Gettysburg Co-Constructed: Producing and Consuming Narratives in an American Battlefield

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While established marketing knowledge sets the consumption experience apart from production, this paper argues that the creation and development of experiential products are an outcome of a co-constructive process between marketers and consumers. Using the Gettysburg storyscape as the experiential context where narratives are commercialized and consumed, it is shown that while marketers are responsible for staging the storyscape in both substantive and communicative ways, consumers are actively participating in shaping the experiential product by using their prior familiarity with history, by struggling to fill narrative gaps, by re-contextualizing their new experiences, and by vividly using their imagination. This study extends Arnould, Price, and Tierney’s (1998) work on commercial staging, builds on existing under-theorized ideas on consumer agency and the co-construction of experiences, and provides insight on the nature of consumer narrative imagination.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
During the American Civil War, more than 600,000 people were killed while the country was divided by blood and hatred. Today, after 140 years from its ending, the Civil War is still present in the American memory as one of its most defining moments. What is more, vestiges of the big fratricide are located among a plethora of cultural expressions including more than 50,000 publications, hundreds of round tables, courses and seminars, movies, television series and documentaries, museum exhibitions, and battle reenactments. Through what process certain events of the past become meaningful cultural narratives feeding the collective imagination and the associated consumption practices? While established marketing knowledge sets the consumption experience apart from production, it is argued that the creation and development of experiential products are an outcome of a co-constructive process between marketers and consumers. The purpose of this paper is to shed light into the co-constructive nature of experiential products. Viewing cultural narratives as mutually constructed outcomes between producers and consumers who interact in the marketplace offers a new theoretical insight into experiential consumption and contributes to the evolving body of Consumer Culture Theory.

Theoretical insight into the production of cultural narratives is offered by narrative theory whose major premise is that life comes to us in the form of stories. The theoretical framework used in this study adopts a constructivist perspective according to which narratives are not natural phenomena, but human inventions. Narratives are constructed through the interaction of two parties: the storyteller and the listener. On the one hand, the storyteller or the narrator relates the story to his or her audience in a particular medium. On the other hand, listeners of a story play an active role into the construction of the experiential product by actively following the narrative. The final narrative outcome and the quality of the consumption experience will be determined by examining the contributions of both producers and consumers. The American Civil War can be seen as a narrative text where this theory can be further developed.

Ethnographic research was conducted at Gettysburg, a small town in south-central Pennsylvania, where one of the most bloody battles of the American Civil War took place from July 1st to July 3rd of 1863. Fieldwork was carried out during the summer of 2002 and data collection methods included personal semi-structured personal interviews, photo-elicitation, and observation. Overall, fieldwork resulted in a total of 76 interviews where the voices of 125 informants was recorded, 238 photographs, and hundreds of hours of observation. Transcribed interviews offered 430 pages of verbal data.

The findings provide theoretical insight into the co-constructed nature of the Gettysburg narrative. On the production side, service providers are responsible for staging the servicescape in both substantive and communicative ways. The Gettysburg storiescape is substantively staged through its landscape and through a large number of monuments, museums, buildings, and “authentic” artifacts. Communicative staging is being achieved through the interpretation of the stupendous battle by numerous agents. Private businesses offer their own versions of the story. Nothing provides a more detailed and colorful story than a battlefield tour. Tour guides invent and offer a plethora of narrative constructions based on the material they have read and investigated in the national archives. One of the major concerns of the guides is their contact with diverse audience and the subsequent need to adapt their presentation to the visitors’ background. Thus, during a battlefield tour, guides’ presentation becomes a balancing act that struggles to consider the multiple audiences and adjust accordingly.

On the consumption side, visitors’ active participation is subsumed under their effort to follow the narrative. In doing so, consumers at Gettysburg use their prior familiarity with history and they struggle to fill narrative gaps. In order to achieve a deeper understanding, they re-contextualize their new experiences and they use their narrative imagination in order to come closer to what it feels like to live in the story.

The present paper contributes to Consumer Culture Theory by illustrating a theoretical account for understanding dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. In contrast to established knowledge that keeps production separate from consumption, an alternative approach looks at consumption experiences and cultural meanings as products of interaction between producers and consumers. This research supplements and advances the ongoing discussion on consumer agency and the co-construction of experiences by using narrative theory to illustrate the way in which national stories are collectively shaped through the interaction of multiple parties. The narrative of the American Civil War is used as an experiential product and the Gettysburg storiescape is used as the context where interactions between service providers and consumers are studied. According to this account, marketers are responsible for staging the storiescape in both substantive and communicative ways. On their side, consumers use their prior familiarity with the story, they fill narrative gaps, they re-contextualize their narrative experience, and they use their imagination in order to come closer to what it feels like to live in the story.

This paper provides theoretical insight into the market-mediated consumer imagination. As an increasing consumer research attention is paid on imagery elicitation in experiential settings, a co-constructive approach emphasizes the role of stories in sparking consumer imagination. Rooted within the mental imagery theory is the notion that decontextualized static images mirroring the external reality are passively formed in consumer’s mind and are subsequently used in information processing to improve decision-making and enhance purchase outcomes. In contrast, it is theorized in the current work that consumer imagination is an experience with a narrative structure including actors, events, and plots with beginning, middle, and end. It is shown that consumer imagination is a multi-sensory, holistic, and dynamic experience within which consumers actively produce narrative understandings. It is also suggested that imagination as an experience is located at the intersection of the service providers’ effort to stage the servicescape in a narrative way and consumers’ active participation in completing, re-shaping, and (re)living the narrative.

REFERENCES


