# The emergence of hybrid commemoration of the dead in developing countries: The case of Vietnam

*- Ngan Phan-Hanoi University-nganptk@hanu.edu.vn*

**Abstract:**

Consumer value has been widely recognized as a key factor in marketing and consumer behavior. However, little academic attention has been devoted to the study of spirituality as a type of consumer value. This study explores the rising of hybrid commemoration of the dead as a new way of delivering ritual practices through the mediation of digital technology. This study is expected to contribute to the current sociocultural and consumer behavior literature by focusing on new aspects of commemoration practices, with online commemoration as rituals help to maintain and renew the shared values of the Vietnamese culture in Vietnamese diaspora communities. The study is also expected to offer insights for service providers to enhance consumers' spiritual value perception through digital technology.

*Key words:* ritual practice, spiritual value, commemoration, digital mediation, diaspora community

## Introduction

Consumer behavior studies extend beyond the examination of how consumer behave in normal markets of goods and services. Spiritual has been the focus of studies into to psychology and sociology for decades, yet little research has explored the value of spirituality in consumer behavior realms. Ulvoas-Moal (2010) defined spirituality as "the construction of the meaning of one's life. It appeals to one's ability for transcendence and its objects are the inner self, alterity and the sacred".

Understanding consumer's spiritual needs has potential implications for service firms which manage cemeteries, that they can offer complementary services related to commemoration.

While there has been much research in how value perceptions affect consumer experience ([Morris B  Holbrook, 1999](), [2006](); [Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991](); [Sweeney & Soutar, 2001]()), theoretical frameworks addressing spiritual value in consumer experience realm remain limited.

Widespread adoption of digital technology, IoT has reshaped production and delivery of goods and services.

Consumer behavior literature recently has experienced a rise in research on the digitalization of grief and funeral service ([Asgari, Naghavi, & Abedi, 2025](); [Drozdzewski, Sumartojo, & Waterton, 2021](); [Nansen, Kohn, Arnold, van Ryn, & Gibbs, 2017]()).  Nansen et al. (2021) explored the link to memories, places and experiences of Anzac and proposed that the digital technology offers opportunities to influence how we remember. Not only bebravement services, digital technology has now enabled the emergence of new forms of rituals and religious practices ([Heidi A Campbell, 2013]()). Digital technology can empower people to perform online rituals, bypassing traditional practices. In [Heidi A Campbell and Evolvi (2020)](), many people have turned to technological innovations to bridge online and offline religious space and associated ritual practices. With the mediation of digital technology, online rituals like commemoration of the death can go beyond limits of time, space, and geographic location.

This study looks into the online commemoration as a new consumption practice in Vietnam. It is worthy to note that in Asian cultures, particularly in Vietnam, commemoration of the dead play in important part in keeping the ongoing relationship with the deceased family members ([DiGregorio & Salemink, 2007]()). [Shimane (2014)]() observed funeral procession in Northern areas in Vietnam and found that the dead person transported from the city to his or her hometown cemetery. That means the dead's family and people who attended the funeral traveled dozens of kilometers and joined by the local community at the dead's hometown. Two communities where the deceased was born and where he or she was living joined the rituals. However, as new generations are mobile and work in different cities across the country or overseas, it may become more difficult for them in term of time and money to travel frequently to their parents or grandparents' hometown to visit the tombs. Meanwhile, the relationship between the later generations with their hometown communities will likely become disconnected.

The disconnection occurs not only to the local people migrating from one place to another within their home country but also the diasporic generations. Diaspora, as a subset of dispersion

([Cavalli-Sforza & Cavalli-Sforza, 1993](#); [Dufoix, 2016](#)), is a social community leaving their home country for certain reasons and settle in other countries. They migrate because of catastrophies or as war refugees, or may be coered to migrate. Migration into another country need not to be due to natural or man-made disasters but can come from the purpose to work or study overseas.

As the migrants move across international borders and rebuild their lives in the host countries, the majority of them want to retain the rituals and practices that they inherited from the homeland cultures. However, the difficulty in worship and commemoration of their ancestor in their home country is subsequently inevitable ([Hua, 2005](#)).

While a growing body of marketing literature has focused on the social, cultural and psychological issues of diasporic communities ([Karabegović, 2019](#); [Um, 2018](#)), the issue of how diasporas commerate their ancestor appears to be inadequately addressed. The socio-cultural context of Vietnam presents an ideal context for investigation of this issue considering the tradition of Vietnam is to value memorialization of the dead in rituals. This paper is concerned about how the Vietnamese diaspora communities navigate through the constraints in physical distance in keeping the traditional commemoration practices toward the dead.

It seems reasonable that many people are using the Internet and social media to livestream and personalize the rituals to commemorate the dead. Many recently built cemeteries offer the service of "Cúng giỗ online" (translation: online commeration of the dead) or "Thắp hương online" (translation: online incensing) to accommodate such change in needs.

Here the issue of innovation forms of memorial via digital technology in relation to traditional forms of worship raise a significant question of spirituality.

Specifically:

1. How have digitally mediated commemoration rituals affected the sense of kinship?
2. How authentic they are as a consumer experience?

Traditional views of marketplace on ritual practices in commemoration of the dead, being influenced by social and cultural factors, limit the context of experience to physical encounters. There has been a growth of studies of religions and the Internet ([Heidi A. Campbell, 2017](#); [Heidi A Campbell & Bellar, 2022](#)), but the relationship between spiritual practices and consumer experience within the hybrid online-offline encounters and within sociocultural context of

Vietnam is under-researched. This paper is expected to contribute to the literature stream of consumer value by extending the context of spiritual value that affects consumer experience to digitalized realm. That is how mediation of meaning and the digital technology have been shaping social and cultural changes in ritual practices.

The practical implication of the findings of this study is expected to provide a broader scope of context including the digitalized services for managers of cemeteries and funeral services to consider in their efforts to meet the needs of their customers and enhance customer experiences, especially the diasporic communities. Hence, through both theoretical and practical implications, this study suggests directions for further empirical research on this important but underexplored area in the time when interdisciplinary investigations into the relationship between consumer experience and new media technologies have evolved into a vibrant area of inquiry.

**Theoretical background**

**Consumer values**

The value concept has long been investigated and always been recognized as the fundamental basis for all marketing activity (Morris B Holbrook, 1994). There is a diverse array of approaches to values which underlies people's consumption behavior. Values is considered unidimensional as it is defined as a cognitive trade-off base on the quality-price correlation in the voluntary exchange among market participants (Alves, 2011). Scholars have argued that the trade-off model is quite simplistic for consumption experience, recognizing the emotional aspects of consumer experience (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Jensen, Annan-Diab, & Seppala, 2018; Sheth et al., 1991; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Among multidimensional approaches to consumer value, Holbrook's typology of consumer value captures diverse aspects of consumption experiences. Holbrook (1999) provides a comprehensive analytical framework that is applied to the full range of consumption-related phenomena. His framework of perceived consumer value proposes eight types of perceived values (Play, Aesthetics, Ethics, Spirituality, Efficiency, Quality, Status, Esteem). More recently, Morris B Holbrook (2006) found untapped aspects of customer value including economic, hedonic, social, and altruistic values.

Among different types of consumer values, spiritual value explains people's preferences for memorial rites. There have been both conceptual and empirical definitions of spiritual value across different consumption experiences including commemorative practices. *Spirituality* was

defined as a subjective experience of the sacred and may or may not include involvement in institutionalized beliefs or doctrines like *religiousness* (Vaughan, 1991). Spiritual and ethical values are distinct concepts, yet closely related to altruistic value (Dodds, Bulmer, & Murphy, 2018; Huber & MacDonald, 2012). Dodds et al., (2018) found that from consumer's perspective, spiritual value is largely in reactive meaning while ethical value is considered more active.

Huber and MacDonald (2012) found that spiritual experiences are the most potent predictors of both empathy and altruism. These consumer value frameworks are widely adopted in multiple research disciplines like tourism (Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2020), healthcare and service context (Dodds et al., 2018). This paper reviews mainly marketing literature as spiritual value is studied as a perceived value in consumption experiences.

**Contestation of consumer values**

Contemporary scholar works has been focusing on the negotiations between the online and offline religious factors, and how this informs a broader understanding of the consumer values, particularly spiritual value in the modern society. Cheong, Huang, and Poon (2011), for example, explore how the Internet can both solidify and undermine traditional forms of religious authority online. Their findings show that Buddhist priests can expand their social identity from experts to arbiters of knowledge. To realize the strategic arbitration of knowledge, they have to actively acquire multimodal communicative competency, which means the encounters are enacted within old and new mediated spaces.

As consumer value is experiential and contextual (Varshneya, Das, & Khare, 2017), ritual practices offering spiritual values are traditionally viewed to be conducted in a physical counter. Nevertheless, there seems to be an implicit desire to adopt this practice for close kin living far away from the memorial place, and expressly concerned by those living overseas with overcoming the burden of worship responsibility in visiting and maintaining their ancestor graves. The pragmatic consequences of online commemorations seemingly can soften the sharp boundaries between the absence and presence of the deceased family members.

**The sacred and profane**

Rituals involve sacred objects and practices that are set apart from everyday life, creating a sense of awe and reverence. Durkeim's theory of religion was coined in "The elementary forms of religious life" in 1912. In his book the term *sacred* refers to the religious doctrines, beliefs, customs respected by a group or person. Rituals, particularly commemorations often involve the sacredness. The term profane refers to things that are not sacred but rather secular in nature. It might include disrespectful opinions or actions expressed about a religion or practices. In the book Social Theory Rewired (2016), a proposition of Durkheim was that common preexisting social forces influence beliefs of different social groups.

Commemoration rituals have been conventionally perceived as a sacred. Although the sacred is thought to be totally different from the profane, contemporary literature challenges the polarization of these concepts. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry Jr (1989) focused on the fluidity of sacredness. Sacralization and de-sacralization are dynamic processes that shift objects, people, events, and practices between sacred and profane realms (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). Sacredness is shaped by consumer values, beliefs, and socio-cultural factors, thus is dependent on context. The shift toward online commemoration of the deceased suggests that sacred practices do not rely solely on the physical presence of the family members and things they offer to commemorate the dead, but can be mediated through digital interactions. The understanding and acceptance of such rituals among the community highlights the adaptability of the ritual performances and the emergence of a new consumption practice in the digital age.

**The self and the other**

Being self-oriented is about the effect a product or service has on the individual whereas being other-oriented is about the effect a consumption experience has on the other and how they react to it. The "other" in this sense could range from other human beings in family or friends to broader level like community. Ritual practices offer spiritual values which are traditionally considered other-oriented (Morris B Holbrook, 1999; Sánchez-Fernández, Iniesta-Bonillo, & Holbrook, 2009). However, it can also be self-oriented. With a research exploring consumers' experiences of spiritual value in healthcare services, Dodds and colleagues found that consumers mentioned they have gained a sense of inner balance and feelings of peace and calm, where the mind, body, emotions and spiritual aspects of their lives were perceived to be in harmony (Dodds et al., 2018).

*Figure 1:* Typology of consumer value

Source: adapted from Holbrook (1999, p. 12)

This self-orientation of consumer value of online ritual practices is significant to the living with regard to the imagined connection between them and the deceased as if it happened in the physical encounters where the deceased is buried. It reflects a retrospective fulfilment of the living. It connects to spiritual well-being, inner peace, self-balance of the family members.

Hybrid commemoration offer an accesible alternative to physical commemoratio at gravesites for those who are living in distant geographical areas to express their emotion or pay tribune to their beloved family member who passed away (Lowe et al., 2021). Lowe and colleagues found that the digital technology has made the informal memorialization practices and formal memorialization increasingly blurred.

Although we understand that digital technology can enhance consumer perceived value in many aspects of life, what is not clear is whether spiritual needs can be met by online commemoration practices. I, thus, propose an exploratory theoretical framework for consumer digitalized spirituality value.

*Figure 2:* Proposed theoretical framework of digitalized commemoration
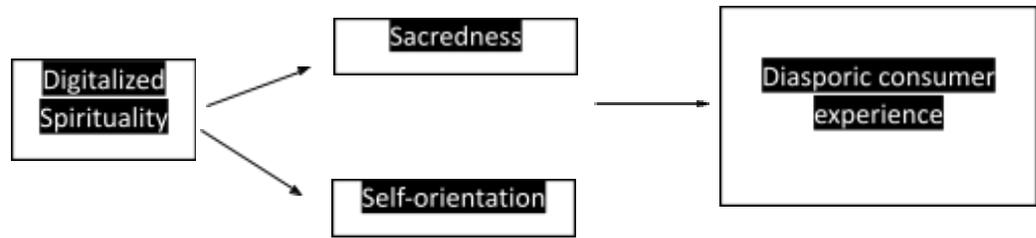
**Diaspora communities' commemoration practices**

The diaspora communities are formed as a consequence of transnational migration. These communities have been researched in various fields of endevour, such as anthropology, sociology, politics, human geography (Adamson, 2016; Behl, 2017; Délano Alonso & Mylonas, 2019). For diaspora communities, tensions occur when the physical commemoration practices come into conflict with their living and working conditions in the host countries. The dominant commemoration rituals within Vietnames culture require frequent visits an annual commemoration of the dead (Salemink, 2022).

Many people who have settled their lives in the host country and after certain period of time, have integrated into the mainstream there may continue the socio-cultural traditions of their homeland through nostalgia, memorbrilia for parents and grand parents. These transnational migrant communities keep seeking ways to maintain their responsibilities toward the passed away family members and maintain sentimental attachment to the country of origin. Need-based memorialization which is facilitated by digital technology can fulfill their sense of responsibility, allow an outlet for their emotional expression, and relieve the burden of crossing geographical distances to visit the gravesites.

Research about cemtech, i.e. cemetaries which use digital technology, have discussed the typology of visitors whose needs are digital technology based and typology of the digital technologies used (Allison et al., 2024). However, diasporas has not been identified as a target group of digital commemoration services.

**Methodology**

This research adopts an interpretive approach ([Thorne, 2014](#)). In-depth interviews will be used to understand consumer needs ([Johnson & Rowlands, 2012](#)) for online commemoration, particularly those who are living overseas. The research also delves into how digitalized rituals of online commemoration affect their experiences, i.e how authentic they can perceive about the experience of hybrid commemoration.

The research consists of two stages. In the first stage, data is drawn from a cemetery park in Vietnam which offers the services of and relating to online commemoration. Lac Hong Vien, is the first and largest cemetery park in Vietnam. Since the inception in 2005, the cemetery park was built in a few years and started its operation in 2011.  I contacted the CEO who is also the founder of Lac Hong Vien and interviewed him about the development of the cemetery park.

The second stage involves in-depth interviews with people from different Vietnamese diaspora communities in the world. Major Vietnamese diaspora communities are found in America, Eastern and Western Europe, Australia, and Korea. A big part of this stage has to do with the diasporas' attitude toward the hybrid commemoration practices and how much authenticity they perceive in using the online commemoration services.

Findings of this research are expected to be key to the more expansive understanding of the emergence in digitally facilitated commemoration rituals. It is one of the many ways that the communities living overseas can retain the linkage with their homeland… While the diaporas may maintain a dual identity, the emergence of hybrid commemoration practices is helpful in the resistance against cultural acculturation in the the mainstream of the host country.

**Preliminary Findings**

Findings of the first stage of this research derive from the interviews with the CEO and founder of Lac Hong Vien reveals that he claimed that he was the first person in Vietnam and Southeast Asia ([https://lachongvien.vn/tim-chan-linh/](https://lachongvien.vn/tim-chan-linh/)) to introduce the online commemoration service. Since 2012, Lac Hong Vien has introduced the hybrid commemoration services. The service was not in high demand at first because the customers are old people and not tech-savvy at all. The service provider saw a robust growth in demand for the service from 2018, especially when Covid-19 social distance orders restrict people from travelling. comes the demands from the diasporas commnities. From 2012 to 2024 Lac Hong Vien has provided its customers with 2500

online commemoration services. Until 2025, 45% of all customers have used the online commemoration service and over 30% of customers subscribe to this service on a frequent basis.

The cemetery park is situated on nine hills, altogether look like the shape of a turtle, surrounded by nine streams. All of these are down to the spiritual belief in Asian culture including Vietnam, that number nine means forever and nine streams means the destination of the dead. The symbolic meaning of Lac Hong Vien lies in the *fengshui* of such location, that the park can facilitate the continuity of the afterlife. That is the reason why this cemetery park has experienced increasing demand.

The photos show hybrid commemration services of Lac Hong Vien including taking care of the tomb and the surrounded area, incensing and praying on the first day and full moon of each month, and other customized services.

When customers subscribe to online commemration services, Lac Hong Vien staff will prepare the ritual gifts (i.e. food, fruits, and joss paper) as per customer's requirement and conduct the commeration ritual on site. They they will send photos and videos to their customers via email.

Figure 3: Hybrid commemration services of Lac Hong Vien

(Source: Lac Hong Vien website)

## Limitations

The proposed framework points researchers and managers of commemoration services toward an extended context of rituals as consumption experience that is mediated through the digital technology in creation of spiritual value. Empirical research is needed to provide evidence of the proposed framework and further extend the understanding of dynamic and increasingly digitalized social and cultural contexts. In particular, there is a need to analyze, and evaluate the experiences of ten Vietnamese diaspora communities who are living in different countries in the world about the hybrid commemoration practices. These are the people who want to maintain cultural uniqueness and create boundaries with the host country as well with other diaspora communities.

## References

Adamson, F. B. (2016). The growing importance of diaspora politics. *Current History, 115*(784), 291-297.

Alves, H. (2011). The measurement of perceived value in higher education: a unidimensional approach. *The Service Industries Journal, 31*(12), 1943-1960.

Asgari, Z., Naghavi, A., & Abedi, M. R. (2025). Death and dying in a digitalized world. *OMEGA-Journal of Death Dying, 90*(4), 1951-1962.

Behl, N. (2017). Diasporic researcher: an autoethnographic analysis of gender and race in political science. *Politics, Groups, Identities, 5*(4), 580-598.

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry Jr, J. F. (1989). The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of consumer research, 16*(1), 1-38.

Campbell, H. A. (2013). Religion and the Internet: A microcosm for studying Internet trends and implications. *New Media Society, 15*(5), 680-694.

Campbell, H. A. (2017). Religious communication and technology. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 41*(3-4), 228-234.

Campbell, H. A., & Bellar, W. (2022). *Digital religion: The basics*: Routledge.

Campbell, H. A., & Evolvi, G. (2020). Contextualizing current digital religion research on emerging technologies. *Human Behavior Emerging Technologies, 2*(1), 5-17.

Cavalli-Sforza, L. L., & Cavalli-Sforza, F. (1993). The Great Human Diasporas: The History of Dispersion and Evolution. In: Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Cheong, P. H., Huang, S., & Poon, J. P. (2011). Cultivating online and offline pathways to enlightenment: Religious authority and strategic arbitration in wired Buddhist organization. *Information, Communication Society, 14*(8), 1160-1180.

Délano Alonso, A., & Mylonas, H. (2019). The microfoundations of diaspora politics: Unpacking the state and disaggregating the diaspora. *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies, 45*(4), 473-491.

DiGregorio, M., & Salemink, O. (2007). Living with the dead: the politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 38*(3), 433-440.

Dodds, S., Bulmer, S. L., & Murphy, A. J. (2018). Exploring consumers' experiences of spiritual value in healthcare services. *Social Responsibility Journal, 14*(2), 287-301.

Drozdzewski, D., Sumartojo, S., & Waterton, E. (2021). Geographies of commemoration in a digital world. In *Geographies of Commemoration in a Digital World: Anzac@ 100* (pp. 1-23): Springer.

Dufoix, S. (2016). *The dispersion: A history of the word diaspora* (Vol. 1): Brill.

Durkheim, E. (2016). The elementary forms of religious life. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 52-67): Routledge.

Gallarza, M. G., & Gil Saura, I. (2020). Consumer value in tourism: a perspective article. *Tourism Review, 75*(1), 41-44.

Holbrook, M. B. (1994). The nature of customer value: an axiology of services in the consumption experience. In *Service quality: New directions in theory and practice* (pp. 21-71): SAGE Publications, Inc.

Holbrook, M. B. (1999). Consumer value. *A framework for analysis research*, 5-14.

Holbrook, M. B. (2006). Consumption experience, customer value, and subjective personal introspection: An illustrative photographic essay. *Journal of business research, 59*(6), 714-725.

Hua, A. (2005). Diaspora and cultural memory. *Diaspora, memory, identity: A search for home*, 191-208.

Huber, J. T., & MacDonald, D. A. (2012). An investigation of the relations between altruism, empathy, and spirituality. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 52*(2), 206-221.

Jensen, B., Annan-Diab, F., & Seppala, N. (2018). Exploring perceptions of customer value: the role of corporate social responsibility initiatives in the European telecommunications industry. *European Business Review, 30*(3), 246-271.

Johnson, J. M., & Rowlands, T. (2012). *The interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviewing*: SAGE.

Karabegović, D. (2019). Who chooses to remember? Diaspora participation in memorialization initiatives. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 42*(11), 1911-1929.

Moufahim, M., & Lichrou, M. (2019). Pilgrimage, consumption and rituals: Spiritual authenticity in a Shia Muslim pilgrimage. *Tourism Management, 70*, 322-332.

Nansen, B., Kohn, T., Arnold, M., van Ryn, L., & Gibbs, M. (2017). Social media in the funeral industry: On the digitization of grief. *Journal of Broadcasting Electronic Media, 61*(1), 73-89.

Salemink, O. (2022). Remembrance, commemoration, and revolutionary apparitions: Ritualizing connections with the past and the future in Vietnam. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam* (pp. 556-572): Routledge.

Sánchez-Fernández, R., Iniesta-Bonillo, M. A., & Holbrook, M. B. (2009). The conceptualisation and measurement of consumer value in services. *International Journal of Market Research, 51*(1), 1-17.

Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of business research, 22*(2), 159-170.

Shimane, K. (2014). *Funeral ceremony as an embedded social capital.* Senshu University,

Sweeney, J. C., & Soutar, G. N. (2001). Consumer perceived value: The development of a multiple item scale. *Journal of retailing, 77*(2), 203-220.

Thorne, S. (2014). Applied interpretive approaches. *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research, 10*.

Ulvoas-Moal, G. (2010). Exploring the Influence of Spirituality: A New Perspective on Senior Consumers' Behavior. *Advances in Consumer Research, 37*.

Um, K. (2018). Diasporas and the Politics of Memory and Commemoration. In *Routledge handbook of diaspora studies* (pp. 328-335): Routledge.

Varshneya, G., Das, G., & Khare, A. (2017). Experiential value: a review and future research directions. *Marketing Intelligence Planning, 35*(3), 339-357.

Vaughan, F. (1991). Spiritual issues in psychotherapy. *Journal of Transpersonal psychology, 23*(2), 105-119.