Ambivalence in Death Ritual Consumption

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Through analyses of bereaved informant narratives, we examine the intrapersonal and interpersonal interplay of death ritual emotions and the ambivalence that they engender. We first see ambivalence arising from the formation of a temporary support network to cope with the negativity surrounding death. Within this network we see major sources of ambivalence as the emotional melange that results from unfettered interactions between participants, the inability of bereaved participants to modify social scripts that define their roles and action, and ambivalence that arises from people’s recognition that the communal feelings may only a transient source of fulfillment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of depth interviews with bereaved informants we investigate the interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional interplays that occur in the negative emotional space. Consumption occasions in which ambivalence has been identified in extant research have been in positive emotional environments (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Joy 2001; Ottes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997). In contrast, we explore how unwanted positive emotions intrude on, and sometimes are allowed into, the negative emotional spaces of death. Western death ritual performances are complex and highly emotional contexts characterized by negative emotions (Walter 1996). Social requirements compel mourners to engage in such activities (Kastenbaum 1995), and ritual plans are often finalized under stress and time constrains (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul and Hill 1994). These characteristics distinguish death rituals from other consumption activities and suggest the possibility of new insights on consumer ambivalence that may not be easily observed in extant positive emotion biased studies.

We draw on Ottes et al. (1997) to suggest that the sequential and simultaneous occurrence of diverse emotions that mourners experience represent ambivalence. We show that although death rituals are ambivalent contexts they are not amenable to cleanly applying coping strategies to remove negative emotions, as per previous research (e.g. Mick and Fournier 1998).

Our analysis suggests that death rituals facilitate a general feeling of communion among ritual participants. Further investigations into the internal dynamics of this temporary support network demonstrate how the feeling of community may only offer a false sense of security. The positive feelings the community engenders are mitigated by the knowledge that death is the primary reason for its existence, and that it offers only a transient source of fulfillment. This is complicated further by the fact that consumers are unable to modify the script that defines their roles and actions in the social drama that is the funeral. Consumers have limited control over who enters the consumption space. Every member is not welcomed equally and the presence of undesirable or unwanted people can heighten ambivalence. In addition, struggles with new social roles result in significant emotional conflict within people. Informants express discomfort about allowing unacceptable positive emotions to invade the negative space of death, in conformity with assumed socio-cultural rules of such engagements. These observations lead us to suggest that while consumer ambivalence in death rituals is grounded partly in the ritual itself, the false sense of community and security that derives from socio-cultural norms are more potent sources of discomfort and ambivalence.

Our research findings contribute to our understanding of consumer ambivalence in a number of ways. Firstly they augment the field’s predominant ambivalence framework developed in Ottes et al. (1997) by demonstrating myriad roles that other participants can play in causing consumer ambivalence over the course of the ritual. We also show that countervailing emotional interplays can occur in a negative emotional space, in addition to the supposedly positive occasions and spaces predominant in consumer research. Indeed our results demonstrate that it may often be misleading to definitively label a space as either positive or negative without sufficient consideration of its associated emotional nuances. The negative space that the funeral comprises is shown to become a site for positive emotion through social interactions, yet this can in turn lead to the materialization of different types of negative emotion.

A point of interest is informants’ consistent expression that they did not welcome positive emotional migration, and would have preferred to wallow in the negative space. The positive feelings that intruded on the negative space were often considered inappropriate for griever. Unable to navigate this aspect associated with their new social role informants tried to relegate the positive emotions beneath the negative ones deemed more fitting. This active desire to suppress positive emotions in favor of experiencing negative emotions runs contrary to the implied positivity outcome that consumers will desire when feeling both positive and negative emotions (Mick and Fournier 1998; Ottes et al. 1997). The disinclination to experience positive emotions has been documented previously in bereavement research (Hallam and Hockey 2001; Gentry, Kennedy, Paul and Hill 1995) and directly challenges the economic man conviction that we continually strive for gratification and utility maximization.

We demonstrate that instances exist in which ambivalence can arise from a consumption experience based on consumers’ knowledge that the positive feelings arising out of the experience are temporary. Providers of experiences in which the creation of a sensation of temporary community is one of its core offerings (e.g. Arnould and Price 1993) must remain attentive to the potential ambivalent feelings the expected or actual dissolution of the community may cause. If the positive feeling one gets from an experience is grounded in the awareness that one is experiencing something atypical, this feeling may be jeopardized by the very awareness of its ephemeral character, engendering ambivalent feelings in the consumer. Consumers’ enjoyment may be consistently attenuated by the knowledge that the end of the consumption period means an overwhelming return to their everyday lives. Our findings also demonstrate the importance of providing personal flexibility during extended encounters. The sense that the occasion was out of informants’ control was a significant contributor to ambivalence. During extended experiences, individuals must be granted sufficient leeway to deviate from prescribed scripts, or tools provided to allow them to craft their own script. Overall this paper provides a more multi-dimensional understanding of ambivalence. It identifies the nuanced emotional interplay occurring in consumption settings and recommends due consideration be granted to the multiplicity of possible emotional triggers and outcomes.

References
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