The War on Downloading: a Music Marketplace Drama in Four Acts

Markus Giesler, Schulich School of Business
Marius Luedicke, Schulich School of Business

Prior studies have investigated the dramatic underpinnings of consumption practices and consumer lifestyle orientations. Traditionally, these studies take for granted that the drama-turgical interests of consumers and producers align. Consequently, this research stream has neglected the important role of cultural conflict in driving dramatic consumption. To redress this oversight, we develop and present empirical evidence for the process of marketplace drama. A marketplace drama is a sequence of antagonistic ritualistic performances among opposing groups of consumers and producers, through which their divergent ideological goals are attained and the normative patterns of social interaction in the marketplace are changed. We use this dramaturgical framework to investigate the war on music downloading. Implications for extant literatures on social drama, dramatic consumption and marketplace conflict are considered and future research directions are provided.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12861/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/.
SESSION OVERVIEW
Drama permeates consumer culture. Since Deighton (1992) pioneered the study of performance in consumption and marketing, consumer researchers have extensively explored the persuasive role of drama in advertising (e.g., Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Stern 1994; Escalas and Stern 2003) and services (e.g., Grove and Fisk 1992; Price, Arnould and Tierny 1998; John 1996; Moisio and Arnould 2005). Consumer culture theorists in turn have developed the dramatic underpinnings of consumption practices and consumer lifestyle orientations. Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993), for instance, have analyzed consumers’ dramatic worldview in the context of skydiving. Likewise, Arnould and Price (1993) have portrayed white water rafting clients and guides as dramatic performers. Belk and Costa (1998, p. 234) in turn have portrayed the mountain man rendezvous as a “drama of living.” Most recently, Holt and Thompson (2005) have illustrated how American middle-class men construct themselves dramatically as “men-of-action-heroes” in mundane and improvisational consumption domains.

While these prior elaborations are most relevant to our understanding of the dramatic underpinnings of consumption practices and consumer lifestyle orientations, they also suffer from a key theoretical oversight. Underlying these prior studies is a pervasive dramatic idealism that renders the performances of consumers and marketers as surprisingly playful, harmonious, and apolitical. Consequently, prior studies fail to recognize that social actors with competing dramatic motives sometimes struggle to negotiate, and resolve certain dramatic tensions, uncertainty, and risk. Perhaps this theoretical oversight stems from the fact that consumer culture theorists have too rashly adopted the marketing perspective on drama and performance. As Holt (2002, p. 70) observed, “academic marketing theorizes away conflicts between marketing and consumers.” In this view, marketing “scripts, produces and directs performances for and with consumers” (Deighton 1992, p. 362, italics added). However, by accepting this marketing cohesion as the dramatic norm, consumer researchers have tended to overstimate the playful dimensions of drama and overlook cultural conflict in dramatic consumption.

The purpose of our special session is to redress this theoretical imbalance. Specifically, we seek to contribute to extant consumer literatures on performance and drama by empirically specifying cultural conflict, tensions, and contradictions in dramatic consumption, by developing a conceptual understanding of these empirical instances, and by situating these findings within the broader marketing and performance literatures. We anticipate that our discussant, Eric Arnould, will help the audience to frame, question and debate important issues such as: What is the specific role of conflict in performance? How do certain cultural tensions translate into particular dramatic narratives, roles, and behaviors? How do consumers and producers dramatically construct or modify their personal and symbolic boundaries and social roles? What is the relationship between dramatic performance, cultural legitimacy, and social identity? The presentations are arranged as presenting current investigations on the dramaturgical performances focused on different research perspectives within CCT-perspectives that situate, challenge, and extend prior drama frameworks and knowledge.

First, Markus Giesler and Marius Luedicke develop and present empirical evidence for the process of marketplace drama. Based on a five-year ethnographic investigation on the war on music downloading including interviews, historical data, and cultural observation, they develop a marketplace drama as a series of antagonistic ritualistic performances among opposing groups of consumers and producers, through which their divergent ideological goals are attained and the normative patterns of social interaction in the marketplace are changed. In addition to showing that previous attempts to look at all marketplace performances in terms of purely theatrical, purely experiential, or self-oriented dimensions miss much of what impels consumers and producers to perform, they also extend fundamental Victor Turner’s (1984) social drama theory by showing that no social drama can take place outside of the systems of meanings and interpretations that guide dramatic actors in particular ideological directions.

Building on experiential consumption, Gülün Tumbat then explores and develops how risk taking and risk management in the case of dramatic leisure consumption and its commodification play a role in characterizing and further maintaining boundaries within and across groups of participants with competing motives. She argues that ideal notions of dramatic frameworks such as liminality and communitas have little value in explaining the essentially complex and divisive qualities of performances of marketers and consumers in contexts where stakes are high.

Finally, Risto Moisio and Mariam Beruchashvili reexamine cultural contradictions as fuel for drama. Focusing on the relationship between performance and identity, his research looks at the performance of the griping ritual in the Weight Watchers brand community. They argue that griping, an underappreciated social ritual in consumer research literature, constructs a vulnerable self defined by traumatic experiences of stigma insinuated childhood that wound the self. Performance of the griping ritual constructs the vulnerable self in need of therapy and outside help.

The proposed session is a timely one with particular relevance to researchers interested in the relations of drama, performance, and consumer research. This session will help these researchers to consider the value of divergent perspectives on consumer performances and dramaturgical consumption. We believe that the presentations are, in themselves, exciting studies conducted by a diverse group of consumer researchers that merit further attention and that may inspire an increased interest in the complex interrelations between marketing, consumption, drama, and performance.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

Markus Giesler, York University
Marius Luedicke, York University

Although originally conceptualized in classic anthropological, sociological, and theatre studies as performed cultural conflict (e.g., Turner 1969; Goffman 1959; Schechner 1977), drama in consumer culture theory has been traditionally conceived of as a harmonious impression management exercise. Rooted in the marketing idea that the dramaturgical interests of producers and consumers align, this
dramatistic experiential view is underlying existing consumer culture theory on dramatic consumption (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Holt and Thompson 2004). Consequently, conflict as a driver of dramatic consumption has remained a rare topic in consumer research.

To redress this theoretical oversight, we advance the process of marketplace drama. A marketplace drama is defined as a series of antagonistic ritualistic performances between divergent groups of consumers and producers through which their conflicting ideological goals are attained and the patterns of power relationships in the marketplace are transformed. The empirical context of this research is the music marketplace. Using five years of ethnographic data, we explore and develop the dramatic social interactions between music downloaaders and producers following the emergence of music downloading in 1999.

Our findings reveal multiple producer performances that idealize corporate music production and stigmatically link downloading with social categories of theft, crime, and defiance. Poised alongside these articulations are multiple downloader performances that demonize corporate music production and link downloading to cultural ideals of freedom and egalitarianism. In the music marketplace, antagonists’ dramatic social interactions are permeated by these different cultural meanings and interpretations as well as by the need to promote or destabilize particular socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Through their ritualistic performances, music downloaaders and producers justify their particular ideological positions and locate their own source of cultural identity and power.

Conceptually, the findings of this ethnography have the potential to enrich our understanding of social drama, dramatic consumption and marketplace conflict. First, we show that previous attempts in consumer culture theory to look at all marketplace performances in terms of purely theatrical, purely experiential, or self-oriented dimensions miss much of what impels consumers and producers to perform. Second, we confirm, extend and situate extant literature on market-place conflict. Thompson (2004, p. 173) has recently conceptualized consumer conflict as a “Sisyphean struggle against polymorphic power structures” between two groups of ideological stakeholder groups. We show that the cultural success of these standpoints is also very much driven, shaped, and constrained by dramatic considerations. Finally, we present a theoretical critique and extension of Victor Turner’s classic social drama concept. Under the functionalist influence of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, Turner has conceptualized social drama as a mechanism to sustain a social order and to secure solidarity among its members. However, we build the alternative case that no social drama takes place outside the systems of meanings and interpretations that guide dramatic actors in particular ideological directions. This alternative view accepts that there is no clear-cut distinction between where the drama begins and the “official social order” ends. Instead the marketplace serves as the central stage on which divergent groups of social actors engage in a dramatic interplay of structure and agency to legitimate their own ideological positions of identity and power. In summary, the consumption issues presented in this presentation provide an attractive theoretical platform for developing further theoretical linkages between dramatic performance, consumption, culture, and marketplace conflict.

“Four Ds of Risky Leisure: Drama, Divinity, Deservingness, and Deliverance”
Gülünur Tumbat, Oregon State University

Few studies conducted about the so-called high-risk leisure activities in consumer behavior field used a dramatic approach to understand participants’ experiences. Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993), for instance, investigated the “dramatic and self-enhancing” activity of skydiving. According to the authors, the Western dramatic worldview through dramatic story lines and images of dramatic behaviors constitutes the socio-cultural context for participation. They reported the hedonic and transcendental benefits as self-realization, self-transformation, and communitas among some others. Arnould and Price (1993) reported similar benefits and called the river rafting experience as “extraordinary” and focused on the “magical” aspects and emotional content (Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999). Although these studies provided valuable accounts of participation by using dramatic perspectives, they embraced a quasi-utopian idealism. In doing so, they neglected the economic, political, and structural dynamics that shape and drive the performances of marketers and consumers in such contexts. In order to address this oversight, I investigated the context of high-altitude mountaineering expeditions that are characterized by risk and stress elements.

Using data from ethnographic work at the Himalayas of Nepal and in-depth interviews with high-altitude climbers and guides, I present evidence that ideal notions of dramatic frameworks such as liminality and communitas (Turner 1969) have little value in explaining the essentially complex and divisive qualities of performances of marketers and consumers in such experiences. The consumption of high-altitude climbing is not necessarily fun, play, and pleasure but rather a complex articulation of risk taking with a style, control, and empowerment through pushing one’s limits and suffering in order to achieve or maintain status and boundaries. Furthermore, the same boundaries facilitate and shape the recognizing and negotiating of risk and uncertainty over both space and time. Furthermore, although it is from a perfect (and extreme) example of an extended service encounter, the data suggest that there are no boundary-open transactions among participants and that the experience does not transcend its commercial nature. There are four identified discourses in operation that account for these differing findings. Specifically, these are (i) discourses of deservingness (e.g., who deserve to climb here?), (ii) discourses of deliverance (e.g., how is a purchased experience made into something money can’t buy?), (iii) discourses of divinity (e.g., what happens when the actors act like bricouleurs when it comes to include spirituality into yet another commercial experience?), and (iv) discourses of drama (e.g., how do clients as main actors negotiate risk with the service providers as the directors of their performance?).

The findings of this ethnography have the potential to enhance our understandings of social drama and consumer/marketer performance. I show that prior studies in consumer culture theory that look at high-risk leisure experiences in terms of hedonic and transformational dimensions do not capture the competitive, contradictory, and power dimensions involved in such performances. Building on and extending these studies, I present a critique of the constraining dramatic idealism underlying their theoretical considerations. In summary, my study shows that even in an extraordinary consumption context, the ideal notions of liminality and communitas are not achieved as statuses, roles, and boundaries are constantly maintained and seen necessary as a way of negotiating and managing risk.

““We Just Gripe’n Gripe... That’s All We Do!”: Performing the Griping Ritual in the Weight Watchers Brand Community”
Risto Moisio, University of Arizona
Mariam Beruchashvili, University of Arizona

In this presentation we report the findings from a study examining the performance of the griping ritual in the Weight

Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 34) / 489
Watchers brand community. We extend the consumer culture theoretic (Arnould and Thompson 2005) understanding of the role that performance of ritual plays in brand communities by investigating the griping ritual in the Weight Watchers. As a form of negatively toned communication that enables members of a respective community to address a cultural problem through speech (Katriel 1991). The purpose of the griping ritual is to release frustration through expressive communication that manifests therapeutic qualities, coordinate blame, and to enforce solidarity (Katriel 1985).

To study the performance of the griping ritual, we use data collected over a two-year period focusing on the Weight Watchers brand community using observation and interviews. To triangulate across online and offline communities (Wallendorf and Belk 1989), we used a combination of online and offline observation to gain insight into the ritual aspects of the Weight Watchers members’ collective communicative exchanges (e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) at Weight Watchers meetings. For the online community data, we collected data through the Weight Watchers online discussion boards (www.weightwatchers/community.com) (Kozinets 2002). We also conducted 30 interviews over two waves. In the first wave, we conducted 15 interviews with the Weight Watchers members. The purpose of the first wave of phenomenological interviews was to understand broader contours of weight loss experiences among the Weight Watchers members (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

Our presentation highlights that the Weight Watchers brand community prospers because it harbors the performance of a social ritual of griping. Our results suggest that performances may be motivated by cultural contradictions. We show how the performance of the griping ritual enables Weight Watchers to counter cultural contradictions (Holt 2002) between the normalized thin body ideals pervading media (Richins 1991) and the overweight body images of dieters (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 32; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Gripes enable Weight Watchers to construct a solution in the form of a vulnerable self, defined by traumatic experiences of stigma since childhood that wound the self. The performance of the griping ritual constructs the vulnerable self as powerless, lacking agency and suffering from addiction (Furedi 2004). Deploying the therapeutic vernacular as a cultural resource enables Weight Watchers to construct a self in need of outside help and support. Guided by our findings, we posit the Weight Watchers brand community is an opportune therapeutic institution and the facilitator of the griping ritual (Katriel 1985; Katriel and Philipsen 1981). We conclude that while cultural contradictions seem to fuel performance of a ritual as suggested by Holt (2002), Weight Watchers draw vigorously upon the therapeutic qualities, coordinate blame, and to enforce solidarity (Katriel 1985).

REFERENCES


