Ashes to Ashes Or Ashes to Coral?: Alternatives to Traditional Burial Rituals and Their Implications For Consumption, Ritual Transformation, and Sustainability

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This paper seeks to understand how consumers relinquish traditional rituals and opt for more sustainable alternatives. Sustainable burial options are examined to highlight shifts from traditional funerary services to alternative services. Interview data exhibits seven emergent themes that illuminate ritual value, ritual transformations, and their impact on consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Rituals play a crucial role in both simple and extraordinary portions of human life. Whether they are daily procedures, holiday celebrations, or markers of pivotal life events, rituals shape the actions taken and meanings constructed by consumers. Consumer researchers have studied rituals because of their relationship to symbolic consumption (Rook 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), gift-giving (Sherry 1983), and exchange (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). We know that ritual practices help individuals make sense of their physiological, social, and moral experiences (Turner 1969). We also know that rites of passage and ritual practices influence individual, social, and cultural identity trajectories (Schouten 1991; Van Gennep 1908).

The current research seeks to contribute to ritual theory through enhanced understanding about circumstances when consumers feel compelled to break away from conventional rituals, and their practices ultimately may alter consumption patterns associated with ritual traditions. It explores why consumers relinquish traditional ritual practices in order to opt for more environmentally sustainable alternatives. Finally, it examines what interventions consumers employ to resist or alter consumption norms related to rituals.

The study context was chosen to highlight shifts away from traditional rituals, such as those associated with conventional funerals and burial, to alternative rituals, such as those associated with sustainable burial. To understand ritual transformation, our focus is on two environmentally sustainable alternatives to conventional burial, conservation burial and reef ball burial. With conservation burial, consumers are buried using no embalming fluids, caskets, artificial flowers, or other manmade products for hand-dug gravesites in a forest, prairie, or other natural area. With reef ball burial, cremated remains are mixed with environmentally-safe concrete to create a form that mimics natural real formations, which is then placed on the ocean floor to create new wildlife habitats.

Consumers who had selected one of the two burial options either for a deceased loved one or for their own pre-need arrangements were interviewed. Thirty-one depth interviews were conducted with thirty-two consumers who had used the services of three different service providers of alternative burial. These phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) included questions about personal funerary experiences, end-of-life preferences, the decision making process, funerary expenses, and environmental values. The first author also attended a three-day ceremony for a reef burial service and visited one of the conservation burial sites. In both instances, field notes and photographs were produced.

Interview data exhibits seven emergent themes regarding the selection of alternative ritual experiences: (1) perceived impracticality of current ritual; (2) aversions to current ritual; (3) fit of alternatives with identity; (4) positive outcomes for self, others, and environment; (5) opportunities for adaptation of symbols; (6) freedoms afforded and constraints imposed by norms, rules, and regulations; and (7) desire to exert control.

The interview data exhibited that impracticality of current ritual, aversions to current ritual, and constraints imposed by norms, rules, and regulations seemed to facilitate the ability to break away from the existing ritual. Conversely, fit of alternatives with identity, positive outcomes, opportunities for symbol adaptation, freedoms afforded by prescribed norms, rules, and regulations, and desire to exert control seemed to be catalysts for allowing consumers to approach alternative rituals.

This data also demonstrates that some American consumers are not willing to simply accept rituals at face value, especially if they have difficulties finding value in them. Individuals use rituals as tools for important processes, such as identity construction, memory maintenance, rites of passage, sense-making, meaning construction, coping, celebration, and connection to the sacred. These processes are critical to consumers, who desire agency and do not allow prescribed norms to dictate how they will use rituals. Instead, they may move away from traditional ritual practices and services that do not fit with their identity and values toward alternatives that will.

From a business standpoint, firms who offer products and services that facilitate ritual experiences should be certain to maintain a close watch on consumer trends and cultural values. Because there are so many traditions and norms associated with rituals, it is easy for a ritualistic business to believe it can carry on as it always has, but this is not the case. Americans, who are well-connected and educated consumers, will not tolerate a ritual that is performed a certain way simply because convention prescribes that they do so. Instead, they desire value and meaning from their ritual experiences, and the companies who are willing to cater to those needs are the ones who will be rewarded with profitability and longevity.

Some consumers chose a sustainable burial for reasons other than environmental concern. Therefore, if governments and businesses wish to pursue environmental goals, they should consider offering sustainable options that make appeals to those individuals who do not embrace environmental values. While not every individual will embrace concern and passion for the natural environment, there is something that they find valuable. It is important for organizations to pinpoint their values and provide meaningful offerings to these consumers in a way that also support environmental goals. Coupling environmental appeals and appeals to other values will not only facilitate achievement of environmental efforts but will also attract multiple consumer groups for diverse reasons.

REFERENCES
