**Till Death Us Do Part? Consumption and the Negotiation of Relationships Following a Bereavement**

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Many studies have focused on the active role of consumers in constructing meaning from encounters with goods, services or advertising (Belk 1988; Mick and Buhl 1992; Elliott and Wattansuwan 1998; Manolis et al 2001). Much of this work has related to self-identity, but there are some indications that consumption also plays a role in negotiating relationships. For example, Ruth et al (1999) examine how the experience of receiving gifts can affirm, strengthen, weaken or even sever a relationship. Recent work in the discipline has extended this focus to relationships between the living and the dead and how they can be modified through disposition or symbolic funerary ritual (Kates 2001; Bonsu and Belk 2003). This latter study examined the ways in which expenditure on such ritual could be managed to enhance the communal identity of the deceased and, by dint of kinship ties, those of bereaved family members. The present study aims to progress this research agenda in two ways. First, it takes a longer term, postmortem perspective extending beyond the short-term funeral period. Second, its focus is on the way in which a particular form of consumption is employed to negotiate an intricate nexus of personal relationships between living and dead, and living and living. In this sense it works on a broader relational canvas than that of communal identity formation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many studies have focused on the active role of consumers in constructing meaning from encounters with goods, services or advertising (Belk 1988; Mick and Buhl 1992; Elliott and Wattansuwan 1998; Manolis et al 2001). Much of this work has related to self-identity, but there are some indications that consumption also plays a role in negotiating relationships. For example, Ruth et al (1999) examine how the experience of receiving gifts can affirm, strengthen, weaken or even sever a relationship. Recent work in the discipline has extended this focus to relationships between the living and the dead and how they can be modified through disposition or symbolic funerary ritual (Kates 2001; Bonsu and Belk 2003). This latter study examined the ways in which expenditure on such ritual could be managed to enhance the communal identity of the deceased and, by dint of kinship ties, those of bereaved family members. The present study aims to progress this research agenda in two ways. First, it takes a longer term, postmortem perspective extending beyond the short-term funeral period. Second, its focus is on the way in which a particular form of consumption is employed to negotiate an intricate nexus of personal relationships between living and dead, and living and living. In this sense it works on a broader relational canvas than that of communal identity formation.

The consumption activity examined in this study centres on In Memoriam verses. These are verses inserted in local newspapers by bereaved relatives and friends on the anniversaries or birthdays of those who have died. Particularly common in Ireland and amongst the Irish Catholic diaspora, they are located within the classified advertising section, and priced accordingly. They usually include the name of the deceased, several lines of verse, and details of those inserting them. The overall impression is of a highly ritualized, conservative discourse, with a sentimental tenor similar to that of greeting cards. Phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al 1989) were undertaken with eighteen bereaved consumers of Irish In Memoriams. A variety of relationships to the deceased were represented among informants. Participants were encouraged to tell the story of their bereavement and trace the trajectory of their involvement with placing these verses.

Apart from developments in the consumer behaviour literature, this study also draws inspiration from what has been characterised as a paradigm shift in research on the grieving process. For most of the twentieth century the success of grief intervention was gauged by the speed and efficiency with which those left behind could separate and detach themselves from the dead person. This approach is increasingly being replaced by an alternative approach in which normal grieving should involve living with the dead, not without them (Walter 1999; continuing bonds with the deceased are considered healthy and functional. The experiences of the informants in this study resonated markedly with the overall thrust of this second paradigm. Continuing bonds with their departed loved ones were unquestioned and unproblematic. Their engagement in composing and placing IMs was a robust statement in its own right that they neither desired nor required to ‘let go’ of their departed loved ones.

When participants were asked to discuss ‘what was going on’ in the insertion of IM verses, it became apparent that the primary focus of their activity was a nexus of relationships. Overall, it seems that these bereaved consumers saw themselves maintaining, moderating, and modulating an array of relationships, both with the living and with the departed. This relationship work was singularly active and evident in various elements of the process: in the composition phase, the wording of verses, the sequencing and location of verses on the newspaper pages or the listing of placers beneath each verse. So, the operational arena within which this agentic consumer behaviour unfolds was both broad and highly nuanced.

Two broad spheres emerged within which our participants sought to negotiate and develop interpersonal agendas. The first sphere comprised relationships between the living and the living. Here, the emphasis is on how placers utilized In Memoriams as an instrument of social engineering to effect personal agendas in either the immediate family or wider communal spheres. Four such ‘living-to-living’ agendas emerged in our analysis, and from these themes it became evident that In Memoriams contributed to family meaning-making after a death (Nadeau 1998) and were implicated in the negotiation of reputations and moral identities of family members (Finch and Mason 1993). ‘Living-to-dead’ relationships, the second sphere, embraced two subsidiary relational agendas and led us to surmise that the cultivation of communal memory might be central to what In Memoriams are about. Public memory is fickle and fallible and needs to be worked on; In Memoriams are a vivid example of how this form of consumer behaviour can be marshalled to this end.

REFERENCES


