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Consumer Behaviour Towards Purchasing Feng Shui Goods: An Empirical Study from Vietnam

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Abstract

Religions and beliefs can affect the shopping behaviors of its followers and practitioners. However, the knowledge about the factors that motivate, facilitate and even constrain customers' purchase of spiritual goods, such as feng shui items, is limited. Therefore, in this study, I examined the reasons, facilitators, and constraints of purchasing spiritual goods from the buyers' perspective. Two research questions directed the examination process, including (1) why users buy spiritual goods? And (2) what factors may facilitate or constrain the purchase and use of spiritual goods? Using Vietnam's feng shui market as the context, I applied the autoethnographic and ethnographic methods to collect and analyze the data. I found that the two main reasons to purchase the feng shui items were the products' meaning and beauty. In addition, I observed three groups of factors that could facilitate or constrain the purchase and use of feng shui items, including information about the products and their sellers, disposable income and life stage of the buyers, and price and authenticity of the products. Finally, based on these findings, I discussed the practical implications for managing the spiritual goods market in Vietnam.

Keywords: Feng Shui, Superstition, Power Stone, Spiritual Meaning

JEL Classification Code: M00, M10, M30, Z12

1. Introduction

People follow or practice a religion or a belief due to a variety of reasons, for example, the health, emotional and spiritual benefits of the related activities (Ferraro & Kim, 2014; Mochon et al., 2011; Ngo, et al., 2021; Nguyen, Than, & Nguyen, 2020). However, the following and practicing are grounded not only on the non-material principles but also supported by certain material objects, such as books and artifacts (Bader & Lockhart, 2006; Kendall et al., 2010). The material objects can be treated as sacred and informative articles in religious sites and museums (Berns, 2016; Levi & Kocher, 2013) or as transactional items in the market (Johnson, 2016;

Maclaran & Scott, 2009). In the latter case, the market can be observed everywhere, from the intra-transactional markets in the East as well as in the West, to the inter-transactional markets between the East and the West.

Despite its prevalence, knowledge about the spiritual goods market is relatively limited. The existing research shows that religions and beliefs can affect the shopping behaviors of followers and practitioners (Agarwala et al., 2019; DeWall & Van Tongeren, 2021; Sierra et al., 2018). As a result, this understanding has been used to create the goods and define their respective prices (Tam et al., 1998). In one study, Zaidman and Lowengart (2001) discovered that sellers try to embed the meanings and, thus, the authenticity of the merchandized objects. In another study, Løøv (2016) found that buyers also search for the meanings that the objects carry and transfer. Nevertheless, we have little knowledge about the factors that motivate, facilitate, and even constrain customers' purchase of spiritual goods. More understanding, therefore, is needed to support the development of the spiritual goods market in the future.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the reasons, facilitators, and constraints of spiritual goods purchase from the buyers' perspective. This purpose is

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detailed by the following two research questions: (1) what are the reasons users buy spiritual goods? And (2) what factors may facilitate or constrain the purchase and use of spiritual goods? Given the exploratory nature of the study, I choose to employ autoethnography and netnography methods. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the literature about spiritual goods on the one hand and provide implications for the management of the spiritual goods market in the future on the other hand.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Spiritual Goods Customers

Customers are internally motivated to purchase an object by a variety of values attached to it. With spiritual goods, the spiritual and symbolic values (Becker et al., 2018), such as a sense of closeness to the supernatural powers and a sense of superiority, are no doubt one of the most important ones (LaMothe, 2004). In addition, emotional values, such as peace and comfort, can also be observed (Kindermann & Riegel, 2018). Moreover, when a spiritual item is used as a piece of jewelry or decoration, the aesthetic and functional values are apparent (Bruland, 2013). Finally, it should be noted that spiritual goods are any material objects that link to or connect with a religion or a belief, which can help facilitate and support the achievement of the expected values.

Customers are also externally facilitated or constrained by several factors. On the one hand, the connectedness between/among the goods, the sellers, the buyers, and the co-buyers may help facilitate a transaction (Naseri & Elliott, 2011; Wang et al., 2018). On the other hand, the price and authenticity of an item, especially these of the valuable or antique ones (e.g., gold, precious stones, and ancient artifacts), may be considered a risk factor and, thus, may restrain the purchasing behavior (Conrad, 2016; Vaidyanathan, 1999).

From another perspective, due to the nature of the spiritual goods and the level of religiosity, atheism/agnosticism or superstition may also affect the purchase of such objects (Rehman & Shabbir, 2010). Attitude toward conserving cultural and natural resources is another potential controlling factor (Collins et al., 2017; Karlström, 2005). These factors represent some personal characteristics of the customers.

2.2. The Autoethnography and Netnography Methods

Autoethnography is a research method by which a researcher describes and analyzes their own experiences in order to understand a given research issue (Adams et al., 2015). In the field of marketing and management, this method can be adapted to examine a variety

of customer-related phenomena (Hackley, 2016). For example, Holbrook (2005) and Scarles (2010) presented their interpretations of customer values and perceived meanings via collections of photographs. Alternatively, Chin (2007), by means of diaries, explored the complex nature of modern consumer life. Recently, Kapoor et al. (2020), applying the autoethnographic method, explained how personal identity was negotiated and constructed in the context of dance consumption.

Despite its popularity, the reliability and validity of autoethnography as a research method are usually doubted. For example, autoethnography is often regarded as “too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic,” which is inappropriate with scientific research (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). In addition, the autoethnographic data is said to be “supposedly biased” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). However, such problems may happen to or may be mentioned by researchers unfamiliar with this method (Holt, 2003). In fact, if it is implemented in a systematic, analytic and critical manner, autoethnography can be a powerful qualitative research method (Jones, 2016; Winkler, 2018).

Additionally, the inclusion of information from other sources can help to reduce the bias and subjectivity of the original autoethnographic dataset. For example, interviews and discussions with other individuals and experts can generate external information to triangulate the internal data (Oppermann, 2000). Alternatively, netnography can be implemented to develop or gather additional information from the related individuals or communities on the Internet world (An & Alarcón, 2021; Terziyska & Damyanova, 2020). Thus, the data of netnography is similar to this of the conventional ethnographic method, with one significant difference in the setting: online vs. onsite.

3. Research Methods and Materials

The context of this study is Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia and a neighbor to the two very big cultures, China and India. Given its geo-cultural location and current economic status, Vietnam has become an interesting market where customers' demand for spiritual goods is apparent, on the one hand, and the supply of such items is increasing, on the other (Hüwelmeier, 2016; Kendall et al., 2010).

In this study, my experiences as a frequent buyer and user of spiritual goods served as the initial source of information (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011). Next, in order to validate and expand this information, I applied the netnography method (Kozinets, 2002) to observe the activities of both buyers and sellers of spiritual goods on Internet-based platforms. I specifically referred to the content posted or shared on websites and social media of spiritual goods sellers and other sources, including product descriptions, news articles, and user comments. Among them, I was particularly enriched by the

articles about the negative aspects of spiritual goods purchase and use (Anh, 2011; Châu, 2018), an interview with a stone expert (Loan, 2019), and the discussions among members of a forum about spiritual goods on vozforum.org (<https://vozforum.org/threads/topic-giai-dap-tat-tan-tat-ve-da-phong-thuy.45561/>). After that, I chose some suitable individuals from my friend list who I knew to be buyers or users of spiritual goods and interviewed them online for further information in August 2020. Specifically, I talked to Thu (female, 35, university lecturer), Hoai (female, 44, senior manager), and Duc (male, 36, journalist). Thu also told me stories about her mother and sister; Hoai gave me some information about her mother, while Duc informed me what he knew about his retired boss and a jewelry-maker friend (both of them were male). After the interview with Duc, I reached the phase in which the information was saturated (Saunders et al., 2018). In other words, my answers for the two research questions were satisfactorily justified, supported (to accept an answer) or contrasted (to reject an answer), and triangulated.

Since the range of spiritual goods is very diverse, I opted to focus on one particular product: power stones and similar items (power stones in short). The reasons for this selection are several. First, power stones are undoubtedly spiritual objects with a long history in many cultures, both in the East and the West (Rapp, 2009). Second, power stones can be purchased regularly, unlike other sacred religious or spiritual goods, due to its popularity and availability. Third, the transaction of this particular product is often linked with certain issues, such as illegal mining, theft, and counterfeit, which may concern both the buyers and sellers (Naylor, 2010). Together, these points promise an interestingly mixed understanding of both the good and the bad sides of power stones to purchase, particularly religious or spiritual goods purchase, in general.

Power stones, however, are often regarded by Vietnamese people as feng shui items. The name of the goods has revealed its spiritual nature since feng shui is considered to be the philosophy of setting and placing elements in an environment to increase the utilization of positive energy (Bonaiuto et al., 2010). The terms “feng shui” and, hence, “feng shui goods” do not originate from the local Vietnamese culture but are borrowed from China, where the philosophy was invented and has been applied for thousands of years (Emmons, 1992). Therefore, from now on, I will refer to power stones and the likes as “feng shui items.”

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Reasons to Buy Feng Shui Items

4.1.1. The Meaning of the Items

I had my first feng shui item when I was in elementary school. It was a green glass pendant in the “wine gourd” shape. I did not remember how I got the pendant, but I can

still recall the feeling of being very lucky wearing it, although I lost it later.

I only bought the next feng shui item in December 2015, a few months before my graduation from my doctoral program in March 2016. At that time, I had been very stressed with my job hunting. I desperately wanted to stay in Japan after my study in a teaching position. Thus, I also searched for external and spiritual help, and the feng shui bracelet made of clear crystals and other semi-precious stones was one of them. (Unfortunately, I cannot remember all of their names now.) But why did I particularly choose these materials? According to ancient Chinese philosophy (Wang, Bao, & Guan, 2020), the universe and everything in it is created by the five elements: metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. These elements interact with (to develop or to ruin) one another to make all life forms (Figure 1). The element of a person who was born in 1983 like myself is water. Clear crystals, as a symbol of the water element, were therefore selected by me. It is said that a water person should wear something related to water (itself) or metal (its creator), and I do believe in that.

Coincidentally or not, I did find my first academic position at a National College of Technology in Fukushima prefecture (Japan) in February 2016, only one month before my graduation. From then on, I have turned myself into a frequent buyer and user of feng shui items. For example, while I bought the clear crystal bracelet at a store, I mainly purchased the beads on Amazon Japan and made the bracelets on my own later on. At first, the materials I chose were those that matched with my elements, such as coral (white and

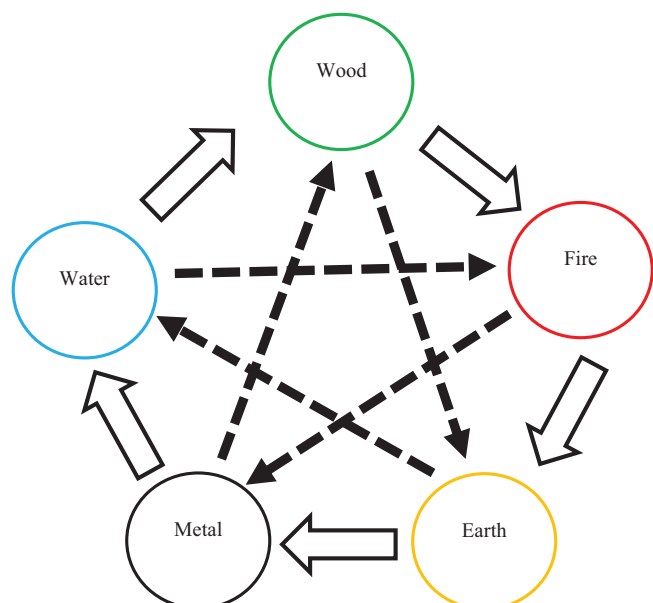


Figure 1: Interactions Among Elements

Note: Solid arrow: Generating power;
Dash arrow: Constraining power.

blue), opal (clear white), and pearl (white and black). Later, I also bought the materials and the colors that might match the element of a particular year. For example, on a year with the water element (2019), I bought some silver and white gold rings since metal is regarded as the creator of water. Recently, I have also been thinking more about my sub-element: ocean water (Table 1). Being ocean water but constrained by the earth element, I think something with the salt-resistant metal element may be suitable. This led to purchasing a terahertz bracelet (a metal-rich kind of stone) (Figure 2a).

Belief in the power of feng shui materials, be it stone, metal, wood, or earth, is common among us Vietnamese buyers and users, even though modern sciences cannot satisfactorily explain this belief in most

cases (Lindeman & Svedholm, 2012). As the people of a communist country whose own culture has been heavily affected by traditional Chinese philosophies, we tend to practice superstition in the hope of achieving our goals (Ly, 2015; Torgler, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that many of us share an idea that the matching of a person and a feng shui item will help transfer the energy kept by the item to the individual so that they may have more luck, health, and success (Damisch et al., 2010). All the interviewers agreed with me about this point to some extent. While Thu, Hoai, and Duc relied on the most basic knowledge about matching one's element and an item, I have gone further by researching the sub-elements and the elements of time and space. Yet, I read an article in which the author (Châu, 2018) mentioned that some people even climbed higher on the ladder of superstition by looking for items once buried in the graves of the dead. Sellers of feng shui goods, indeed, are aware of this psychology. Their sale and promotion strategies are mostly based on this knowledge (Anh, 2011; Châu, 2018).

4.1.2. The Beauty of the Items

With Hoai's mother's generation, a solid band of green jadeite or white nephrite bangle on your wrist is an indicator of the wealth of affluent urban families. Hoai's mother, who still is wearing one of her bands as a piece of jewelry, inherited it from her mother or Hoai's grandmother (Figure 2b). Nowadays, our younger generations have more choices, from necklaces and earrings to bracelets and anklets. On the day of the interview, Thu was wearing a pearl-pendant necklace. She also told me that her sister and mother wore other items mainly as accessories, and her sister changed her accessories on a daily basis. On the other hand, Hoai showed me her collection of *dalbergia tonkinensis* (a kind of rare and precious wood in Vietnam), bracelets, necklaces, and statues. As a result, I have some rings (both with and without stones), bracelets (of various materials I thought could match with my water element), and an anklet (of nylon and black stones). Duc, similar to me, had a ring (white gold and black stone) and a bracelet (also black stone, which matched with his water element). When he was still working, his retired boss put several feng shui items in his office as decorative objects.

When reading viewer comments on YouTube videos about feng shui items, I realized that many viewers and commenters were male. Duc and I, both of us were male, were having accessory feng shui items. One commenter on vozforum.org even wondered whether or not men could wear feng shui items as jewelry, in addition to, of course, women. The answer, no doubt, was positive. Men could wear them, given the colors and probably the shapes, matched with their masculinity. If not, outsiders might use

Table 1: Sub-Elements

Main Element	Sub-Elements
Metal	Sea metal; Sand metal; Sword metal; Precious metal; Wax metal; Jewelry metal
Water	Cave water; Sky water; Stream water; Rapids water; River water; Ocean water
Wood	Forest wood; Meadow wood; Willow wood; Mulberry wood; Conifer wood; Pomegranate wood
Fire	Furnace fire; Forest fire; Volcanic fire; Lamp fire; Lightning fire; Sun fire
Earth	Road earth; Adobe earth; Fortress earth; Highway earth; Roof tiles earth; Desert earth

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuxing_\(Chinese_philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuxing_(Chinese_philosophy)) (accessed on 29 August 2020).

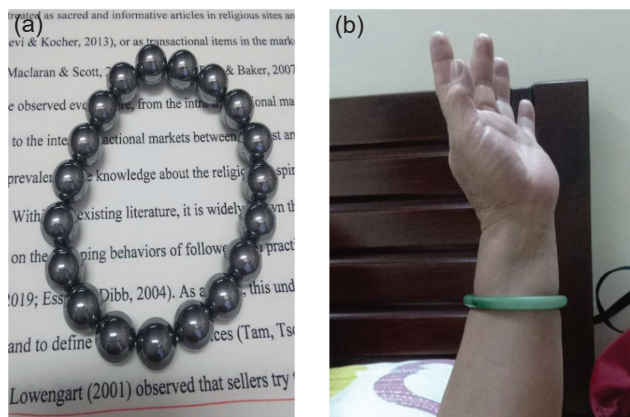


Figure 2: (a) My Terahertz Bracelet; (b) Hoai's Mother's Bangle

the mismatching to indicate one's gender identity, such as being gay. I do not believe in this interpretation much since the latest must-have jewelry for men is pearl, a material conventionally thought to be the possession of women only (Gallagher, 2020). However, a few years ago, when buying pearls, I usually chose irregular shapes, such as baroque, to make them less feminine.

Also, being bought as accessories or decorative objects, feng shui items are doubtlessly beautiful and have some certain monetary value. I once watched a video on YouTube about four sisters selling their inherited aquamarine rings and getting good prices. I wondered whether feng shui items can be considered as investments or not, and thus, I asked my interviewers about this. Despite my expectation, Thu, Hoai, and Duc did not regard their feng shui items like that. The reason they gave me was that the value of semi-precious stones, for example, was small. My netnography research also confirmed their explanation. Perhaps, investment only is the purpose of certain stone experts and dealers, who have real and deep knowledge about stones' natural and economic values (Loan, 2019).

4.2. The Facilitators and Constraints of Feng Shui Items Purchase and Use

4.2.1. Information

Information is a facilitator of the purchase and use of feng shui items, regardless of whether the buyers and users are knowledgeable or not. For example, I bought more feng shui stones after doing much research about them. Similarly, Duc bought feng shui items for himself or as presents after consulting with his jewelry-maker friend and with his own experiences. On the other hand, new buyers might know nothing about their elements and the powers of the stones. They posted questions on discussion forums or directly asked the sellers, then purchased their favorite items. The following are the quotes that I took and translated from the discussion thread on vozforum.org with the help of Google Translate (via a translation – back-translation process).

***Vozforum.org member 1:** I was born in 1995; my element is fire. Which stone is best for me? Please inbox me about the price?*

***Vozforum.org member 2:** My element is metal (sword metal). I was born in 1993, the year of the rooster (Quý Dậu in Vietnamese). Which bracelet or ring, and which color, are suitable for a metal person?*

Thus, information might come from a variety of sources. Duc, for example, mainly relied on organic or noncommercial information gathered through his own

experiences or word-of-mouth of acquaintances (Gartner, 1993). On the other hand, the new buyers consulted induced or commercial information provided directly by the sellers (Gartner, 1993). I referred to both sources. And I must admit that the Internet has provided a rich platform for both organic and induced information (Micu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020). For example, when I was doing the netnography research, advertisements about feng shui items appeared on my personal Facebook page. If I were curious, as were many other customers (Kawaf & Istanbuluoglu, 2019), I would click on the ads and visit the sites for more information. I would find pictures and descriptions of the products on the sites and would buy something there. Thus, online stores made the feng shui market more extensive and more popular in addition to traditional stores.

4.2.2. Disposable Income and Life Stage

Disposable income and life stage serve either as a facilitator or a constraint on purchasing and using feng shui items. I am a tenured university lecturer in my late-30s and still am single. Yet, I live a simplification-oriented lifestyle with which material goods are not prioritized items in my shopping list. Thus, I have plenty of disposable income to buy feng shui items whenever the compulsion attacks me. Thu, also a tenured university lecturer in her mid-30s, has a family with two small children. She could spend half of her monthly salary on a necklace when she was still single. But when she became a mother and the keeper of her household budget, she decided against unnecessary items for herself, such as feng shui goods (see the quote below).

***Thu:** After my husband successfully defended his doctoral thesis, he told me to buy myself a stone bangle. I liked a new item, but I did not buy any since I am the keeper of household money. Moreover, we were expecting a new child. So, I only frequented Phuong's Facebook page to look at the products but did not buy any (Phuong is a common acquaintance of both Thu and I).*

Thu still was frequenting the site of an acquainted seller, but only as a window shopper (Chen et al., 2019). She, however, might buy some items as gifts for other people, such as her elder daughter and her husband's academic instructor (Thu's husband was her coworker). Duc, a father, shared the same spending rationale with Thu. Nonetheless, Hoai had more money to spend on herself because her children were older. Despite that, she might not buy more feng shui items since she had other needs as well. More importantly, she was in a position that allowed her chances to be given feng shui goods as gifts. The *dalbergia tonkinensis* wood items she was keeping were some of them.

The relationship between disposable income and life stage and spending habits has been verified by previous studies (Carroll et al., 1994; Fogel & Schneide, 2011). However, other factors may also facilitate or constrain one's spending. For example, when Thu bought a feng shui item as a charm to protect her daughter or as a gift to compensate a person in power, she was driven by extrinsic egoistic motivation (Krebs, 1991). Specifically, although it seemed that Thu gave others presents in the hope of making them healthy or happy, which was an altruistic motivator, she was indeed searching for her self-assurance and happiness (Dunn et al., 2008), knowing that her child was protected. In addition, her husband's instructor was compensated, which was an egoistic motivator. On the other hand, Hoai, Duc, and I, when we bought some feng shui items for ourselves, were driven by internal egoistic motivation.

From another perspective, while I might briefly hesitate to buy corals since this could increase the ocean environment's degradation (biospheric environmental concern) (Snellgar, 2006), Thu and Duc did not consider the environmental sustainability issue. Duc further said that he only lived in the present and did not care much about the future. This observation, however, was different from what the literature has indicated (Collins et al., 2017; Karlström, 2005). Perhaps the level of altruism as a personal trait characteristic of each individual will affect how they think about preserving feng shui materials, such as semi-precious stones and woods, as natural resources (Bréchet & Lambrecht, 2009).

4.2.3. Price and Authenticity

The majority of the feng shui items are often handmade from semi-precious materials, whose monetary values are low to medium (Loan, 2019). Moreover, their powers or energies are said to be fading gradually (Loan, 2019), and many of them can be made artificially or faked (Eliseev et al., 2009). Therefore, expensiveness and inauthenticity are the two factors that can constrain the purchase and use of feng shui items, similar to these of other consumption products (Slonim & Garbarino, 1999; Youn & Kim, 2017).

Thu (an interviewee mentioned previously), for example, did not buy a new stone bangle because a real one was too expensive. When purchasing on Amazon, I mainly chose rough-looking stones or chip stones because they were cheaper and probably more authentic (on my judgment). From another perspective, stone experts advised us to buy certified products (Loan, 2019). A seller, Phuong (mentioned earlier in Thu's quote), obtained official certificates for high-value products. However, most of us buyers are not knowledgeable and experienced enough to identify fake or imitated products. On the other hand, the majority of the sellers are almost free with their prices and product offers (Anh, 2011). Therefore, customers rely on or are told to rely

on acquaintances to buy feng shui items. For example, Duc, Thu, and I have friends who are doing feng shui businesses. Other customers may talk to one another in open discussion forums, such as that on vozforum.org. With Vietnamese people in general, this kind of information reference is prevalent (Nghiêm-Phú, 2018).

To overcome these constraints, buyers may set a price limit and buy things within this limit (see the below quote).

Vozforum.org member 3: I want to buy a bracelet within a 500.000 – 800.000 Vietnamese Dong budget; which one should I buy?

The authenticity of the products, in such cases, might not be the top priority. So, on the one hand, I, with a certain understanding and a certain amount of doubt, on the other, chose a certified seller on Amazon in one of my latest transactions there (the terahertz beads). I accepted that the price was higher than my previous choices but was somewhat guaranteed that the products probably were authentic. But, of course, without decent knowledge, experiences, and even machines, we could never know for sure whether a feng shui item in the market was real or not.

5. Conclusion

Based on autoethnographic and netnographic information, I realized that the two main reasons for buying feng shui items were the meaning and the beauty of the products. In addition, I found three groups of factors that can facilitate or constrain the purchase and use of feng shui items, including information about the products and their sellers, disposable income and life stage of the buyers, and price and authenticity of the products. These factors seem to be shared by both buyers and sellers on the feng shui goods market.

My observation is consistent with that of previous studies regarding the spiritual meaning of spiritual goods (LaMothe, 2004; Løøv, 2016; Zaidman & Lowengart, 2001). It is also in line with other studies concerning these items' functional and aesthetic meaning once they are used as accessories or pieces of jewelry (Bruland, 2013). Consequently, combining these meanings in a simple and single item gives users, including me, a sense of calmness, happiness, and self-assurance (Kindermann & Riegel, 2018). These feelings mostly reflect the egoistic values that motivate certain customers to buy a spiritual item for themselves or others. The symbolic meaning, such as the feelings of being important or wealthy, is not apparent since the majority of the products are handmade from semi-precious materials and have low-to-medium monetary values.

In addition, the factors that facilitate or constrain the purchase and use of spiritual goods are similar to these of other commercial products (Carroll et al., 1994; Fogel &

Schneide, 2011; Slonim & Garbarino, 1999; Soto-Acosta et al., 2014; Youn & Kim, 2017). While a lack of information may not discourage an individual customer from buying an item, a lack of money or inauthenticity definitely does. Likewise, a high price and is in a critical stage of life can also dissuade an individual customer. Thus, in order to increase customers' purchase intention, sellers of spiritual goods must ensure that their products have a certain level of authenticity and are adequately priced. They must also prepare and provide sufficient information about these elements (authenticity and price), as well as the potential spiritual meanings of their products (Hanks et al., 2016). It should be noted that it is the perceived matching between a customer and a product, not the connectedness between a customer and a seller or a peer (Naseri & Elliott, 2011; Wang et al., 2018), the fundamental belief that motivates a customer to purchase a spiritual item.

Spiritual belief or superstition, in general, can significantly motivate customers to buy and use spiritual goods (Sierra et al., 2018). However, with its ethnographic method, my study could not identify the differences among customers with different levels of superstition, if there are any (Torgler, 2007). Future studies, therefore, may apply the structured methods to survey a larger sample of spiritual goods customers to identify this particular issue. In addition, the interaction between superstition and other private characteristics of the customers, such as disposable income and life stage, could not be examined either. This is another direction for investigation in the future. Moreover, only one product was examined in this study. Therefore, the situations of other popular feng shui and religious or spiritual products of Vietnamese people, such as ghost money (“vàng mã” in Vietnamese) and lucky numbers (e.g., vehicle plate and phone numbers), were overlooked. The addressing of this issue can extend the knowledge about the spiritual goods market to another level.

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