



2018

Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals

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Recommended Citation

Drenten, Jenna M. and Zayer, Linda Tuncay. Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals. *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, 46, : 231-236, 2018. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Business: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals

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Our research examines how digital virtual consumption enables family rituals in four ways: 1) they provide virtual ritual artifacts 2) they aid in locating ritual scripts 3) they build capacities in ritual performance and 4) they extend the reach of ritual audiences. In turn, this process aids in constructing family identities.

[to cite]:

Linda Tuncay Zayer and Jenna Drenten (2018) , "Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 46, eds. Andrew Gershoff, Robert Kozinets, and Tiffany White, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 231-236.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2411346/volumes/v46/NA-46>

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Contemporizing Scholarship on Consumption Rituals

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Paper #1: Ritual Scholarship in Marketing: Past, Present and Future

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Paper #2: The Ritualistic Dimension of Microlending

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Paper #3: Stigmatization of a Cultural Ritual

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Paper #4: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In his pioneering article on rituals and consumer behavior, Dennis Rook defines rituals as expressive, symbolic, and repeated behaviors that are “performed with formality, seriousness and inner intensity” (1985, 252). Marketing scholars have studied the importance of rituals for consumers and marketers to individual consumers, consumer communities, consumer-marketer interactions, and culture. Rituals transfer meaning to consumption goods (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; McCracken 1986), enhance consumption experiences (Epp and Price 2008), and shape and influence the identities of consumers (Schouten 1991). Marketers successfully rely upon rituals to establish the iconicity and authenticity of brands by incorporating these enactments in marketer-consumer exchanges (Arnould and Price 1993), commercial spaces (O’Guinn and Belk 1989), marketing messages (Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2012), and consumer socialization practices (Arsel and Bean 2012).

Although rituals remain a popular topic in consumer research, three broad areas noticeably warrant further investigation. First, scholars need to acquire a better understanding of the roles various market actors (e.g. marketers, consumers, service providers) play in perpetuating and valorizing consumer rituals in non-US contexts. Second, research on the “dark side” of rituals (e.g., the negative experiences and detriments consumers may experience by engaging in them) is limited, despite the consumer-welfare implications of such inquiry. Third, as Belk (2013) observes, extant research on rituals neglects exploring the intersection of the digital space and rapid technological changes with consumer rituals.

In this special session, we highlight these gaps by reviewing extant ritual scholarship, addressing these gaps through illustrative research, and pointing towards avenues for future research on contemporary consumer rituals. The authors of Paper #1 review thirty years of research on consumer rituals to examine the roles of rituals with regard to consumer identities, objects, experiences, relation-

ships, cultural institutions, and market interactions. In doing so, they also identify important areas for future research. In Paper #2, the authors examine moralized rituals of market actors who offer micro-loans to consumers in a poverty setting. Paper #3 investigates how stakeholders stigmatized a coming-of-age cultural ritual in Norway, denoting it as “dark-side” ritual activity and highlighting its consumer-welfare consequences. Finally, in Paper #4, the authors study how family identity is shaped by a digital platform, through the influence of digital forces on family rituals.

This session appeals to the need for making ritual scholarship consonant with consumer experiences and consumption practices in the contemporary market landscape. The papers included uncover potential areas for future research, focusing on how rituals influence consumer behavior in today’s globalized and digitized marketplace. Interested audiences should include the broad spectrum of scholars interested in ritual behavior, CCT research, and consumer welfare.

Ritual Scholarship in Marketing: Past, Present and Future

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since Rook (1985) first described important linkages between rituals and consumer behavior, scholars have examined consumer rituals from the perspectives of the individual consumer, marketers, marketing exchanges, and cultural institutions. New modes of communication and expression (e.g., digital media), and globalization calls for a thorough understanding of the consumption-related ritual topics, and what areas they should explore in the future. In this paper, we systematically review articles in the top marketing and consumer behavior journals to provide an overview of the current composition of ritual scholarship, and of prospective areas for future research. In so doing, we hope to categorize ritual scholarship into broad conceptual domains and evaluate our current understanding of rituals in each, identify gaps in our understanding based on the changing market environment, and suggest areas of inquiry to address these gaps.

We examined articles in the top twelve marketing journals identified in the SCImago Journal Rank of all marketing journals, each with an impact factor of at least 2.5. We searched for articles pertaining to consumption rituals in the twelve journals by consulting the three business databases included in the EBSCO database. Of these journals, five included pertinent articles: *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and the *Journal of Retailing*. We determined that the authors’ foci led to an emergent partition of the literature into five domains (albeit with a few overlaps). The research team engaged in close reads and iterative discussion of articles, identifying various themes and research extensions within each domain. The themes are: foundational, macro-level, meso-level, marketplace-level, and micro-level.

Foundational

This domain includes conceptual articles that define and describe the construct of consumption rituals, and theoretical papers that explore how rituals influence consumer behavior. The field continues to develop theoretically around the initial definition and conceptual exploration of consumption rituals that Rook (1985) offers. Research examines how rituals transfer meaning to objects through

exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment (McCracken 1986). During the process of meaning transfer, rituals may result in commodities becoming decommoditized (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), which may apply to both material and digital possessions of consumers (Belk 2010; 2013).

Micro-level

We delineate micro-level ritualistic consumption as involving individuals, dyads, or families. A dominant theme in these articles is people's reliance on rituals to help them socialize others' consumption practices, particularly through family rituals (Epp, Schau and Price 2014). Micro-level studies reveal ritual socialization practices may be highly gendered (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), and that brands can be powerful forces of socialization (Diamond et al. 2009). The micro-domain also examines interconnections between rituals and identity (Bradford 2015; Schouten 1991).

Meso-level

Meso-level articles focus on how rituals influence sociologically--similar groups of people who interact within or outside of market-mediated contexts (Kates 2004). We find that rituals at the meso-level primarily serve four emergent functions: socialization, belongingness, identity maintenance, and resistance. Within meso-contexts, rituals indoctrinate consumers into a collective, helping them socialize with other consumers in communal settings (Wooten 2006). Within groups such as brand communities, rituals may also help consumers deepen their connections and social relations to other consumers (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Meso-level research also highlights how ritual artifacts assist consumers to form or sustain their identities (Mehta and Belk 1991; Ritson and Elliott 1999), and sometimes also transform identities within groups (Belk 1992).

Marketplace-level

This domain pertains to the marketers' use of rituals. By far, the most pervasive way they do so is to help them iconize a marketplace. Ritualization is also one of the key socialization practices marketers leverage for their consumers (Arsel and Bean 2012). Other marketplace-level articles explore how practitioners use rituals to enhance aspects of the buyers/seller or customer/provider relationship (Sherry 1990), especially customer relationships and customer perceptions of the buying experience (Arnould and Price 1993). Research highlights the importance of language in marketers' rituals, and how marketers rely on performative, symbolic, and shared aspects of language to achieve customer-related goals (Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2012; Sherry and Camargo 1987).

Macro-level

Articles that we classify in the macro domain locate rituals within cultural phenomena. The entry of market forces in socio-economic spaces can spur new rituals, or reformulate the meaning of existing ones (Callon 2016; Vikas, Varman, and Belk 2015). Consumers use rituals as mechanisms to negotiate and interact with their cultural environments (Sherry 2000) and as sources of identity-related meanings (Arnould 1989; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011).

We find extant articles typically do not focus on ritual aspects or elements that make them more or less efficacious. Specifically, future research could explore how rituals connect to a broader range of theoretical constructs (e.g., discourses, practices, and sentiments). In addition, research could ask: What roles do various actors (e.g., marketers, consumers, service providers) enact in perpetuating and valorizing rituals? How do the elements of ritual practices relate to

the individual and/or collective emotions of consumers? We also find inadequate investigation of the beneficial or detrimental outcomes of engaging in consumption rituals. Ritual scholarship also needs to capture the impact of current and disruptive dynamics in consumer culture (e.g., marketplace globalization; dominance of digital consumer culture). Finally, we identify the importance of ritual(s) scholarship in unexplored regions (e.g. non-US countries), economies (e.g. B-O-P; emerging) and cultural categories.

The Ritualistic Dimension of Microlending

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The rise of microcredit as a popular tool for fighting poverty (Mader 2015), begs the question of how debt came to be seen as cure for poverty. The question becomes all the more pertinent with the recent popularization of online microlending, or the provision of interest-free credit to low-income borrowers through online platforms such as Kiva.org (Bajde 2013, Schwittay 2014). Every day, millions of lenders around the world devote their time, money and energy to low-income borrowers with the hope of helping them escape poverty. Despite the growing skepticism among development experts regarding the capacity of microlending to actually alleviate poverty and extensive media coverage on the damaging effects of microdebt (Banerjee and Jackson 2017), online microlending continues to thrive (Schwittay 2014).

Our study addresses this puzzle by investigating the role of ritual in the moralized market of online microcredit. We draw upon a four-year multi-method investigation of the online microcredit market, assembled by microlending platforms and microfinance institutions to attract interest-free capital from potential lenders. We show how this moralized market facilitates rituals of generativity (Magatti 2017), through which lenders adopt the role of socially-generative actors who generously help the poor and generatively tackle the problem of poverty. Through these rituals microcredit is dramatized as a potent and virtuous solution to social problems (i.e., poverty), and lenders are enthused and energized to act as generative and responsible moral actors by investing their money, time, and energy in microloans.

To holistically investigate the moralized market of microcredit, we followed the action of diverse market actors (Martin and Schouten 2014) via participant observation and interviews with lenders, borrowers, and microcredit professionals (n=27 interviews), and conducted a systematic analysis of microlending websites, promotional material, and media. During data analysis, we moved iteratively between data and theory, and between emerging analytical themes and relevant theoretical frames (Thompson and Troester 2002).

Our study unpacks microlending as a ritual of generativity (Magatti and Giaccardi 2014; Magatti 2017), assembled by microlending platforms to enable lenders to emotionally connect with the poor and empower them to escape poverty. Kiva.org, the world's leading microlending platform, states that microloans "celebrate and support people looking to create a better future for themselves, their families and their communities," giving them the "power to create opportunity for themselves" and "realize their potential." Due to high repayment rates, lenders can recuperate their money and perpetually reinvest it, further magnifying the horizon of opportunity (Varul 2009) for development through financial empowerment.

The rituals of microlending (i.e., selecting the borrower, making the loan, receiving updates, reinvesting repayments) dramatize credit as a potent engine of growth and prosperity for both borrowers and their communities. Microloans obtain a romantic aura of potentiality, typically absent from in other poverty-alleviation rituals (e.g.,

charitable giving). As stated by the lenders interviewed, every loan repayment update proves the loan has helped the borrower to improve his/her life. Some lenders, and even the institutions promoting microlending, do recognize that the power of credit is not infinite. Nevertheless, romantic renditions of microcredit as a magical cure for poverty continue to overshadow the realities of life in poverty and the complexities of development (Bateman 2010; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Banerjee and Jackson 2017).

Further, the ritual of microlending transforms what is essentially a contractual relationship between the lender and the borrower into a relationship of solidarity and care. As Kiva's 'Product Philosophy' states bluntly: "Lending is connecting." Informant-lenders readily embrace this ethos. They convey how the stories and pictures of borrowers published on the platforms enable them to recognize the qualities and challenges they share with borrowers, despite their vastly different life circumstances. This enables lenders to emotionally connect with the poor and experience a sense of solidarity (i.e., shared commonality and a willingness to help others). Periodic loan updates and repayments temporally extend the ritual, enabling the lenders to experience the loan process as a prolonged interaction with the borrowers (Flannery 2007).

However, our data also shows the described rituals of generativity can be very one-sided. The borrowers interviewed know nothing of the lenders and their noble intentions. Rather, borrowers experience the loans as a commercial exchange with the local microfinance institutions, which actually charge interest rates to cover their expenses. They do not fully understand why their pictures and stories are recorded and shared online. Market-mediated rituals of microlending thus may induce solidarity, responsibility and generativity, but they also mask enduring imbalances of power (Rajak 2011).

The popularity of microlending can at least in part be accounted for by its ritualistic qualities. Online platforms assemble and coordinate flows of stories, images, data, and money to facilitate what we call rituals of generativity. Through these rituals, market resources like credit are dramatized as virtuous engines of social progress, empowerment and solidarity, providing consumers with opportunities to act as generative and responsible moral actors. Further research on moralized rituals is needed to explain the performative dynamics of consumer responsabilization (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) and neo-liberal moral governance (Shamir 2008; Rajak 2011).

Stigmatization of a Cultural Ritual

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cultural rituals are defined as "aesthetic, performative, and symbolic public events occurring on a grand scale that are broadly accessible to consumers" (Otnes, 2018, 489). When creating and sustaining these rituals, stakeholders from various institutions exert different roles in the ritual (e.g., service delivery, legislative permissions, media coverage, social control). This paper explores how such stakeholders stigmatize enactment of a controversial Norwegian ritual. We demonstrate that when concern emerges over the "dark side" of this cultural ritual, stakeholders engage in prolonged, pervasive stigmatization to enact change in ritual participation. We address this question: How do stakeholders in a cultural ritual stigmatize and shape the actions of ritual participants?

Our enabling theory is the "stigma turbine," a framework that "locates...stigma within the broader sociocultural context and illuminates its relationship to forces that exacerbate or blunt stigma" (Mirabito et al., 2016, p. 170). As sources of stigmatization / destigmatization, powerful historical, institutional, and commercial "winds" exert pressure on the turbine. Winds increase or decrease

the stigma, influencing directionality of the turbine toward stigmatization, destigmatization or stagnation (due to conflicting winds). We focus on how the cultural winds specifically influence the "societal" blade of the turbine, representing the meso-level of culture.

The "Russefeiring" or "Russe" is an annual national coming-of-age ritual celebration for Norwegian high school seniors in their final semester. Over the past thirty years, it has evolved into a large-scale, nationally coordinated event comprised of multiple sub-rituals. The most significant artifact (Rook 1985) is the "Russ-bus," a core element enabling participants to "roll to" other Russ events. It serves as a concealed party space away from authorities, schools, and parents. This lack of transparency contributes to conflicts with these stakeholders. Teams of 15 to 25 (mostly male) students invest substantial time, money (from 20,000 to 60,000 USD – focus group interview, 2018; Stavanger Aftenblad, 2017) and effort securing commercial sponsors for their buses, which feature custom logos, branded imagery, theme songs, special apparel, and social-media sites. A well-organized commercial ecosystem of suppliers, service providers, and contractors supports the Russ-bus industry. The bus is increasingly regarded as a disruptive social element, facilitating wild partying, excessive drinking/drug abuse, littering, noise, and irresponsibility. Parents and teachers worry about accidents, deviance, and academic consequences. The police monitor disruptions of public places and traffic violations. These concerns have been ineffectual in shaping norms pertaining to the Russ-bus – until recently.

In 2017, propelled by (among other activities) a stigmatizing media storm (Boydston et al. 2014), "Casanova2017," a Russ-bus team consisting of 25 males, became the national "poster-child" of criticism aimed at the Russ-buses. Its theme song, which the team bought from professional "Russ" song-writers, provided the media with the triggering wind it needed to initiate the stigma turbine. The media featured its song lyrics in headlines, triggering shock in the marketplace, as the lyrics suggested sex with a thirteen-year old girl. The release triggered public debate about the entire Russ-celebration. Casanova2017 faced public outrage, sponsorship withdrawal, condemnation by experts on rape and sexual misconduct, threats to personal safety, and an outcry among female students.

We draw upon four types of qualitative data: interviews, text from social media/the Internet, and written and broadcast news accounts. We created a database of media coverage, comprised of news articles in traditional and social media, recordings of available television and YouTube interviews, and meetings with educators, public authorities (e.g. local police, the Norwegian Public Roads Administration, a collaborating NGO), stakeholders, parents, and students. We analyzed 111 pages of interview transcripts, 321 pages of text in printed media, two documentaries, 228 YouTube videos, several hours of news broadcast, and chronological posts on Instagram and Facebook for themes pertaining to stigmatization activities and consequences. In January 2018, we conducted a focus-group with four members of Casanova2017.

We find stakeholders engage in the following stigmatizing actions: shunning, chastising, scapegoating, and responsabilizing (and/or denormalizing) (Bell et al. 2010), which we define, describe and differentiate in our analysis. The transcript indicates Casanova2017 members are cognizant of these practices: "When you get there and have published such a song – you have nothing to say...In that situation, we felt really small actually" (Focus group interview, January 2018).

Furthermore, these actions wielded both immediate consequences for Casanova2017, and longer-term consequences for Russe celebrations across the nation. Stakeholders involved in the Russ-bus ecosystem supported various agendas and contributed to both ritual

stigmatization and destigmatization. Media and school authorities represented the key stigmatizing forces. Local authorities, as neutral actors, focused on the actual (but relatively small) damage from the Russe celebration, instead of the morality aspects. Commercial actors for the Russ-bus (i.e., apparel suppliers, interior designers and music vendors) played contradicting roles, supporting/maintaining Russ-buses, but also exploiting the existing rebellion underlying the Russe foolishness in their commercial interest. As young consumers, Casanova2017 team members tried to resist these stigmatizing forces, but report feeling powerless and neglected, as stigmatized groups often do (Adkins & Ozanne 2005; Bell et al. 2010; Crockett et al. 2017).

Casanova2017 participants found public apologies and moderating their ritual practices were their only means to moderate the stigma that the winds generated. Commercial endorsers deemed the team untouchable. The stigma of sexual deviance transferred to many Russ-buses, associating them with violence and rape. In addition, the founder/leader of an NGO against sexual violence spoke at the high school of Casanova2017's team leader. The national celebration also saw longer-term consequences. For instance, the "russeknuter" (badges Russ participants earn when completing a task or dare during the festivities) now exclude sexual activities. Nationwide, female Russe participants are more aware of the increasing sexualization of Russ rituals, and now publicly criticize this development (Aftenposten 2018).

Exploring the Intersection of Digital Virtual Consumption and Family Rituals

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ritual experiences contain four "tangible" elements: ritual artifacts; a ritual script; ritual performance role(s); and, a ritual audience (Rook, 1985). In light of a changing consumer culture that is increasingly digitized, how are rituals performed within and shaped by digital platforms and spaces? Belk (2013) specifically calls for research into how the digital world shapes rituals such as gift-giving and collecting. Scant existing research explores how digital spaces shape rituals. One exception is Epp, Price, and Schau (2014) who examine how technologies influence family practices, including rituals, during family physical separations (e.g., due to military service). However, their focus is on how technologies enable the reassembling of family consumption practices. Drenten and Zayer (2018), in their study of digital virtual consumption, highlight the need for future research with regard to how the changing digital landscape impacts rituals. In this vein, we broadly ask, how are consumer rituals shaped by digital virtual consumption?

We detail our findings based on in-depth interviews with fourteen users (ages 21 to 45) of Pinterest, a digital platform that allows users to collect, share, and organize "pins" (images and videos found online). The site claims usage among a third of American online users (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 2016) and boasts 150 million active online users worldwide (Omnicores Agency Report 2017). We follow the conceptualization of Pinterest as a site for digital virtual consumption (see Drenten and Zayer 2018). In total, 506 pages of double-spaced text were analyzed.

We find digital virtual consumption (DVC) enables consumers to perform a wide range of rituals, from personal and small group rituals to rites of passage and aesthetic rituals. In particular, we leverage Molesworth and Denegri-Knott's theoretical work (2013, 223). They identify DVC as a space through which consumers "acquire and test out practices and subject positions, not always possible through either material real or the imagination on its own, but always

linked to both." We focus our analysis on how DVC enables family rituals in particular. We identify four ways DVC supports and enables family rituals: 1) they provide virtual ritual artifacts 2) they aid in locating ritual scripts 3) they build capacities in ritual performance and 4) they extend the reach of ritual audiences. This process, in turn, enables families to create and maintain their identity. Our findings illuminate the changing nature of family rituals in light of digital advances. We also reveal opportunities for marketers to become embedded in these rituals, and to aid in the betterment of consumers' lives through the solidification of family identities. For example, we find DVC serves to foster positive family rituals (e.g., family meal times; nightly parent-child bedtime rituals).

To demonstrate the four ways that Pinterest as a site for DVC supports family rituals, we offer these examples from our data. First, DVC provides virtual artifacts to support family rituals. Tom uses Pinterest to support bedtime rituals with his kids by maintaining a Pinterest board featuring French bulldog images. Tom says he and his kids share the dream of getting a French bulldog. For now, however, they use digital images to support their evening rituals.

... yeah, I like to share [the pictures] with the kids too. At night, we like to look at French bulldog movies and pictures on here, and they are always like, 'Aww, let's get one like that!' It is just cool. We all snuggle together in bed. They will come in and be there, so we are physically close which is kind of cool. Instead of all of us on three devices, we are all on one device...just dreaming about having this dog is kind of fun too. (Tom)

Thus, digital images act as virtual artifacts to support Tom's quality time spent with his children in the evening. DVC acts as an impetus to bring his family closer together—physically and emotionally.

Second, DVC aids in locating scripts for performing family rituals. Our data show various ways consumers turn to Pinterest for direction on how to execute family rituals. Rebecca, who is newly engaged, pins recipes to follow for her future family meals, in anticipation of creating new mealtime rituals with her fiancé: "now I'm not just like cooking for myself, so I feel like I need to like cook a real meal rather than just make myself like half a sandwich". Third, DVC builds capacities in ritual performance. Consumers turn to Pinterest to support executing their ritual performances in the "real world." For instance, Kelsey pins Christmas list ideas to a Pinterest board shared with her parents, who can then click the links to shop for her. This type of capacity-building pinning practice is evident across the data to support a variety of family rituals (e.g., holiday traditions, family vacations, birthday-party planning). Fourth, DVC has the potential to extend the reach of ritual audiences by making family rituals viewable beyond the family unit. Thus, what once may have been a privately shared family ritual is instead emplaced in a public forum that is shared with friends and strangers via social media. For example, Emma's family has strict dietary guidelines due to their oldest son's peanut allergy, which shapes their family mealtime rituals. Emma shares peanut-related recipes and content, knowing her followers will see it: "so people can see how my life can be affected by [my son's peanut allergy]."

Emma uses DVC to educate others about the nuances in her family's mealtime rituals. Notably, some consumers utilize privacy settings on digital platforms to limit who can view their activities. In sum, our data suggest digital virtual consumption supports and facilitates family rituals. This process, in turn, enables the creation and maintenance of family identities.

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