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Roberta Campos, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - COPPEAD, Brazil
Maribel Suarez, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - COPPEAD, Brazil
Thaysa do Nascimento, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Brazil
Fabrício Molica, Universidade Federal de São João Del Rey, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

We propose the concept of Longitudinal Rite of Passage as a specific type of ritual that communicates a status transition over time, differentiating itself from more traditional rites of passage by its temporal dimension, since it occurs as a set of multiple and connected behaviors performed throughout consumers’ lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

Cars have a strong and pervasive imagery in contemporary culture. They are vessels of different meanings such as power, status, domination, mobility, freedom, danger (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2004; Hirschman 2003). Therefore, several consumption actions associated to car possession can become ritualized (Belk 2004; McCracken 1988). And through rituals, car consumption may offer structure and meaning to social interaction.

In ritual literature, consumption objects are presented as artifacts that offer an instrumental resource for rituals. They are used and manipulated according to performative scripts, as a support to the symbolic expressiveness of ritual action (Bradford and Sherry Jr. 1985). Rituals may communicate not only through semantics, but also through the mise-en-scène of a particular syntactic structure (Kehret-Ward, Johnson and Louie 1985). Levy (1981), for instance, analyzed the association of food and consumers, by comparing food attributes (sweet / sour) to age groups (children / adults). Syntactic analysis enhances this perspective, through a part-whole framing, placing goods on a broader consumption structure. In the case of food, different items can be analyzed by their meaning individually (semantically), but also within the family meal structure of courses (syntactically).

The work of Mary Douglas is a good example of the combination of semantic and syntactic analysis on food consumption. Many Anthropologists adopt the structural linguistic model to deeply describe culture (Geertz 1973). They combine the description of syntactic structural categories to the description of semantic elements within those categories. For Douglas, “a code affords a general set of possibilities of sending particular messages” (Douglas 1975, 61). In her analysis, food categories encode social events. So, she contrasts types and meaning of plates to the meal course structure. Semantic distinctions (sweet / salty, heavy / light) combined to syntactic structure (dessert / main course / appetizer) forge new meanings for plates, meals and consumers: “real men” eat “sweet, heavy and rich” dessert; “a sophisticated dinner have many different plates”. But how this structural analysis could apply to other consumption categories rituals?

Our research proposes the analysis of car consumption rituals, following both its semantic and syntactic forms, throughout consumers’ lives. We argue that product category offers a symbolic structure, created by a diverse set of brands and products. Therefore, rituals communicate not only through the semantic choice of artifacts (a specific model or brand), but also through the dialog with a broader syntactic structure (a consumption grammar). In addition, we defend that the category consumption, if investigated syntactically, may follow a longitudinal and lifetime form, differing from occasional and circumstantial rites of passage already described in the ritual literature (Afflerback et al. 2014; Escalas 1993; Friese 1997; Gentina, Palan and Fosse-Gomez 2012; Schouten 1991; Solomon and Anand 1985; VanGemert 1960).

METHOD

In this research, we investigated car consumption rituals, semantically and syntactically. We combined three different methods: (a) life story method (Bertaux, 1997), in order to capture a longitudinal perspective, centered on car consumption; (b) itinerary method (Desjeux, Suarez and Campos, 2014; Alami, Desjeux and Garabou-Moussaoui 2009; Desjeux 2004) to collect the present experience of consumption and its rituals, (c) projective techniques (McDaniel and Gates 2004), to identify symbolic prescriptions to car consumption and ritual performative scripts to be followed.

Hence, we conducted 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews, on the cities of Rio de Janeiro (a metropolis) and São João del Rei (an inland town) in Brazil, with car owners: 18 men and 10 women, 15 consumers aged from 20 to 40 y.o. and 13 consumers older than 41 y.o., and diverse professional and marital status. The mandatory aspect was to interview consumers who had purchased their vehicle up to six months before. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, totaling 1377 pages of text. We conducted a hermeneutic, iterative analysis (Thompson 1997) in two different phases. First, interviews were individually analyzed to identify life-stories, car consumption trajectories and cultural narratives. Second, emphasis was placed on cross-case analysis, allowing the comparison of the various testimonies.

DISCUSSION

Cars are public objects, constantly emanating meaning. In our research, men often described the public effect of cars and symbolic assets obtained through car consumption (e.g. visibility to women, professional success, and manhood). Rituals are pervasive on car consumption. There is a certain way to purchase cars, to prepare a special trip, to cherish or drive. But, from the interviews, we could also identify another pattern. The lifetime consumption activity of car purchase and ownership demonstrated a ritualized manner, where consumers follow, throughout their lives, a structured course of car choice. During the interviews, we perceived car consumption offers a syntax that creates public communication.

In this part, we will present the symbolic structural analysis (Kehret-Ward et al. 1985) of ritual car consumption in three parts. First, we discuss the symbolic prescription that offers a general guideline for car consumption. Second, we describe the semantic meanings assigned to different types of cars. Last, we detail the syntactic structure that organizes car consumption and establishes a dialog with symbolic general guideline and semantics of cars. It is the combination of these aspects that will offer a broad view of ritual in car consumption.

Idealized trajectories: a symbolic prescription for consumption

According to interviewees, car consumption follows a general symbolic guideline that rules how to choose and to read the choice of others. This was particularly evident when consumers were invited, through projective techniques, to imagine car choices for particular consumer profiles. In this exercise, car reveals itself as a social measure for personal achievement, having as rule of thumb the idea that...
each new purchase has to be better than the previous one, to reflect a sense of personal progression. New purchases are not nearly a replacement of the old car, but an opportunity to make an enhanced purchase, of a better model. It is the manifest proof that consumers are “evolving” properly, as a reward for life achievements. This progression is expected to follow the consumer evolution on several territories: professional, patrimonial, familial.

Therefore, choice of cars follows a script that negotiates a desired future, where consumers get closer to “cars I intend to have some day”. This consumption script, that prescribes a syntax for car choice, also communicates a status change over time, in a rite of passage form (Friese 1997; Gentina et al. 2012; Solomon and Anand 1985; Van Gennep 1960), from an inexperienced single student to a full family provider experienced professional. Additionally, this status transition rite presents a longitudinal form, materializing itself in a longterm process throughout consumers’ lives. However, which kind of script is prescribed in this longitudinal consumption ritual?

Cars should not be chosen senselessly. Car consumption, seen longitudinally, seems to carry an implicit pedagogy of evolution: one should start “wisely”, buying a low cost, small model that functions as a first step into the category. This is considered suitable for “beginners”, who are learning to drive and still need to progress in life. The movement towards a new car can only be made when consumers had proven not only their driving skills in controlling “the machine”, but also the achievement of life milestones (e.g. job stability, career progression). At that moment, consumers may start to incorporate new elements on their choice: a sport design, a powerful engine, or a more expensive model, which would work as a market-mediated milestones to signal consumer’s identity progress (Drenten, 2013). The non-conformity to this prescription of gradual progression may implicate in social sanctions. When a consumer reaches a premium segment before the compatible assets and career evolution, interviewees say they expect to see this individual facing financial issues (e.g. bankruptcy, loss from overspending). Next, we will discuss in more the detail the elements that orquestrate car consumption rituals and scripts.

**Semantics and syntax of car consumption**

The pedagogy of evolution is communicated through certain consumption structure, provided by both semantic and syntactic structures. Car consumption follows a structure that communicates values of life evolution to a social immediate group. But which are the parts of this symbolic structure? Which meanings are assigned to different car models and brands? Which is the expected syntactic path that structures consumption trajectories? How consumption syntax correlates to category semantics? And how they correspond to different states in personal life of consumers?

Cars are interpreted according to their social-symbolic meanings. This semantics is based on the value of evolution, where models are grouped in sets of different status or comfort levels. We could identify six groups of cars, according to their semantics: (a) low-cost cars, cheap and simple models, (b) identity cars, accessible cars with few items of comfort or sportive design, (c) family cars, functional “unattractive” cars that offer space with some design features, (d) luxury sedans, expensive executive-like cars with full comfort items and luxury finishing, (e) SUV, sport premium cars that combine space, comfort and design, (f) dream cars, unreachable exclusive cars. Brands are also classified following this logic, where the first-entry traditional brands in the Brazilian market, called by consumers “The national brands”, are more associated with low-cost, functional, safe investments (Fiat, Volkswagen, Ford and General Motors). Japanese brands are more associate with luxury and high performance, and perceived as prestigious cars (Toyota, Honda, Nissan, and Korean Hyundai). These six car groups and the brand meanings will create a dialogue with the category syntax, forming a multi-layered symbolic thread.

In regards to car category syntax, we identified three main syntactic stages emerging from interviews: (a) frugal stage, (b) assets building stage, and (c) conspicuous stage. To each of these stages correspond to certain group of values and a consumer social status that sustains a homology with the syntactic phase and car semantics (Table I).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntax Stage</th>
<th>Stage Values</th>
<th>Social Status of consumers</th>
<th>Consonant car Semantic types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frugal stage</td>
<td>Austerity, frugality, effort</td>
<td>Financial dependent, professional-to-be single young adult</td>
<td>Low cost cars and identity cars (Transition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assets building stage</td>
<td>Pleasure under the constraints of responsibility Provision and investment in the future</td>
<td>Financially independent, married, full professionals, and family providers</td>
<td>Identity cars, family cars, cheaper SUVs or Sedans Transition: SUVs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspicuous stage</td>
<td>Enjoyment, full and free pleasure Achievement show-off</td>
<td>Professionals at the peak of their career, full property owners</td>
<td>SUVs, Luxury Sedans, Dream cars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table I: Syntactic Structure of Longitudinal Rite of Passage in Car Consumption)
Frugal stage is defined by the entry into car consumption, where car signals the intent of obtaining financial independence, but mainly, it demonstrates a state with no surplus to spend on cars. At this phase, consumers are single, still live with their parents, and have no children. Professionally, they are entering a sector, following first career steps. Cars are tools that provide mobility to work or the university, and parents' opinion or “blessing” is respected. At this point, the right thing, according to consumers, is to buy the “possible car”: affordable simple models, representing a first achievement for personal property. At this austere stage, any model with comfort or design is associated to waste or a show-off. The consonant semantic car type of this phase is the simple and cheap low-cost car. For a more liminal moment, we could identify the presence of simple identity cars models.

For many interviewees, this stage was a “natural” moment that they patiently bear, watching their assets slowly accumulate. Roger (30 years old, single), however, is a good example of how this stage could be symbolic uncomfortable. He is “waiting for his chance in life”, while doing some small acting jobs and managing the family hardware shop. His cars reflect a consumption trajectory that is still in the “wise” frugal phase. His first car, a small size Fiat Uno, was a gift from his parents when he turned 18. He describes his current car as a “bet” on the “unknown Chinese brand”, JAC Motors. Even if it was a low-cost model (J3), it offered more optionals (“leather seats”, ABS brakes, automatic windows and lock, air conditioning, power steering), if compared to “national” models. This choice rendered him a car that communicates some progress, even if still in the low-cost segment.

The next syntactic moment is the assets building stage, where consumers balance consumption fruit and pleasure with assets building and financial stability. On one side, consumers have the burden of being family providers, building their assets (e.g. owned house, businesses, summer house, children education fund). On the other, as mid-career professionals, their revenues allow a surplus to enjoy less functional and more pleasurable consumption choices. The values of this stage are pleasure under the constraints of responsibility, provision and investment in the future. Car groups that combine functional aspects (space, safety, accessible prices) with fruition (comfort items, sport design) are the semantic consonant to this stage (e.g. family cars or SUVs).

Among respondents, there are consumers who follow the exact steps of prescribed trajectory: from a small, low-cost car, they improve wisely and slowly (from second hand to a brand new car, a better model, a better engine). Whenever they reach a steady career point they communicate it by aiming at a higher consumption level. Flavio (35 years old, married, metropolis resident), started with a GM small low-cost car, called Celta. Afterwards he bought a Fiat midsize car, called Idea (identity car). When he starts to work in the public administration, he allows himself to buy a Mitsubishi Pajero TR4. He shows the need to justify his “extravagance”, showing he did not hurt consumption pedagogy: his choice was a harvest of hard work.

However, there is another way to experience the asset building stage, where the juggling effort associated to property acquisition becomes more evident. Some consumers had a good start in life, with a good job, a fair start in car consumption. But, then, they face a setback: purchase of a house, debts of their business, salary reduction, and illness. Elton (46 years old, married, inland town resident) owns a small business and starts his trajectory with second hand low-cost cars. When he buys a brand new low-cost car, paid in installments, he ends up insolvent, due to irregular revenues. After ten years, with a steady business and an owned house, he chooses a new car that, curiously, costs twice his current low-cost car. A symbolic adjustment of his consumption trajectory, where he is finally able to acquire a consonant car to his professional and familiar condition. This experience reveals the dilemmas of assets building stage: the balance between work and play make them oscillate between investment and pleasure. Whenever they are financially steady, they feel they deserve a better car, reconnecting their consumption trajectory to the broader cultural narrative of evolution.

The third stage, the conspicuous car, is where consumers experience a financial surplus, obtained through a successful professional trajectory. Cars, at this point, reflect the wealth and enjoyment of their protagonists. Consumers are at the peak of their career and are full property owners. This stage is marked by values of enjoyment, full and free pleasure, without the burden of providing financially for the family. So cars are conspicuously chosen. Interviews revealed the abandon of rational procedures in the new cars’ choice, leaving room for a more emotional process. The semantic car groups associated to this stage are the luxury SUVs and Sedans, and also the so-called “dream cars”.

Fernando (32 years old, married, engineer, metropolis resident) describes himself as a very “rational consumer”. He owns three apartments, and works for a public oil company. With his wife, they are paying the installments of the 4th apartment. He feels he has done his “homework”, bearing a few years without a car, or using his wife’s car, even if he “hated” it. When he buys a car, after acquiring these assets, he describes a very safe rational decision process: comparison of models on an excel sheet, multiple visits to dealerships, online researches, reading of specialized magazines. But the purchase trigger was not rational. He spots a car in the street, he has never seen before. A unique car, “that you cannot find everywhere”. He was in love and, on that moment, he allows himself to be in love. The conspicuous stage is the moment to fully enjoy consumption, with no commitments. And, to publicly display this achievement.

The combination of car semantics to syntactic stages reveals a longitudinal ritual, or even better, a longitudinal rite of passage, where consumers, by fulfilling each stage script with the adequate choice of consumption artifacts, operate a personal status change, from a professional to be, to an assets builder, and finally to a property owner and professional steady consumer.

Longitudinal rite of passage

The analysis of syntactic and semantic dimensions present on car consumption in Brazil indicates that there is certain way to consume cars, which communicates personal values and social state achievement. Following the underlying value of evolution, consumers experience a status change over time when they advance in the syntactic structure provided by the category. We will call this specific type of ritual as Longitudinal Rite of Passage. It refers to a specific type of expressive, symbolic activity, constructed of multiple and connected behaviors that follows a lengthwise and structured trajectory (syntactic), which marks the individual’s journey of social status transition.

Longitudinal Rites of Passage encapsulate all ritual dimensions, since they follow a script of syntactic steps, using prescribed artifacts according to their semantic function. They also are performed for an audience (e.g. family, other men, professional peers), that decodes and acknowledge their social movement. And, finally, they present a very clear guideline for participants that know where and how they should behave at each moment. Often, consumers would describe the expected steps and also the sanctions for those that ignored the ritual consumption script.
Longitudinal rite of passage has specific aspects if compared to the ones presented in the previous literature. Like rites of passage (Friesen 1997; Solomon and Anand 1985), they communicate a change of state to consumers. But they are not episodic or one-time events. They aim to communicate journeys and are enacted in long consumption trajectories. Hence, the syntax dimension is an important tool to allow ritual scripts to come forth. In longitudinal rites of passage, the category structure seems to be as important as the semantic content provided by products individually as artifacts.

Rook (1984) describes ritual as a redundant behavior that starts at a given fix moment, and after a series of events, comes to its closure. Longitudinal rites of passage are multiple and connected behaviors because their particular meaning arise when consumers perform that script by traversing the different market-mediated milestones (Drenten, 2013) of a cultural prescribed trajectory. The syntactic stages of the longitudinal rite of passage work as a script of how to consume, as a way to perform the expected status change over time. The consumers’ life choices interact with a narrative semantic structure offered by the category. The combination of category resources, as artifacts, with the different consumer stages, allow longitudinal rites of passage to deploy overtime. In this sense, one-time rites of passage in consumers’ lives, such as a wedding, provide personal life cycle milestones that complete and give support to market milestones.

Finally, the distinction between short and longitudinal rites of passage might also rely on the extent of status transition for consumers. While, in a wedding, for instance, consumers change one aspect of their lives (marital status), in longitudinal rites of passage, the status change is broader. In the case of the present research, the transition refers to a combination of professional, financial and familial aspects.

CONCLUSIONS

Cova (1997, 299) states that “in postmodernity, the conquest of self has become inescapable and each individual, wherever they come from, must accomplish the feat of becoming someone by showing their difference”. Contemporary society provides not only many ways of “becoming” but also challenges individuals to negotiate their trajectories of life. And consumption may turn into an important resource in this process, through the exchange of meanings with consumers and with society. Most of consumer research focuses on understanding the symbolic meanings of specific products. Less frequent is the investigation of meanings created by groups of products. This research proposes a longitudinal perspective, that considers that certain types of products are not consumed in an isolated manner in consumer life, but in an integrated way that connect past and future decisions, since they can express the consumer’s journey in life.

Our research extends the analysis of car consumption rituals, following not only its semantic, but also its syntactic form. We propose the concept of the Longitudinal Rite of Passage. This specific type of ritual communicates a status transition, differentiating itself from the more traditional rites of passage by its temporal dimension, since it occurs as a set of multiple and connected behaviors performed throughout consumers’ lifetime.

Usually, rites of passage were investigated and described through their ceremonial form, like weddings and debutante balls (Escalas 1993; Ustuner, Ger and Holt 2000). In contemporary society, some argue that rites of passage are losing their centrality (Deegan 1989, 1998; Gilmore, 1990; Mahdi, Christopher and Meade 1996). Therefore, consumers may experience a longer, more ambiguous status transition. In this sense, personal, intimate rites of passage may appear to replace the traditional ones, forging new identities with the resources from consumer culture (Mehta and Belk 1991; Schouoten 1991). Drenten (2013) proposes the concept of market-mediated milestones to explain consumption-oriented incremental changes that serve as achievable criterion by which individuals solidify their new self-concepts. Analogously, longitudinal rites of passage may be a more fluid, less rigid ritual form, that presents a less marked and traditional way to perform the social status change.

We additionally argue that certain categories, like cars, can act as a syntactic resource for longitudinal rites of passage, to express social status change over time. Future studies could further explore other possible categories that can serve as artifacts and symbolic public context (e.g. clothes, restaurants, tourist destinations), deepening our understanding about its characteristics and processes of negotiation of life cycle and identity meanings. Additionally, exploring categories of different natures (e.g. frequent purchase categories, private consumption categories) could be helpful to determine the nature of longitudinal rites of passage.

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