each, characterized by empathy, conducted live or by phone, satisfied the fundamental features: we instigated them, they were conducted clearly for research purposes, were based on a pretested interview guide, and were transcribed to produce a written report, serving as a support to the data processing and analysis (Bardin 1980).

### **Data processing and analysis**

Data obtained from interviews were the subject of two complementary data handling phases. A first phase of an automatic textual analysis (Alceste<sup>®</sup>) enabled discriminant discourse categories to emerge from the corpus.<sup>2</sup> Then, a second phase of deep and iterative manual coding (N'Vivo<sup>®</sup>) allowed the emergence of faint signals (Strauss and Corbin 2014; Dumez 2016). The first order coding is composed of these inductive discourse categories and faint signals (Appendix 3). Then, to focus the analysis on the communitarian dimensions of the purchasing act, we extracted all social and interactivity evocations, functional or hedonistic, materialistic or rhetorical (Roederer 2012). Thanks to this extraction, we identified five types of communities, which are the structure of the second order coding (Appendix 4). In synthesis, we firstly describe the monks' and purchasers' points of view in their context (emic approach) and, secondly, we interpret the significance with an external and theoretical perspective (etic approach) (Garsten 2011). Thus, from methodologically collected, then analyzed, data, we build a puzzle of representations and tell a coherent story (Schouten 2013). This process avoids the risk of circularity and over-interpretation (Dumez 2016).

### **Findings**

The first findings' stage characterizes the first phase in the monastic product's biography. The second stage identifies the five types of communities (re)joined by the purchasers. The third one allows to show the *communitas* state of the purchasers.

## **The beginning of the monastic product's biography**

In filiation with Kopitoff's theory (1986), the interpretation of the monastic product movements during the beginning of its biography from its production to its selling is divided in two chronological phases.

First, the production phase: When handmade by the consecrated persons, monks or nuns, within the sacred monastery place, with tools of work seen "as sacred vases of the altar" (RSB, 31, 10)<sup>3</sup>, during the ritual and silent *labora* time which is part of prayer, monastic products are incorporating the sacredness of the whole monastery. Indeed, during our visits to several monastic workshops, we understood how the ambiance was entirely oriented toward personal prayer, community in silence with the other workers (monks, nuns, or lay persons), and loving thoughts toward the future users of the products: the handmade products are a monastic extended-self engaged toward secular purchasers (Belk 1988). The production moment is a piece of the monastic communitarian life, and a way for monks and nuns to incorporate prayer and love in the product intended for the clients:

This work requires constancy, physical work, and I put my whole heart into it; I feel at peace when I think of the people who will taste my fruit jellies (Brother B. La Trappe);

Work, we don't care about this! The goal is to be in union with God and others! (Sister M. Bec Hellouin);

When I make the packets, I think about these people, how they will be happy to receive my packet; I make it with love (Sister B. Chantelle);

The noise of the machine is so regular that it does not bother me when I pray (Sister S. Campénéac).

Second, the offering for sale phase: After the production, monks and nuns are achieving a double wish: to share their extended-self products with laity (Belk 1988, 2010), and to earn money to survive. When put in the merchant sphere by the monks and nuns, the product is leaving its sacred status: commercial considerations, price setting, negotiations with resellers, choices of mixed assortments with profane craft or fair-trade products, facing and shelving in the abbey shops, accounting constraints, all of these profane features are infiltrating (Shoval 2000) or infusing (Miller 1998) the initial sacred characteristics. The product is thus contaminated by tangibilization (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) and is reaching a commoditized status which is assimilated to a de-sacralization process (Kopytoff 1986). These results are contrasting with previous findings about religious goods and services, which do not lose their sacredness thanks to their religious practice finality, because they are devoted to piety or pilgrimage (Shoval 2000; Zaidman and Lowengart 2001; Zaidman 2003). Two considerations allow us to defend this de-sacralization process. The first consideration is that monastic products are intended for food, well-being, or cosmetic uses, and not for religious use. Consequently, they enter the household universe, cohabit with all other objects for common uses, and lose their incommensurable singularity (Karpik 2007):

I chose to display our monastic olive oil just behind this organic one which is a little more expensive. It will influence the clients, they will prefer to buy ours which is cheaper! (Brother M.H. Aiguebelle)

The second consideration is that the selling moment is seen by monks and nuns as a less monastic moment than the production one, because they are obliged to adopt a posture that is far from the un-materialistic and silent monastic priorities:

I did not become a sister to do marketing! But I am obligated to do it, if not we don't sell anything! (Sister L. Verdun)

However, depending on the shop, the contamination by commoditization is more or less counter-balanced by the maintaining of sacred characteristics. Indeed, we can ask if, in the abbey shops, the meaning carried by the monastic buildings and by the monk or the nun standing at the cashier is attenuating the de-sacralization effect (McCracken 1986, 1988). This meaning transfer is reinforced when people have visited the monastic place just before shopping in the abbey store:

You would think we were in the chapel (Chantelle, resp. 28);

We feel here the monastic life atmosphere, just like during our visit, there is coherence with the life within the monastery (Tamié, resp. 38).

Inversely, on the Internet or in the center of Paris, the external contexts are carrying profane meanings which amplify the commoditization process:

The website is too commercial, it is like a supermarket. I don't find the same ambiance on the website as in the abbey boutique (Les Boutiques de Théophile, resp. 8);

I would compare this store to an organic shop, or even a market, with artisanal products (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp.25).

Nevertheless, whatever the type of shop, the product's de-sacralization decreases if shoppers – especially Christian believers – perceive the commodification as an invitation to sharing by monks and nuns:

I will savor them little by little, it may be a kind of asceticism shared with us by the monks, an invitation into their life (Aiguebelle, resp.5, practicing Catholic);

When I go back home with my purchased sweets, I still feel like I'm with the monks, from my modest place I share their life choices (La Trappe, resp 23, practicing Catholic);

By purchasing on this monastic website, I give something but also receive something, it is as if I was picking a flower and offering it (Boutiques de Théophile, resp. 15, practicing Catholic);

The fact that they are made by sisters is a plus. It's spiritual food in addition to actual food (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp.7, non-practicing Catholic).

When commoditized, the product is changing hands: it is leaving the monastic offer side and is entering the personal purchaser side. Next section will highlight what happens during the moment of purchase from a communitarian point of view.

### ***The five types of communities (re)joined during the purchasing experience***

Results show that monastic products purchasing allows to (re)join or reinforce five types of communities. If two communities were still revealed by the literature (shopping companion and interfacing personnel communities), three others have emerged from the first coded data: the monastic community, the purchaser's own community, and the purchaser aid's community.

**The store-companion community**

The first type is the store-companion community, with whom the purchasers exchange impressions and share opinions. This community may be composed of close circles (family and friends) or other shoppers. It can also be either long-lasting or ephemeral, like a tribe (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007), a base of strong or weak links (Debenedetti 2003) (verbatim in Table 1 – line 1).

We can observe that within the store-companion community, the common ground between individuals is tied to their presence at the same moment in the sales outlet. They share intangible criteria like their impressions and emotions, and tangible criteria like their shopping activity and choice of products (Cohen 1985). This community is physical (Rheingold 1993), and activates two of the four components of community sense: the shared emotional connection, and the influence (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008). Let us note that this store-companion community is only evoked in physical stores, be they religious or secular.

**The interfacing personnel community**

In the physical stores, be they religious or secular, people mention the interfacing personnel with positive and kind words. They appreciate being informed on the products, but also being welcomed as friends (verbatim in Table 1 – line 2).

As Brother N. said in the introduction, products, but also interfacing personnel, incarnate the touch point between the two worlds. Fleeting exchanges with monks and nuns in abbey shops, or with the lay cashier in town, allow people to brush with the monastic communities, with intangible shared emotional connection and influence (Cohen 1985;

**Table 1.** The five communities (re)joined by the purchasers: significant verbatim.

Community (re)joined	Significant verbatim
1. The store-companion community	<p>"We had exchanges between ourselves on our products, which was the right choice, are they really produced by the monks, what are the ingredients?" (Aiguebelle, resp. 2)</p> <p>"The atmosphere was nice, pretty cool, it smells good, there's music, it's quiet, more relaxed, as much for the people who come here as those who welcome us" (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 9)</p>
2. The interfacing personnel community	<p>"It is more than a store, much more, the personnel are very nice, available, the sister, she takes the time, I like to talk with her" (Chantelle, resp.28)</p> <p>"The ambiance is agreeable, different from a typical store, you are made very welcome, it is more convivial, calm, they listen, with real relationships" (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 16)</p>
3. The purchaser's own community	<p>"It's a gift purchase, I'm going to make somebody happy, the impact of my purchase is positive, thanks to the present I'm going to give to the person I'm thinking of" (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 13)</p> <p>"I bought my son soap. Coming from the abbey adds value to the gift" (Les Boutiques de Théophile, resp. 13)</p>
4. The monastic community	<p>"A rather special purchase, we know we provide our neighbors a livelihood, it's the community helping, we're in the same neighborhood" (Chantelle, resp. 27)</p> <p>"The monk at the checkout, he's at home, and he welcomes me; he always has a kind word, a look, a smile" (La Trappe, resp. 19)</p>
5. The purchaser-aids community	<p>"Purchasing products, it's also helping, but in acknowledging the work done" (Chantelle, resp. 25)</p> <p>"The product creates a tangible, symbolic link: purchasing a product, it's a gift, in buying on this website, I receive something, but I'm also giving something, it's like if I pick a flower and I give it as a present" (Les Boutiques de Théophile, resp. 15)</p>



Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008). A utopic vision of commerce is expressed, as much more pleasant, quiet, and welcoming than in ordinary shops.

### ***The purchaser's own community***

The third type is the purchaser's own community, through the purchasing of monastic products as gifts (Paquier 2015). In buying for themselves, but also for gifts (Ward and Tran 2007), purchasers strengthen their personal ties by sharing and conveying the values attached to the products (Mauss 1925) (verbatim in Table 1 – line 3).

In their personal communities the purchasers share tangible criteria like the product offered, and intangible criteria like the values it conveys (Cohen 1985). These communities are physical and long-lasting (Rheingold 1993), and activate the four components which are membership, shared emotional connection, reinforcement, and influence (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008).

### ***The monastic community***

The fourth type is the monastic community which produces and sells the products and which, without betraying its cloister, leaves a door ajar for the intermediary of the commercial act. By welcoming secular persons in their life through their commercial activities, monks and nuns are “sharing in” with them part of their community (Belk 2010). The purchaser rubs shoulders thus with the monastic community, and “buys a small patch of paradise” (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 20), and one can say that it strengthens the sense of belonging to the Christian community for believers. This meeting is physical and real when the purchase takes place in abbey stores run by monks or nuns, and virtual when it is made on the net or in town (verbatim in Table 1 – line 4).

When the purchaser rubs shoulders with the monastic community, there is a sharing of a fleeting moment, of words, and a mixed sentiment is felt, with pleasure, desire to help, and spirituality. This intangible sharing (Cohen 1985) with physical communities, near or remote, depending on the type of outlet, activates shared emotional connection and influence (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008).

### ***The purchaser-aid community***

The fifth type is the purchaser-aid community, embodied by the associations of monastery friends, and client files in physical or virtual stores. This purchaser-aid community is characterized by the pregnancy of the gift in the purchasing gesture: in buying, individuals bring financial aid to the monastic world and receive a reciprocity both tangible (the product) and intangible (solidarity, pleasure of helping and giving a present, love from the monks) (Mauss 1925; Cohen 1985; Paquier 2015). Although they don't know their fellow-members, they consciously share a common behavior with them: a mix of buying, financial supporting, and a circular exchange of gifts (verbatim in Table 1 – line 5).

The membership is activated by being listed in the client files and by receiving newsletters regularly, and is reinforced by continued support and monetary gift (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008).

In synthesis, irrespective of the type of point of sale, the moment of the purchasing act allows the purchaser to (re)join different communities characterized by the components revealed in the literature (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan 2008). Yet, this communitarian dimension of purchase, does it approach the state of *communitas*?

### ***Purchasing monastic products, a state of *communitas*?***

To answer this question, we rely on the definition of the state of *communitas* like an acute form of spontaneous, transitory, egalitarian and utopian community, with respect to which membership, shared emotional connection, reinforcement, and influence are engaged. Table 2 helps us to clarify the presence or not of the characteristics of *communitas* for each community.

We see that the utopian vision is transversal to the five communities (re)joined. Irrespective of the point of sale frequented, purchasers like to express their positive and idealistic vision of the monastic world, like a utopic halo. They also feel egalitarian relationships with the unknown store companions, the interfacing personnel, and the monks or nuns. The transitory characteristic concerns three communities, in which spontaneity of the relationship is variable, especially with the interfacing personnel in its professional context. Finally, findings show that the purchasers of monastic products are reaching a *communitas* state through several combinations of communities (re)joined. Verbatim pinpoint the evasion felt by purchasers reaching their ephemeral communities, when they see the shop like a spiritual bubble in the town:

In the city, it is a bit of a bubble in everyday life, we do not come to recollect, but it is a special moment, out of the city and out of time (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 1);

I like the spiritual atmosphere, we have a rest, we feel spirituality, a bit like in an abbey (Comptoir des Abbayes, resp. 11).

Even on the Internet, the virtual outlet plays the liaising role between the purchaser and the monastic world, and seems to be the antechamber of the monasteries:

I feel quite close, because I have the impression of finding the same atmosphere as when I visit a monastery (Les Boutiques de Théophile, resp. 13).

In abbey shops, buyers get closer to cloistered life, they are on the threshold of the monastic world, physically and mentally:

No noise, a certain religiosity, sober and classic colors, wooden displays stalls, it is coherent with the rest of the abbey which is just behind the store (Aiguebelle, resp. 1);

It is a relaxing space, white, pleasant, calm, silent, like in the chapel of the monastery (Chantelle, resp. 32).

This *communitas* state reached by the purchasers is impregnated by ritual and liminal dimensions. Indeed, the purchase of monastic products may be considered as a ritual interaction (Goffman 1974; Rook 1985; Collins 2004) which, impregnated by gift-giving, is close to an exchange ritual (McCracken 1986). The case of a purchase made in an abbey shop is particularly enlightening, since this ritual of purchasing forms part of a succession of phases (van Gennep 1909).

The first one is the separation phase, when the individual is leaving his/her everyday individual status; it corresponds to the preliminary visit of the monastery and, eventually, the Mass attendance before the purchase. The second one is the liminal phase, when the individual is entering the shop as a necessary ritual step after the visit, or with friends, and then is purchasing the products. This liminal phase is the key moment of the purchase studied in this article: made of socially common and repeated behaviors such as pushing the door of the monastic shop, greeting the sales persons or the monks, filling up the shopping basket,



**Table 2.** *Communitas* characteristics in each community (re)joined by the purchasers.

Communities (re)joined	<i>Communitas</i> characteristics			
	Spontaneous	Transitory	Egalitarian	Utopic
Store-companions	Yes, spontaneous verbal exchanges with other shoppers	Yes, ephemeral	Yes, no mention of any social hierarchy or status	Yes, no barrier to speak kindly and to share experiences
Interfacing personnel	Moderately, because it is the job of the interfacing personnel	Yes, ephemeral	Yes on a social aspect, no on the aspect of asymmetric information, everybody stays in their role	Yes, interfacing personnel are always seen as pleasant, available, and friendly listening
Personal community	Yes, for the gift-giving gesture	No, permanent	Yes, no mention of any social hierarchy or status in the close circle	Yes, close family and friends are evoked with nostalgia, warmly and lovely words
Monastic community	Yes, intangible sharing with near or remote monastic communities	Yes, ephemeral	Yes, monks and nuns are perceived as our equals, even if their life is extra-ordinary	Yes, abbeys are seen as utopic autarchic places, and monks and nuns take the time to make the products with love
Purchaser-aids community	No, the initiative is taken by the cashier (monk, nun, or layperson)	No, permanent in the purchaser-aids files	Yes, no hierarchy between the purchaser-aids	Yes, thanks to the engagement with the gift gesture toward the monastic communities

purposefully walking toward the monk at the cashier, getting the payment out of the purse... the purchasing act allows the purchaser to temporarily lose his/her individual status and to acquire a collective status by feeling in *communitas* with the five communities revealed by the data. The third one is the re-integration phase, when the purchaser returns to his/her initial individual status when he/she leaves the shop. Indeed, findings show that the purchasers escape from their everyday social status during their purchasing experience, and re-integrate it just after, without getting into a new status. Similarly to recent research about restaurant consumption which highlighted the return to the initial status after a liminal phase (Tissier-Desbordes and Maclaran 2013), we are faced with an incomplete scheme of the rites of passage of van Gennep (1909).

In synthesis, findings show that the purchasing act is a ritual which allows the purchasers to feel in *communitas* with five communities. We observe the particular status of stores located in abbey grounds themselves, even if the remoteness in town, or the virtual nature on the Internet does not prevent the characteristics of the *communitas* from appearing. In accumulating a spatial situation impregnated with religious and architectural heritage, with the physical presence of monks and nuns in their habits in the store, the abbey outlets are particularly propitious to an intense sentiment of *communitas*. These contextualized findings lead us to discuss and conceptualize our contributions.

## Discussion and contributions

Added to previous work on the impregnation of the monastic products' purchase by gift-giving rituals (Paquier 2015), these findings allow to launch a discussion in two steps. Firstly, we show that, thanks to *communitas* interwoven with gift-giving rituals, the purchasing moment is a key transition point in the monastic product biography toward re-sacralization. Secondly, to open further research, we extend the usual vision of a continuum between the two poles (Kopytoff 1986; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) to the sinusoidal and dynamic de-re-sacralization wave in the product's biography and conclude by the managerial contributions of this work.

### ***Purchasing, a key transition point toward re-sacralization in the biography***

This work has studied the first phases of the monastic product's biography: originally sacred when handmade by monks and nuns, it is then commoditized, thus de-sacralized, when offered for sale. This section is focusing on the next phase, the purchasing moment, one of the key transition points in the monastic product's biography (Table 3).

During the purchase of monastic products, *communitas* and gift-giving are closely interwoven. Indeed, by entering *communitas*, purchasers share information, emotion, trust, peaceful moments, or products, with their shopping companions, the interfacing personnel, their personal network, and the monks and nuns. Furthermore, by giving money to the monasteries, and by offering products to close family and friends, purchasers receive various forms of reciprocities which are creating or reinforcing social bonds within communities, which possess *communitas* characteristics (Paquier 2015). The state of *communitas* felt by the purchasers initiates the movement toward the monastic product's re-sacralization, and is reinforced by the impregnation by gift-giving gesture (Sherry 1983; Kopytoff 1986; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Turner 1990). The re-sacralization process intensifies when



**Table 3.** The transition points in the monastic product's biography.

Transition points	Status of the monastic product/Network	Main characteristics
Manufacturing	<p>Sacred status</p> <p>Network:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• handmade product within the Ora et Labora rhythm,</li> <li>• monastery,</li> <li>• cloistered monks and nuns</li> </ul>	<p>Monastic world physically separated from the profane, with rituals, silence, <i>communitas</i>, bareness, and transcendence (Turner 1990)</p> <p>Handmade production by sacred persons in sacred cloistered places with sacred tools (Nursia de Vith century)</p> <p>Naming with the <i>Monastic</i> brand, elevating with ingredients' quality, enshrinement by love and prayer, social reproduction in monastic community (MacCannell 1989)</p> <p>The product is pre-sacralized before the sale (Gould 2006)</p> <p>Monks and nuns break down the barrier between the sacred and profane (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), le product emerges from the cloister and loses its mystery (Nisbet 1966)</p> <p>Interruption of money and of pricing (Belk and Wallendorf 1990), comparability et interchangeable-ty of the product (Kopytoff 1986)</p> <p>Encroachment to the profane (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), contamination (Eliade 1987) in the store, first touch point with secular people, and place of the infusion of the sacred and the profane (Miller 1998)</p> <p>Sacralization by impregnation of gift-giving in <i>communitas</i> (Sherry 1983; Turner 1990)</p>
Offering for sale	<p>De-sacralized thus commoditized status</p> <p>Network:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• manufactured and priced monastic product</li> <li>• shop (physical or virtual, religious or secular)</li> <li>• interfacing personnel</li> </ul>	
Purchase	<p>Re-sacralized, thus sacred status</p> <p>Network:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• manufactured and priced monastic product</li> <li>• shop (physical or virtual, religious or secular)</li> <li>• purchaser, shopping companions, interfacing personnel</li> </ul>	<p>Money usage destined to permit a transmission (Belk and Wallendorf 1990)</p> <p>Sacrificial form by the gift of money to the monastery via the purchase of products, do good through one's purchase thanks to gift-giving to closed people, horizontal and vertical contact with others; transcendence (Miller 1998). Liminality of the purchaser, at the threshold of the monastic world, a bubble outside of town, a time outside of ordinary time</p> <p>Future research</p> <p>Future research</p>
Gift-giving	Maintain of sacred status?	
Consumption and disposition	De-sacralization or maintain of sacred status?	

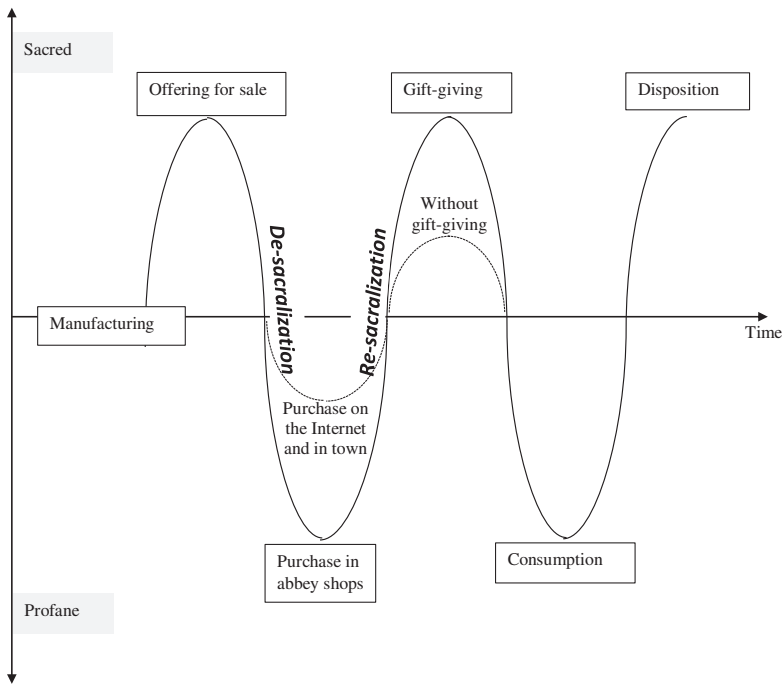
the purchased product is intended to be offered as a medium for the transmission of values of ethics, nature, pleasure, love, and spirituality (Belk and Wallendorf 1990; Paquier 2015). Finally, a sacrificial form also manifests itself, since financial expenditure is intended to support the monasteries, and to give gifts to relatives (Miller 1998). *Communitas* interwoven with gift-giving rituals, and cumulated to the sacrificial destination of the money, triggers the process of re-sacralization of the monastic product when bought. Furthermore, the intensity of the state of *communitas*, and its corollary the liminality felt by the purchasers varies depending on the context, specifically the type of sales outlet (see Table 2). We observed that the monastery shops carry a large spectrum of meanings derived from their architectural, historical and spiritual context, and from the monks and nuns themselves in the shop, and this reinforces the feeling of being part of a community, especially the monastic community (McCracken 1986, 1988). The monastic selling context thus amplifies the *communitas* feeling (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Paquier and Morin-Delerm 2016).

These results extend Kopytoff's theory (1986) by showing that the moment of purchase is a key transition point in the product's biography. More precisely, after the manufacturing transition point (technical biography) and the offering for sale transition point (economic biography), the purchasing moment is inscribed in both economic and cultural biographies mentioned by Kopytoff (1986). At this moment of its life, thanks to the *communitas* perspective, the monastic product is regaining sacred properties. This re-sacralization process is reinforced in the case of purchase made for the purpose of giving, even more if the purchase takes place in a meaningful abbey shop (McCracken 1986, 1988). This potential graduation of the re-sacralization is reflecting Kopytoff's assertion: "Although the singular and the commodity are opposites, nothing ever quite reaches the ultimate commodity end of the continuum between them. There are no perfect commodities" (Kopytoff 1986, p.87). In our case, there is a trend toward (but not perfect) re-sacralization, depending on the gift destination and the place of the purchase.

More largely, to represent the successive transition points and recognized periods in an object's biography, we conclude by replacing the usually linear continuum between sacred and profane (Kopytoff 1986; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) by a sinusoidal and dynamic vision of the process of de and re-sacralization.

### ***To conclude, the sacralization wave***

This contextualized research has shown how the monastic product, originally sacred, is commoditized thus de-sacralized by the monks and nuns when entering in the merchant sphere, and is re-sacralized by the purchasers during the purchase moment. Manufacturing, offering for sale, and purchasing are the three first transition points in the product's biography. To visualize the chronology of the product's biography, we add a temporal dimension to the continuum between sacred and profane formulated by Kopytoff (1986) and Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989). Our sacralization wave visualizes the sinusoidal movement of de- and re-sacralization of the product alongside its biography and anticipates on further transition points which are gift-giving, consumption and disposal (Figure 2). In the sacralization wave, the extremum are the transition points, the wavelengths are corresponding to the recognized periods, and the amplitude is expressing the intensity of the de- or re-sacralization process. This graduation of the product's re-sacralization is particularly relevant



**Figure 2.** The sacralization wave in the monastic product's biography.

during the purchasing moment, depending on the point of sale and on the gift destination of the product bought.

Theoretically, the de/resacralization wave found in the French monastic context reinforces the biographical approach of Kopytoff (1986) by showing its sine wave pattern, punctuated by contextualized events (Johns 2006). These events, or key transition points, result from interactions between actors (producers, suppliers, purchasers, shopping companions, family, and friends) and contexts (workshops, sales outlets), that trigger status changes, between sacralization and de-sacralization, or more broadly between singularization and commodification. The first three transition points in the monastic product's biography highlight a singular paradox: it is sacred actors who de-sacralize the product when commoditizing it, and profane actors who re-sacralize it when buying it. There is room for future research on the transition points in this biography, such as moments of gift-giving, consumption, and disposal. Concerning the gift-giving moment, it could be relevant to ask whether the monastic product given is received as a commodity comparable to other cosmetics or food, or as an extended-self of the giver (Belk 1988). Concerning the specific case of the food product's consumption, we can wonder if the ingestion of the monastic product could be seen as a sacred moment, like taking communion and the body of Christ. While accompanying the French cellarers in the professionalization of their commercial methods, we can lean upon these findings to re-assure those who fear losing their sacred soul: their products' commoditization is more a transitional status than a definitive one, and re-sacralization happens thanks to the purchaser himself.

## Notes

1. Cistercian abbeys such as Aiguebelle, La Trappe, Campénéac, Hauterive, Timadeuc, and Tamié, Benedictine abbeys such as Chantelle, Tournay, Saint Wandrille, Bouzy-la-Forêt and Bec Hellouin.
2. This tool (Alceste®), founded on the proximity between the words used, creates the corpus lexis, cuts into individual units, matrices of presence/an absence for each word in each unit, maps out a factor analysis of the correspondences and a top down hierarchical classification, the whole without any a priori on the classes to discover. Each sense unit is allocated exclusively to one or other of the body of recorded exchanges.
3. In the Rule of Saint Benedict, Chap 31 titled “The cellarer of the monastery as he should be,” concerning the tools of work and about the cellarer: “All the objects and all the goods of the monastery will be in his eyes as sacred vases of the altar” (RSB, 31, 10).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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## Appendix 1. Characteristics of the persons interviewed after navigating and purchasing on the website of *Boutiques de Théophile*, *Comptoir des Abbayes*, and at abbeys stores.

Respondant	Sex		Age				Religion		
	H	F	18–30	30–45	45–60	60+	Practicing Catholic	Non-practicing	Atheist
<i>Interviewees on the website Boutiques de Théophile</i>									
1		X			X		X		
2		X			X		X		
3		X	X					X	
4	X				X			X	
5	X				X				X
6		X	X						X
7	X				X			X	
8		X				X	X		
9		X		X				X	
10		X			X			X	
11		X			X			X	
12	X				X				X
13		X		X			X		
14		X			X			X	
15	X					X	X		
	5	10	2	2	9	2	5	7	3
<i>Interviewees in Comptoir des Abbayes</i>									
1		X			X		X		
2		X		X			X		
3	X			X				X	
4	X			X				X	
5		X			X		X		
6		X		X			X		
7	X				X			X	
8		X		X				X	
9		X			X			X	
10	X				X				X
11		X			X				X
12		X		X				X	
13	X			X					X
14		X			X		X		
15	X		X					X	
16	X				X			X	
17		X			X				X
18	X				X				X
19		X		X				X	
20	X					X	X		
21	X				X			X	
22		X		X				X	
23		X	X				X		
24		X			X			X	
25	X		X					X	
26	X		X				X		
27	X			X					X
28		X				X		X	
29	X				X		X		
30	X			X			X		
Total 30	15	15	4	11	13	2	10	14	6

(Continued)

**Appendix 1. (Continued)**

Resp.	Sex		Age				Religion				Profil		
	H	F	18-30	30-45	45-60	60+	Prac- ticing Catholic	Non- practicing Catholic.	Athe- ist	Neigh- bor	Retiree	Tour- ist	Abbey
Interviewees at abbeys stores													
1		X		X			X					X	Aigue-belle
2		X	X				X				X		
3		X		X			X				X		
4		X		X					X			X	
5	X			X			X				X		
6	X				X		X				X		La Trappe de
7	X			X				X				X	Soligny
8		X			X		X			X			
9		X				X		X			X		
10	X			X				X		X			
11	X			X					X	X			
12	X					X		X			X		
13	X				X		X				X		
14		X				X		X		X			
15	X				X			X		X			
16		X			X				X	X			
17	X					X	X			X			
18		X			X			X		X			
19	X			X				X		X			
20		X		X				X		X			
21		X				X	X			X			
22	X					X	X			X			
23		X			X		X			X			
24		X		X			X					X	
25		X			X			X				X	Chantelle
26		X				X	X					X	
27		X			X			X		X			
28		X				X		X		X			
29		X			X		X			X			
30		X			X				X			X	
31	X			X				X		X			
32		X			X		X			X			
33		X				X		X		X			
34	X			X			X				X		Tamié
35		X			X			X				X	
36		X			X		X					X	
37		X			X			X				X	
38	X					X	X					X	
39		X				X	X					X	
40		X				X	X					X	
41	X					X			X orth.	X			
41	15	26	1	12	15	13	20	16	5	20	8	13	

**Appendix 2. Interview guides**

Interview guide for purchasers in physical stores (in abbey stores and in *Comptoir des Abbayes* store):

- (1) Please, tell me about the ambiance you feel in the store : the arrangement, the layout, the design, the information, the interfacing personnel .... Is this store comparable to other types of stores that you know?
- (2) Now, about the products, what could you say? Their presentation, their characteristics, their ingredients, their method of manufacturing, their origin, .... Are these products comparable to others types of products?

- (3) How do you characterize your purchase? Episodic, regular, exceptional, common ... Does it mean something special or not? Is this purchase comparable to other purchases you could do?

Interview guide for purchaser after browsing on les Boutiques de Theophile website:

20 minutes of free browsing, followed by this purchasing instruction: Now, you have a budget of 50€. I ask you to find and to buy at least one honey-pot, or more if you are tempted by other products. The only constraint is to focus on food and cosmetic products, such as beverages, grocery, biscuits, marmalades, fruit jellies, oils, condiments, lotions, soaps, eau de toilette... Please avoid piety objects and books. Do exactly as if you really want to buy, but stop just before to confirm the order!

- (1) Please, tell me about the ambiance you feel on this website: your browsing, the rubrics, the design, the pictures, the information, the arrangement .... Is this website comparable to other types of sites that you know?
- (2) Now, about the products, what could you say? Their characteristics, their ingredients, their method of manufacturing, their origin.... Are these products comparable to others types of products?
- (3) How do you characterize your purchase? Episodic, regular, exceptional, common.... Does it mean something special or not? Is this purchase comparable to other purchases you could do?

### Appendix 3. First order coding

First order codes		
Mother	Daughter	Used in the 2nd order coding*
Ambiance	Serene ambiance	C4
	Modern ambiance	
	Warm ambiance	C1, C2
	Old-fashioned ambiance	
	Un-anonymous ambiance	C1, C2
	Silent ambiance	C4
	Too commercial	
	Not too commercial	
	Discrete commerce	
	Monastic ambiance	C4
	Spiritual ambiance	C4
	Pleasant ambiance	C1, C2, C4
	Simple ambiance	C4
	Calm ambiance	C4
	Coherent ambiance	C4
Purchase	Frequent purchase	
	Forecasted purchase	
	Regular purchase	
	Make others happy	C3, C4
	Trite purchase	
	Impulsive purchase	
	Gift purchase	C3, C5
	Ethical purchase	
	Pleasure to help	C4, C5
	Useful purchase	C5
	Special purchase	
Significant purchase		

(Continued)

**Appendix 3. (Continued)**

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	For self-purchase	
	Double pleasure	C3, C4
	Incomparable purchase	
	Episodic purchase	
	Religiously engaged purchase	C4
	Anti-system purchase	
	Particular approach purchase	
	Transmission purchase	C3
	Feel good purchase	
	Commercial purchase	
	Solidary purchase	C4, C5
	Spiritual approach purchase	C4
	Abbey souvenir purchase	C3
	Helpful supporting purchase	C5
Welcome		
	Smiley welcome	C2
	Listening welcome	C2
	Available welcome	C2
	Friendly welcome	C2
	Monastic presence	C2, C4
Information		
	Not enough information	
	Enough information	
	Not clear information	
	Clear information	
	Discrete information	
Price		
	Non-obstacle price	
	Obstacle price	
	Shipping cost	
	Justified by quality	
	Helpful approach	
	Right price	
	Willingness to pay	
Product		
	Embedded product	
	Solidary product	
	Special product	
	Ethical product	
	Craft product	
	Gift product	
	Different product	
	Done with love product	
	Done with heart	
	Handmade product	
	Help reciprocal product	
	Healthy product	
	Simple product	
	Spiritual product	
	Local product	
	Good product	
	Quality product	
	Natural product	
	Non industrial product	
	Original product	
	Non comparable product	
	Traditional product	
	Authentic product	
	Abbey souvenir product	
	History transmission	

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(Continued)



**Appendix 3. (Continued)**

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Sensorial	Music Olfactory Visual wood Visual luminous Visual pretty Visual products Visual negative	
Trust	Trust in origin Trust in ingredients Trust a priori Trust in monks' work Trust in manual process	
Comparison with...	Local products Market Organic store Organic products Delicatessen Craft man Short channel Fair trade	
Store	Non comparable store Nonprofessional store Professional store Meaning transfer store	C4
Instant	Pleasure instant Take the time instant Pleasure experiential instant	C1, C2 C1, C2 C1, C2
Perceived work	Ethical monks work Traditional work Respected work Reward work	
Emotion	Yes No	
Choice	Little choice Many choices	
Anchorage	Time anchorage Local anchorage	
Shopping	Right to the point shopping Discovery shopping	C1 C1
Clarity offer	Clear offer Disordered offer	

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*(Continued)*

**Appendix 3. (Continued)**

Monastic immersion	Yes	
	No	
Conviviality	With lay personnel	C2
	With shopping companions	C1
	With monks and nuns	C4
Habit		
Monastic bubble		C4
Surprise		
Childhood nostalgia		C3
Doubt		
Curiosity		
Monks endangered species		
Disappointment		
Rewarding provenance		C3

Notes:

- \* – Type of community (re)joined
- C1 – The store-companion community
- C2 – The interfacing personnel community
- C3 – The purchaser’s own community
- C4 – The monastic community
- C5 – The purchaser-aids community

**Appendix 4. Second order coding by type of community (re)joined**

C1	The store-companion community Warm ambiance Un-anonymous ambiance Pleasant ambiance With shopping companions Right to the point shopping Discovery shopping Pleasure instant Take the time instant Pleasure experiential instant
C2	The interfacing personnel community Warm ambiance Un-anonymous ambiance Pleasant ambiance Smiley welcome Listening welcome Available welcome Friendly welcome Monastic presence With lay personnel Pleasure instant Take the time instant Pleasure experiential instant
C3	The purchaser’s own community Make others happy Gift purchase Double pleasure Transmission purchase Abbey souvenir purchase Craft product Gift product Different product Done with love product Done with heart product Handmade product

(Continued)

**Appendix 4.** *(Continued)*


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	Help reciprocal product
	Healthy product
	Simple product
	Spiritual product
	Local product
	Good product
	Quality product
	Natural product
	Non industrial product
	Original product
	Non comparable product
	Traditional product
	Authentic product
	Abbey souvenir product
	History transmission product
	Childhood nostalgia
C4	Rewarding provenance
	The monastic community
	Serene ambiance
	Silent ambiance
	Monastic ambiance
	Spiritual ambiance
	Pleasant ambiance
	Simple ambiance
	Calm ambiance
	Coherent ambiance
	Make others happy
	Pleasure to help
	Double pleasure
	Religiously engaged purchase
	Solidary purchase
	Spiritual approach purchase
	Monastic presence
	Solidary product
	Meaning transfer store
	With monks and nuns
	Monastic bubble
C5	The purchasers-aid community
	Gift purchase
	Pleasure to help
	Useful purchase
	Solidary purchase
	Helpful supporting purchase
	Solidary product
	Help reciprocal product

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