Tinsel, Trimmings, and Tensions: Consumer Negotiations of a Focal Christmas Artifact

Cele C. Otnes, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Elizabeth Crosby, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Robert Kreuzbauer, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Jennifer Ho, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Our specific purpose in this paper is to explore households’ negotiation practices as they co-create a key ritual artifact of the holiday—the Christmas tree. We find that four distinct pairs of tensions can shape consumers’ co-creation of the Christmas tree: aesthetics vs. tradition, inclusiveness vs. risk, family fantasy vs. family reality, and authenticity vs. convenience. We identify and interpret the negotiation strategies that emerge as consumers seek to resolve these sets of tensions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13153/volumes/v35/NA-35

[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/.
Tinsel, Trimmings, and Tensions: Consumer Negotiations of a Focal Christmas Artifact

Cele C. Otnes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Elizabeth Crosby, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Robert Kreuzbauer, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Jennifer Ho, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ritualistic consumption is defined as the use of goods, services and experiences in expressive, dramatic, symbolic, formal and intense ways, in contexts often repeated over time (Rook, 1985). Scholars consistently demonstrate that consumers find rituals to be financially, socially, and emotionally significant (Belk 1989; Otnes and Lowrey 2004; Sherry 1983; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Participating in consumption rituals often involves coordination and planning among nuclear and extended families, and such planning can require weeks, months or even a year or longer. However, little is known about how family members negotiate as they co-create the aesthetic aspects of ritualistic experiences.

This paper explores how family members negotiate as they create a key ritual artifact of the Christmas holiday—the Christmas tree. Our interviews with consumers clearly indicate that many consider the tree a key—if not the key—ritual artifact during the holiday season. The tree acts as a ritual hub, with important and sensory-laden sub-rituals emanating from it. Since the relationships between members are fluid and constantly renegotiated, co-creation of Christmas tree traditions is fluid within a household as well. Given the integral role of the tree at Christmas, we explore these questions: 1) what tensions pervade consumers’ co-creation of the Christmas tree?; and 2) what negotiation strategies do consumers employ when trying to resolve these tensions?

As part of a larger study on consumers’ Christmas experiences, we conducted depth interviews with 26 consumers from December 2006 to February 2007. We employed snowball sampling, recruiting informants from among acquaintance networks. Informants ranged in age from 22 to 64, and resided in either the Midwest or the Northeast United States. Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes, were audi-taped and transcribed, and yielded 334 double-spaced pages of text.

In analyzing the text, we sought out emergent themes while engaging in dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), immersing ourselves in the interdisciplinary literature on Christmas and ritual celebrations to seek out consistencies and/or inconsistencies with our text. In our initial readings we narrowed the findings such that patterns of association and assumption emerged and became clear (McCracken, 1988). Although we did not initially intend to focus on how consumers negotiate the Christmas tree, the quantity and quality of text devoted to the artifact spurred us to narrow our focus. We then narrowed it even more to unpacking the specific tensions that emerge as consumers select, decorate, and display the tree.

We find four distinct pairs of tensions that can shape consumers’ co-creation of the Christmas tree: aesthetics vs. tradition, family fantasy vs. family reality, authenticity vs. convenience, and taste 1 vs. taste 2. For each tension, a set of negotiation strategies emerge, although consumers sometimes apply the same strategy to resolve different tensions.

Aesthetics vs. Tradition. One function of rituals is to connect consumers of one ritual occasion to other similar events across time (Gillis 1996). One way consumers do so is by retaining and reusing the same ritual artifacts every time they celebrate Christmas. But one difficulty with this behavior is that these sentimental ornaments may not meet consumers’ own likely shifting standards of beauty, which are likewise embedded in an increasing valorization of aesthetics as a cultural value (Postrel, 2003). Many informants express ambivalence toward marrying sentimental and aesthetic approaches, and a few adamantly oppose doing so, even when other family members wish to. Those informants who must resolve family tensions between aesthetics and sentimentality when co-creating the Christmas tree employ three strategies: dictate, segregate (same-site), or segregate (multiple-site).

Family Fantasy vs. Family Reality. Many informants possess an idealized image of how they want their Christmas tree selection and decoration to proceed. However, the realities of everyday life—including time pressures and changes in their household structure as family members move through the life cycle—means much of the time, their fantasies of co-creating the Christmas tree cannot always be fulfilled. When consumers are not able to enact their ritual fantasies, they often employ three strategies that help them negotiate the tension between ritual fantasy and ritual reality: adhere to an acceptable minimal standard, reserve the sacred, and eliminate the tradition, while mourning the loss in order to resolve the tension.

Authenticity vs. Convenience. For many informants, the meaning of an authentic Christmas tree tradition stems from their adherence to two rules. The first—that one must have a Christmas tree, especially if young children are involved in the celebration, is described by Caplow (1982). The second involves the necessity of having a live Christmas tree rather than an artificial variant. But authenticity also requires consumers to retrieve, haul, care for, and clean up after a real tree; thus, many informants often note (with regret) that they have opted for an artificial tree. When informants try to negotiate the tensions arising from the decision to opt for authenticity over convenience, they follow two strategies that we have previously identified—adhere the minimally acceptable standard, or eliminate the tradition, while mourning the loss in order to resolve the tension.

Taste 1 vs. Taste 2. The final tension that emerges can stem purely from different established tastes in tree fashions. Not surprisingly, the central role of the tree means some consumers develop very specific ideas as to how they want their trees to appear. Sometimes these preferences are the result of new market offerings—and innovations in trees can result in clashes of aesthetic preferences within a household. When informants try and negotiate the tensions arising from differences in taste, they follow two strategies—joke/tease or use a third party mediator.

We explore the ways in which consumers negotiate the aesthetics of the focal ritual artifact of the Christmas tree. We hope this paper encourages scholars to revisit consumers’ understanding of aesthetics as these understandings are negotiated and reconceptualized within their social networks, both during ritual occasions and beyond.

References available from the authors.