The Construction of Memory in the Aftermath of 9/11

Jean-Sebastien Marcoux, HEC Montreal, Department of Marketing, Canada

This paper deals with the construction of social memory in the aftermath of 9/11. It is grounded in an ongoing ethnography conducted since March 2003, on and around the site of Ground Zero. The paper explores the complex, not to say contested, character of the dark tourism that is taking place at Ground Zero. It analyses what attracts pilgrims, tourists and voyeurs to this site which is invested with political and ideological values such as patriotism, as well as images of terror. In doing so, it unveils the value of consumption as part of a broader recovery process, and it culminates in a discussion of the construction of the memory through the means of consumption.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12834/volumes/v34/NA-34

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
needs of adolescents appear to have been routinely overlooked. When adolescents did receive goods, they were often inappropriate for them or completely unneeded. One female adolescent informant related:

“When they came to give us things, it was nice, but never things that we wanted. It was things that they wanted us to have.”

One boy declared:

“I never wanted to see another pack of Ramen noodles.”

Given the consumer behavior literature on the extended self and symbolic consumption (e.g., Belk 1988) as well as research from psychology on Terror Management Theory (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski 1997), adolescent survivors are in particular need of possessions that will allow them to express their identity and build self-esteem. In spite of their particular vulnerabilities and needs, teenagers in the village were not targeted by relief organizations. One possible reason for this is that it is difficult to diagnose the material needs of adolescent survivors. It is relatively easy to find objects that young children will enjoy, yet little is understood about the treasured possessions of teenagers (Kampfner 1995).

Thus, we wanted to gain a better of understanding of the kinds of possessions these teenagers valued, what they would have most appreciated receiving in the months after the tsunami, and which lost goods they sought to replace. We also wanted to understand what methods of distribution would have been most valuable.

In conducting our interviews a set of themes emerged that guided the adolescents in their choices and behaviors in the replacement process. Among the most valuable possessions of our informants prior to the tsunami were objects that made up collections, such as coins, stuffed animals, or comic books. Re-starting a collection appears to have been a priority for teens and thus, when asked what kinds of objects they would most like now, they often mentioned items to restart a collection or to contribute to a recently restarted collection.

In addition, the adolescents repeatedly mentioned the ‘down-time’ that they experienced post-tsunami. There was a sense of restlessness and helplessness that the adolescents felt during this period, when most were in camps and schools had not reopened. The teens yearned for things that would help them occupy time, to give them something to do. When asked what kinds of gifts they would like to have received during this time, objects mentioned by girls were embroidery sets, craft materials, books, puzzles, crossword puzzles, and badminton equipment, and boys wanted building sets, sports equipment (e.g., footballs), and comic books. When asked, they said that these objects would help them occupy their time in the camp. Involvement in the distribution also appeared to have benefits, though teens were rarely asked to participate in relief work. One respondent mentioned that he was able to help aid organizations distribute goods. This activity kept him occupied and made him feel like he was contributing by helping others.

Informants reported that in the weeks after the tsunami they tended to try to obtain replacement goods for their families from relief workers, and when asked generally about what they would have liked to receive at that time, they often referred to food and equipment that the whole family could use. However, when asked, “Imagine if three weeks after the tsunami we took you to a store that only made things for kids your age, what would you want us to get for you?” most had no trouble listing items such as those mentioned above. This led us to develop a menu-based selection process that informants found accessible and easy to use, and we make suggestions to relief organizations based on these findings.

More generally, the techniques we commonly use in marketing can be applied to disaster relief efforts to help the repossessions process. Marketers are very adept at understanding how to uncover and measure consumer needs and desires, and how these vary across segments. Marketing tools can be used to make targeting decisions to help resolve resource allocation issues, and focus initiatives on those who will be most responsive. NGOs have become more and more skilled at marketing to potential donors, and it would be highly beneficial to recipients of aid if these skills were also applied to gaining a better understanding of survivor needs. This suggests an excellent corporate social responsibility opportunity for businesses (and business schools) by sharing marketing knowledge to assist NGOs in better understanding survivor needs.

“The Construction of Memory in the Aftermath of 9/11”
Jean-Sébastien Marcoux, HEC Montreal

Since the end of the second World War, numerous researchers and philosophers such Battaglia (1995), Lowenthal (1997), Nora (1984), Pomian (1999), and Ricoeur (2000) have reflected on Maurice Halbwach’s notion of collective memory. The moral imperative to keep alive the memory of the Shoah, the need to prevent a tragic event such as this one from sinking into oblivion, the necessity to honour what Primo Levi (1995) has called the ‘memory duty’, have lead researchers to define memory more broadly than what is usually the case in psychology, but also look at it as a process which relates to the ways people give meanings to the past, and the ways they approach the future.

Even though the research on social memory remains largely unknown in consumer research, it acquires a particular importance in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001; a context where sentences like “We will never forget” has invaded a multitude of commodities, souvenirs and memorabilia. The relationship between collective memory and consumption becomes even more important in regard to the recent development of death tourism (Lennon and Malcolm 2000; Lloyd 1998; Saunders 2003; Sturken 1997, 2004) on sites as contested as Ground Zero, that are invested with political and ideological values, as well as images of horror. Whereas researches on dark tourism such as those of Sturken (1997) have highlighted the relation between this activity and the formation of a national identity, not to say patriotism, few researches have actually reflected on the role played by consumption in the construction of collective memory. More importantly, consumer researchers themselves have failed to examine critically and reflexively the role of consumption in the construction of memory, as well as the criticisms and the disgust that consumption may raise. Yet, in contemporary situations such as the post 9/11 context, the marketplace provides primary resources involved in the process of memory construction.

The aim of this paper is to unveil the relationships between consumption and collective processes of memory construction. It explores the complex character of the dark tourism that is taking place at Ground Zero. In doing so, it analyses what attracts pilgrims, tourists and voyeurs to this site, as well as the kind of memory that is taking shape as a result of the commodification process. The question that directs this paper is: how is consumption related to the social construction of memory in the aftermath of 9/11?

This paper is grounded in an ethnographic research conducted since March 2003, on and around the site of Ground Zero. It can be situated along the line of the works on social memory undertaken in social sciences, in humanities, in arts history as well as in philosophy. As such, this paper attempts to move beyond the psychological dimensions of the memory; an issue that consumer
The Role of Consumption in Re-establishing Cultural Stability: Case Studies of Disaster

researchers have explored in depth, and which is still attracting a great deal of attention. This paper also draws on CCT research (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and CCT researchers’ interest for collective culture (Marcoux 2005). An ethnographic analysis of the social construction of memory does not only promise to fill in an important gap in consumer research. It may also help push the reflections on memory conducted outside of consumer research in sensitive directions that still need to be explored.

“Tradition and Renewal: Reconstruction of Culture through Consumption”
Michelle F. Weinberger, University of Arizona
Melanie Wallendorf, University of Arizona

This research examines how local residents used the annual tradition of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras as a tool for community recovery following one of the largest natural disasters in U.S. history. We address collective reconstitution of culture by examining how consumption traditions and consumption rhetoric are used to assert social solidarity and demonstrate cultural hegemony.

While other consumer research has studied how individual consumers recover from extreme hardships (c.f. Hill and Stamey 1990; DeLorme, Zinkhan, Hagen 2004), that is not our focus. Instead, we use community activities 6 months after this natural disaster as a vivid context for understanding consumption’s role in the development of social solidarity and community. Theoretically, this research aims to explicate how consumption is used collectively to reconstitute social cohesion and connection for neighborhoods and metropolitan areas. It addresses the means by which the collectivity is glued back together, partially through consumption activities, and the form that the reconstituted culture takes.

The Mardi Gras (Carnival) festival in New Orleans provides a rich context for understanding how deeply embedded consumption traditions are used by locals as a tool for cultural recovery. Certainly, New Orleans’ tourist economy, particularly at Mardi Gras, has grown in importance over the past 30 years (Gotham 2002). Increasing tourism, the popularization of the exchange of beads for nudity (Shrum and Kilburn 1996, Shrum 2004) and the proliferation of excessive drinking within a small French Quarter section of New Orleans has grown to dominate the media and marketing images of Mardi Gras. But our focus is not on the tourist experience (MacCannell 1976) of Mardi Gras evident in these sites.

Instead, our focus is on the festival as a central component of New Orleans culture for residents of the city’s neighborhoods and surrounding areas, dating to 1835 (Mauldin 2004). New Orleaners and their extended family members from surrounding areas spend the weeks leading up to Carnival twenty blocks and a cultural world away from the French Quarter scene. Bearing more resemblance to tailgate parties before a football game than to a wild party, their activities include spending days in folding chairs along grassy St. Charles Avenue with family, friends, and strangers waiting for the many parades that occur periodically through the day. It is a time for spending days socializing, playing, eating, participating in the parades, and collecting during the parades, in the way many of their families have done for decades.

Public celebration of Mardi Gras was threatened in 2006. The destruction that occurred following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the subsequent levee breaks produced a mass exodus of residents and highly politicized discussions concerning the future of the city of New Orleans. At the same time, a fierce debate erupted as to the city’s ability to hold and afford the public festival. A rhetoric of consumption for the sake of tourism dollars was leveraged against a rhetoric of restraint both out of respect for the dead and for reallocation of the public funds that would be required for the rebuilding effort. Ultimately, the festival was given clearance from the city, and many community members returned to New Orleans to participate in the event. During the event, however, locally-oriented participants articulated a different collective reaction: a rhetoric of renewal. The data reveal strong expressions of the importance of the event both at the individual level and the cultural level. While cultural capital continued to mediate the roles that various types of individuals played within the events as Krewe riders, band members, and catchers at different locations along the parade routes (Bourdieu 1984), participants’ ‘emic’ articulations were ones of inclusion, community, and togetherness. Despite the wider cultural prominence of mechanical solidarity and division of labor in U.S. society and at the event, participant expressions and actions asserted the key role of organic solidarity (Durkheim 1960 [1893]) in the recovery process. While rituals such as funerals have long been used to smooth the change required in recovery processes after disasters (van Gennep 1909 [1960]; Turner 1969), this research demonstrates how traditions other than those designed for bereavement and change are used as a tool for the cultivation of social solidarity and cultural recovery.

Data collection for this research occurred in February 2006 as a sited ethnography in New Orleans during the first Carnival following Hurricane Katrina. The data are based on participant observation and in-context interviews as well as a collection of ancillary material objects, 472 photographs, and media documents.

Two emergent themes provide an understanding of the role of collective consumption in the reconstitution of social solidarity. First, data reveal that this calendrical tradition of consumption was perceived by residents to be a fundamental and invaluable component of New Orleans’ culture, one in which families participate year after year. Through participation, cultural normalization and symbolic solidarity are constructed and proven, despite their simultaneous reinvention of the cultural categories of race, class, and gender as a system of social stratification. Second, attempts to hold market forces at bay in order to maintain and prove cultural authority were reflected in anti-sponsorship rhetoric by residents. Ironically, however, the economic boon to the local production system comprised of float makers, costume designers, and bead makers was often used as a secondary justification for the festival’s occurrence, in an unquestioned rhetoric of the moral imperative of economics. Taken together, the data provide key theoretical insights into the means by which consumption is used to (re)constitute social solidarity, and the forms of solidarity that consumption reifies.

REFERENCES