The Impact of Aesthetics in Embedded Service Rituals

Cele Otnes, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Elizabeth Crosby, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Mina Kwon, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Sydney Chinchanachokchai, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This paper explores the ways providers’ and retailers’ strategic aesthetic decisions shape consumers’ experiences of embedded service rituals – or those that providers regard as integral to their marketplace experience, and that are therefore not optional for consumers. We highlight the specific ways aesthetic elements either enhance or detract from these embedded rituals. Using multiple qualitative methods, we also discuss how aesthetics and other elements (e.g., the skill levels of service providers) contribute to consumers’ perceptions of the atmospherics of embedded service rituals.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1007185/eacr/vol9/E-09

[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/.
Rituals continue to be a vibrant dimension of many consumption experiences. An area that has received recent attention are the rituals created by retailers and service providers that are designed to achieve strategic outcomes, such as enhancing consumers’ experiences in the marketplace, building brand loyalty and creating consumer traditions with retailers and providers at their center (e.g., Kjeldgaard 2008; Sandikci and Omeraki 2008; Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2009). One dimension of ritual behavior that remains underexplored is how aesthetics shape ritual experiences, even as consumers and providers alike devote a great deal of time, money, and effort to the acquisition, display, and storage of ritual decorations, foods and beverages, apparel/uniforms, and accessories (Harrison 2009). Recent research in consumer-to-consumer rituals reveals that aesthetic elements provide consumers with ways to compete for status in broader social and narrower kinship circles, to create and continue cherished traditions, to feel transported through their interaction with beautiful and sacred objects and other sensory delights, and to experience pride and security through ownership and display (e.g., Otnes et al. 2009; Sredl 2009).

This paper deepens the stream of research on ritual aesthetics by analyzing consumers’ perceptions of rituals that are embedded into retail or service provider offerings. We define “embedded rituals” as those that retailers or service providers perceive as so integral to their marketplace offerings that they do not make exposure to or participation in these activities optional for consumers. Furthermore, the provider controls the delivery and content of the ritual, and while they are often co-created, embedded rituals are not typically adapted for individual consumers. As such, they are distinct from rituals where consumers can opt out or escape from participation or observation. The study of embedded rituals offers researchers intriguing opportunities to explore issues relating to intimacy and privacy, boundaries, consumer emotions and agency in the marketplace. More strategically, it also offers the opportunity to gain consumer insights into how marketing decisions regarding ritual execution and performance can impact the effectiveness and appeal of these activities. To that end, this paper explores the following questions: 1) How do the aesthetic choices that marketers incorporate into embedded rituals impact consumers’ experiences of these events? 2) How do these choices and other elements (e.g., skill of the ritual actors) impact consumers’ perceptions of the overall atmospherics that pervade embedded rituals?

Our data set consists of the following: in-depth narratives, depth interviews with consumers, and in-depth participant observation by the research team. Narratives were collected from undergraduate and graduate students in 2008 and 2009 at a large university in the US Midwest. Students were instructed to write about a ritual that a retailer or service provider had offered, and the ways in which the strategic ritual choices made by these providers impacted their experiences. A total data set of 151 narratives was created, with 97 of those specifically discussing rituals that meet the definition of “embedded.” In addition, eleven depth interviews were conducted on the topic of retailer/service provider rituals with adults ages 25+ in both a small and a large city in the Midwest in 2009. Of these, nine discussed some aspect of embedded ritual practice. With respect to participant observation, the team visited a retail site (specifically, a Japanese Teppanyaki-only steakhouse) and each researcher prepared a set of in-depth field notes from the experience. The team then shared and compared these notes, and met and discussed their findings. The team consists of four women, two of whom were not born in the United States, and two of whom are novices with respect to qualitative research and analysis. This diversity contributed to a variety of interesting interpretations of the embedded ritual, and revealed interesting areas for future research.

The resulting text revealed a variety of emergent embedded-ritual contexts, including: consumers’ participation in their own or others’ birthday celebrations at restaurants, traditions such as the “Seven-Inning Stretch” at baseball games, highly scripted service rituals such as recitations of menu items vs. being offered the menu in print, highly scripted greeting and/or parting rituals by salespeople, tours, orientation sessions and ceremonies that celebrate rites of passage in the marketplace (e.g., turning 21 at a bar, and receiving a free drink and bar “membership number”). In terms of our research questions, aesthetic choices impact consumers’ experiences of embedded rituals in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, aesthetic choices can impact memorability of the event and desire for repetition of the ritual, can create an ambiance that sacralizes the activity, can alter consumers’ perceptions of their own identity (e.g., by surrounding consumers with sumptuous trappings and making them feel wealthy or like royalty), and can concretize favorable impressions of the retailer, especially when one aesthetic choice is to stress the cleanliness and simplicity that encompasses and embedded ritual. On the negative side, the aesthetics inherent in embedded rituals can violate consumers’ sense of privacy, make them feel hemmed in or stifled, lead them to experience negative emotions such as embarrassment and resentment (e.g., by having to be associated with gaudy, loud or overly fragrant ritual artifacts), and cause them to shun the retailer or provider in the future. Furthermore, consumers elaborate upon how aesthetics contribute to overall atmospherics, by imparting and expanding upon a variety of metaphors. Positive metaphors that describe embedded-ritual contexts include: palace, heaven, community, and club. More negative metaphors include: hell, outsider, tomb, and joke. And while the tenor of most of the consumer text generated in this study was positive with respect to embedded rituals, consumers also were quite pointed in their discussion of when and how these rituals proved intrusive, irritating or annoying—and how aesthetic elements contributed to these perceptions. Our paper concludes with recommendations for retailers and providers, in terms of how they can manage and control the aesthetic elements of embedded rituals in order to create meaningful and memorable marketplace encounters for consumers.