“We Just Gripe’N Gripe…That’S All We Do!”: Performing the Griping Ritual in the Weight Watchers Brand Community

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This presentation focuses on the performance of the griping ritual in the Weight Watchers brand community. We 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.

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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 dramatistic social interactions between music downloaders 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 to cultural ideals of freedom and egalitarianism. In the music marketplace, antagonists’ ritualistic 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 downloaders 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 marketplace 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, Deservingsness, and Deliverance”

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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 transcendent 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 Everest base camp in the Himalayas of Nepal and 23 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 brocoulers 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 transnational 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.

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In this presentation we report the findings from a study examining the performance of the griping ritual in the Weight
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 culture as a rich vernacular to develop solutions to the existential tensions they experience (Swidler 1986).

REFERENCES