

# Kitsch religious souvenirs can rekindle pilgrimage experience

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'Tacky' and 'kitsch' religious souvenirs brought back from pilgrimage sites offer pilgrims and their friends and family who cannot make the journey a deeper religious connection.

Research by Dr. Leighanne Higgins, of Lancaster University, and Dr.

Kathy Hamilton, of the University of Strathclyde, published in the *Annals of Tourism Research*, studied visitors to the Catholic pilgrimage site of Lourdes, in France, a beacon for both ill and healthy [pilgrims](#).

They found that souvenirs brought home either as gifts or for the pilgrim themselves extend the pilgrimage beyond Lourdes and into the homes of those who may never have been to the town itself.

Such material objects can frequently be given derogatory labels, but the researchers found such terms fail to appreciate the value pilgrims and those who receive their gift derive from having the souvenirs in their homes.

"Religious souvenirs from pilgrimage sites have been variously labelled 'Jesus Junk', 'Holy Hardware' and 'Christian Kitsch'," said Dr. Higgins, Senior Lecturer in Marketing in Lancaster University Management School. "However, our study shows they have a more symbolic and important meaning for those who take them home.

"Objects purchased in Lourdes not only remind pilgrims of their pilgrimage, but also extend the essence of Lourdes to their homes. A pilgrim's personal attachment to the objects they bring home from Lourdes allows them to recapture the feelings of the pilgrimage.

"Religious objects are not used as symbols of religion, but instead provide a link to the pilgrimage and creates a sense of togetherness both with others who have been on pilgrimage and with those who remained at home but who receive similar items. The objects allow some of the therapeutic benefits of pilgrimage to be extended, with their cheap monetary value not commensurate with the value derived by those who buy or receive them.

"Our findings show that beneath the cacophony of plastic, luminosity

and glitter, there can lie a kaleidoscope of symbolism important to a person's sense of self and a pathway to experiencing a more subtle, individual sense of community around pilgrimage. Souvenirs allow people to experience the sense of togetherness pilgrimage can create, conveying a sense of belonging even to those who have not made the journey."

The researchers conducted six visits to Lourdes, totalling eight weeks at the pilgrimage site, observing and interviewing pilgrims, both in Lourdes and after their return, as well as speaking with volunteers, Lourdes hotel owners and priests.

One of the pilgrims the researchers spoke to, Matthew, discussed the sense of calm and quietude he experienced on his visits to the Grotto of Massabielle, and how he recaptured these feelings through interaction with a wooden bracelet he brought home. He told them: "It reminds me of the place. It reminds me of how I felt, how I feel about the place... It reminds me of everything about Lourdes, about the experience, the kind of better person I want to be."

"What Matthew told us reinforce the sensory nature of memories of pilgrimage, which he is able to recapture through the bracelet," said Dr. Hamilton, Reader in Marketing at the University of Strathclyde. "Beliefs are materialised in such objects, connecting those at home with Lourdes, where the practice of touching them brings their meaning to the fore.

"Another pilgrim, Lilly, brought home a sparkling Our Lady statue that she herself described as 'tacky'. Yet it connects her to her visits to Lourdes and memories of her mother, who visited the shrine on pilgrimage and who later died from cancer. The significance of the item extends beyond its market value."

Andrea, a pilgrim who brought home a luminous Our Lady statue she

acknowledges as being religious kitsch, said: "When I wake during the night and see the statue shining, I feel protected and safe knowing Our Lady is watching me."

"The statue projects an atmosphere of safety and protection for Andrea, much as pilgrims experience in Lourdes," added Dr. Higgins. "Lourdes 'speaks' to pilgrims through the objects they bring home, helping them with their lives away from the pilgrimage site and in the larger world.

"It is the pilgrims' belief in the narrative of Lourdes that drives them to bring souvenirs home."

As well as investigating the sense of togetherness souvenirs taken home can provide for pilgrims, their friends and families, Dr. Higgins and Dr. Hamilton also looked at the bonds with pilgrimage created by written prayers (petitions) left behind and candles lit in or near the Grotto in Lourdes.

Petitions are personal requests for religious intervention in life problems, both from pilgrims themselves and often from friends, family or acquaintances who cannot make the journey but who ask for them to be taken to Lourdes for them. They are private communications with God and provide a connection between pilgrims and those at home.

The researchers found that people posting petitions do not believe they will be more likely to be heard and answered if they are left in the Grotto, but see the process as special, allowing the sacred experience of the pilgrimage to speak to those at home.

Candles lit in or near the Grotto offer a similar connection, with the displays representing the collective voice of pilgrims and a shared connection between those on pilgrimage and those who do not travel.

"Therapeutic release is not only achieved by the pilgrims who are physically present at the pilgrimage site, but it can be extended to those at [home](#), both through the petitions and the candles," said Dr. Hamilton. "Those who receive the gifts and who send petitions to Lourdes have a similar sense of emotional release to those who make the physical journey, creating a bond between them and Lourdes, a unity and togetherness shared by pilgrims and those who may never be able to visit the shrine."

**More information:** Leighanne Higgins et al, Pilgrimage, material objects and spontaneous communitas, *Annals of Tourism Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2019.102855](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102855)

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