Market Agents’ Roles in the Maintenance and Transformation of Rituals

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While there has been significant interest on symbolism and consumption-related dimensions of rituals, there has been scant research attention on marketing aspects of rituals. This paper explores the roles of market agents in the maintenance and transformation of consumption rituals. Specifically, we look at the dowry practice in Turkey and investigate related market agents and their roles. Preliminary data collected through ethnographic methods indicate that there are several players in this market, including independent women, retailers, schools and institutes, collective exhibitions, and media, who reproduce and transform dowry artifacts, scripts and roles through mediation, consultation and innovation.

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Extended Abstract
Following Rook’s (1985) seminal work on ritualistic dimensions of consumption, numerous studies investigating the content, context, and major elements of different rituals appeared in the marketing literature (e.g. Lowrey and Otnes, 1994; Sherry and McGrath, 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). These studies demonstrated symbolic significance of rituals and reported their dynamic nature. However, while it is noted that “the marketplace significance of rituals ... is striking” (Rook 2004, p.315), very few studies to date examined the role of market agents in the maintenance and transformation of rituals. The exceptions include the studies looking at the role of retailers (McGrath 1990; Otnes 1998; Sherry and McGrath 1989) and the relationship between advertising and consumption rituals (Otnes and Scott 1996). Motivated by this gap, this study seeks to identify the market agents and explore their roles in reproduction and transformation of rituals, using dowry practice—a form of marriage payment—in Turkey as a case study.

There are two reasons for our focus on the dowry practice. First, dowry is a long-standing and commonly performed wedding-related ritual in Turkey and many other Asian countries, including India and China (e.g. Tambiah, 1973; Croll 1984; Siu 1993; Bhopal, 1997). While the content of dowry varies from culture to culture, in general, it involves the gifts given to the bride, the groom, and the groom’s family by the bride’s parents. Irrespective of its content, it is a highly symbolic ritual that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and from being a daughter/son to a wife/husband. Second, several studies report major transformations in the nature and content of dowry ritual in different cultures it is practiced (e.g. Rao, 1993; Caldwell et al., 1983; Banarjee 1999; Yan 1996). A recent study demonstrates that Turkish marriage dowries have undergone major changes as a result of the country’s economic development and urbanization (Sandikci and Ilhan 2004).

Traditionally, Turkish dowry is confined to the textile products such as embroidery, clothing, bed linen, and carpets that are manually manufactured by the bride-to-be (e.g., Çelik, 1987. Tezcan, 1997, Öztürk, 1983). However, as a result of the changes in the social roles of women, the weakening of traditional lifestyles, and the emergence of independent manufacturers, more and more daughters and their mothers began to either buy ready-made dowry pieces or outsource the artifacts. Today, a prolific and expansive dowry market, composed of different agents producing various dowry pieces exists in Turkey. Our analysis indicates that there are several players in this market, including independent women, retailers, schools and institutes, collective exhibitions, and media that have the power and the means to both reproduce and transform dowry ritual through their design, production, and marketing activities.

So far, we collected data through a series of semi-structured, “long interviews” (McCracken 1988), observations, photographs, and supplemental materials such as newspapers, web pages, and business flyers. Depth interviews were conducted with four dowry shop owners and four independent women who work as freelance manufacturers in Ankara. The informants vary in terms of the size of the businesses, type of dowry preparation service they provide, and number of years in the dowry market. We have also visited dowry and marriage planning fairs both in Ankara (May 2003, 2004) and in Istanbul (February 2005) where we had the chance to observe different players in the market.

Preliminary analysis suggests that the market agents play three different roles: to mediate, consult, and innovate. The market agents assumed the role of the mediator as a result of the proliferation of dowry meanings. Traditionally, dowry included a pre-determined, fixed set of artifacts. However, as a result of urbanization and changing lifestyles dowry preparation became increasingly subject to negotiation (Sandikci and Ilhan 2004). While market agents transform the rituals through new or modified artifacts, scripts, and performances, they also reproduce the ritual through marketing ‘classic’ pieces. Overall, our study indicates that market agents have the ability to transform the dowry ritual and also the means to control the rate and extent of the diffusion of new artifacts, scripts and performances.

References
Spiraling Downward: An Illustration of Social Breakdown Theory and Its Relationship with Self-Concept

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Extended Abstract

Social breakdown theory (SBT) suggests that an individual’s sense of self, his/her ability to mediate between self and society, and his/her orientation to personal mastery are functions of the kinds of social labeling experienced in life (Kuypers and Bengston 1973). It contends that the media can be instrumental in creating negative social labels that adversely affect the self-concept of susceptible older adults. The result is a downward spiral that finds victims accepting the view that they are incompetent, ailing, and useless to society and subsequently believing and behaving accordingly. Kuypers and Bengston (1973) argue that the elderly are more vulnerable to social labeling because of the “nature of social reorganization in late life” (i.e., role loss, vague or inappropriate normative information, and a lack of reference groups). Thus, the model has the potential to clarify why older individual’s self-concepts may change in later life and the consumption related consequences of such changes (Moschis 1994).

While SBT is yet to be empirically tested in its entirety due to its dynamic nature, specific relationships between variables lend themselves to falsification. Our efforts were in a similar vein, testing specific relationships and the moderating effects of select variables.

Conceptualization

Over their life course, older adults are likely to face a variety of life transitions that require the acquisition of new norms, behaviors, and roles. SBT addresses the issue of how one’s changing social world might result in changes in one’s self-concept (Moschis 1994). The SBT model acknowledges that one’s social system is in constant flux as it reflects new roles, norms, reference groups, and statuses characterized by different stages in one’s life (Kuypers and Bengston 1973).

Social roles are sets of expectations or guidelines for people who occupy given social positions, such as those of a widow(er), grandfather, and retiree. Yet, there appears to be little evidence of clearly-defined expectations concerning what the growing number of older people should do during their later years, as a result of transitions into various types of roles. The difficulty in determining the socially appropriate cognitions and behaviors for older adults is likely due to a number of factors. The transition to “old age” tends to be vague, amorphous, and unregulated, as the scarcity of rites of passage ceremonies that benefit children and younger adults reflects (e.g., graduation, marriage) (Rosow 1974). Additionally, the heterogeneity of older adults adds to the complexity of defining their social roles.

Kuypers and Bengston (1973) assert that when certain social reorganizations occur in late life, the individual is deprived of feedback concerning “...who he is, what roles and behavior he can perform, and, in general, what value he is to his social world” (p. 182), due to a lack of normative guidance, role loss, and a lack of appropriate reference groups. As a result of the subsequent “feedback vacuum,” the elderly are vulnerable to, and dependent on, external sources of self-labeling (e.g., the mass media). Moreover, these external cues tend to communicate negative, stereotypical messages of the elderly as useless and obsolete. In short, Kuypers and Bengston (1973) contend that the effects of ambiguous role conditions leave older adults susceptible to the negative cycle of social breakdown syndrome because they rely on negative, external labeling that gradually erodes their self-concepts; ultimately, they accept a self-concept of a person who is useless, obsolete, and inadequate. Kuypers and Bengston (1973) predict that the consequence of this pattern is an atrophy of coping skills. However, they contend that SBT’s downward cycle can be broken and even reconstructed through certain personal circumstances and/or interventions (e.g., his/her health, financial resources, and housing situation).