Contemporary Consumption Rituals:
A Research Anthology
MARKETING AND CONSUMER
PSYCHOLOGY SERIES
Curtis P. Haugtvedt, Ohio State University
Series Editor

OTNES/LOWREY • Contemporary Consumption Rituals:
A Research Anthology
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A Research Anthology

Edited by 
Cele C. Otnes 
Tina M. Lowrey
To my family, near and far
—C.C.O.

To LJ.
—T.M.L.
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Series Foreword

On a daily basis, people are exposed to thousands of marketing appeals (brand names, logos, advertisements, etc.). Attitudes toward products, brands, companies, and decisions to purchase, use, and dispose of products are common and important activities in our lives.

The Consumer Psychology and Marketing Series focuses on contemporary and long-standing issues relevant to psychology, sociology, anthropology and other social sciences as they relate to consumption activities, the multifaceted influence of advertising, and the relationships between consumers, companies, and brands. The volumes are meant to serve as a bridge between basic and applied research, providing summaries of existing research findings, noting relevant theoretical frameworks, and identifying new areas of inquiry. The volumes in this series will appeal to advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in the social sciences interested in learning more about the relationship of their disciplines to the discipline of marketing. The volumes will also appeal to practitioners seeking to identify relevant theories and research methods to address practical problems.

For the first book in the series, Cele Otnes and Tina Lowrey have assembled an impressive list of experts to discuss perspectives on the roles of consumption rituals in the lives of consumers.

—Curt Haugtvedt
Series Editor
Contributor Biographies

Eric Arnould is Professor of Marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln despite the fact that he holds a PhD degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Arizona (1982). He has also taught at Odense University, Denmark, the University of South Florida, California State University Long Beach, and the University of Colorado at Denver. From 1975 to 1990, he tried to do less harm than good working on economic development issues in more than a dozen West African nations for governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Since 1990, he has been a full-time academic. His research investigates consumer ritual (Thanksgiving, New Year’s, football bowl games, Halloween, inheritance), service relationships (experiential services, commercial friendships, service betrayal), West African marketing channels, and the uses of qualitative data. To his enduring surprise, his work appears in the three major U.S. marketing journals, as well as many other social science periodicals and books. Dr. Arnould speaks French and Hausa and enjoys running, do-it-yourself projects, and being a parent. His dog Daisy loves him.

Carolyn Folkman Curasi is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the J.Mack Robinson College of Business Administration at Georgia State University. She received her PhD in business administration with a specialization in marketing from the University of South Florida in 1998. She has published in scholarly outlets, including the Journal of Consumer Research, the Journal of Services Marketing, Anthropology Newsletter, Advances in Consumer Research, the Quarterly Journal of Electronic Commerce, the International Journal of Market Research, and in the European Advances in Consumer Research. Prior to joining the academic community, Dr. Curasi held several executive positions within corporate America.

Sameer Deshpande is a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he also received his master’s degree in 1999. He has taught courses in strategic communication, introduction to mass communication and advertising,
and pop culture to high school and undergraduate students. His research interests include social marketing, cross-cultural issues, alliances between profit and nonprofit enterprises, and civic participation. A paper on cause-related marketing (coauthored with Jacqueline Hitchon) is forthcoming in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. He received his MBA from the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies, Bombay, in 1995 and has 3 years of industry experience in advertising agencies.

**Ronald L. Grimes** is Chair of the Department of Religion and Culture, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He was a founding editor of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* and has been a consultant on ritual for organizations such as the Sundance Institute Playwrights’ Lab, the Cranbrook Institute of Science, the Irish World Music Centre, WordBridge, and the A&E Channel. He is author of several books on ritual, including *Ritual Criticism* (University of South Carolina Press, 1990), *Reading, Writing, and Ritualizing* (Pastoral Press, 1993), *Marrying & Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man’s Life* (Westview, 1995), *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Prentice-Hall, 1996), and *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (University of California, 2000). In addition to his writing and research on ritual, he teaches courses on religion and the arts, the anthropology of religion, Zen in North America, and indigenous religions. Currently, he is working on a documentary film series on ritual as well as a book on ritual studies and performance theory.

**B. Ece İlhan** is a Doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Business Administration at Bilkent University, Turkey. Her research interests include consumption rituals in transition, consumption of history, and the relation between identity, globalization, postmodernity, consumption, and marketing.

**Robert V. Kozinets** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. An anthropologist by training, he also has extensive consulting experience with over 500 corporations, including IBM, EDS, TV Guide, Mediacom, Interrep, Novartis, and Honda. His teaching and training skills include new product and service development, ethnographic consumer research, and entertainment marketing. His research interests include technology consumption, virtual communities, consumer activism, marketing to subcultures and communities, and media and entertainment marketing. He has written and published articles on *ESPN Zone*, *Burning Man*, *Star Trek*, the *X-Files*, coffee connoisseurs, Wal-Mart, and themed flagship brand stores for journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, the *European Management Journal*, the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and the *Journal of Retailing*.

**Tina M. Lowrey** is Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She has published articles in
the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Advertising, and Psychology & Marketing, among others. She has chapters in New Developments and Approaches in Consumer Behavior Research, Gift Giving: A Research Anthology, Marketing and Consumer Behavior Research in the Public Interest, and Gender Issues and Consumer Behavior. Her main research interests include gift-giving behaviors, ritualistic consumption, and psycholinguistic analyses of advertising texts. She has presented numerous papers on these topics at conferences of the Association for Consumer Research, the Society for Consumer Psychology, the American Marketing Association, the American Academy of Advertising, the International Association for Research in Economic Psychology, the Midwestern Psychological Association, and the International Communication Association. She is a member of the Psychology & Marketing editorial board.

Jean-Sébastien Marcoux is Assistant Professor of Marketing at l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, which is affiliated to the University of Montreal. He trained as an anthropologist, and teaches consumer research and material culture studies. His current research interests are consumer support networks, informal economy, and the broader issue of the “second life” of things.

Mary Ann McGrath is Professor of Marketing and the Director of the Master of Science in Integrated Marketing Communication Program at Loyola University, Chicago. She earned her MBA and PhD degrees in marketing from Northwestern University. Her teaching and research special interests include consumer behavior and marketing communications. She has published numerous articles on shopping behavior, the retail setting, gender differences in consumer behavior, gift exchanges, children in the marketing context, and the application of a variety of qualitative methods to consumer research. She has also been a marketing consultant to several major firms and retailers.

Michelle R. Nelson is Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Earlier in her career, Nelson taught in the Department of Communication at Emerson College (Boston, MA) and in the Marketing Group at Oxford Brookes University (Oxford, England). She teaches undergraduate courses in strategic communication and graduate courses in qualitative methods. Her research focuses on how culture and gender influence identity/values, communication, and consumer behavior. In addition to her current work on cross-cultural weddings, Nelson has investigated ritualistic consumption related to birthday parties, Christmas shopping, and Valentine’s Day. She has published articles in the Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Economic Psychology, and Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology. She received her PhD from the Institute of Communications
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Cele C. Otnes is Associate Professor in the department of Business Administration, the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is also a member of the Campus Honors faculty, where she has taught a seminar on contemporary consumer rituals. She teaches courses in retailing, promotions, and consumer behavior at the undergraduate and MBA levels. She was previously a faculty member in the Department of Marketing at Rutgers University and the Department of Advertising at the University of Illinois. Her research focuses on understanding gift giving, as well as consumer behavior during holidays and other major rituals. She is coauthor with Elizabeth H. Pleck of *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, forthcoming from the University of California Press in 2003. She is also coeditor of *Gift Giving* with Richard F. Beltramini. She has published articles on ritualistic consumption in the *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Business Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Ritual Studies, and Journal of Popular Culture*, among others. She serves on the editorial board of several journals, and is guest editor of a recent special issue of the *Journal of Advertising* that focuses on advertising and consumer culture. She received her PhD in communications from the University of Tennessee in 1990.

Elizabeth H. Pleck is Professor of History and Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her second historical monograph, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy Against Family Violence* will be reissued by the University of Illinois Press with a new introduction in 2003. She is coauthor with Cele C. Otnes of *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, to be published by the University of California Press in 2003.

Linda L. Price is E. J. Faulkner Professor of Agribusiness and Marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She received her PhD in marketing from the University of Texas-Austin in 1983. She has also been on the faculty at the University of South Florida; the University of Colorado, Boulder; the University of California, Irvine; Odense University, Denmark; and the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Price has published over 50 research papers in areas of marketing and consumer behavior, including leading journals such as *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, and Organization Science*. Her research focuses on consumers as emotional, imaginative, and creative agents and on the relational dimensions of consumers’ behaviors.

Dennis Rook is Professor of Marketing, Clinical, in the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. He received his PhD from Northwestern University (1983), where he studied consumer
behavior analysis and qualitative research methods. His dissertation, Consumer Products as Ritual Artifacts, was chaired by Sidney J. Levy. Dr. Rook’s research into impulse buying, ritualized consumption, and projective methods has appeared in various journals, books, and symposia proceedings. Since 1988, he has served on the editorial board of the Journal of Consumer Research. In between academic assignments, he worked as a strategic planner at DDB Needham Advertising in Chicago, and as director of qualitative research services at Conway/Miliken & Associates, a Chicago research and consulting firm. In 1999, he edited a compilation of Sidney J. Levy’s writings, Brands, Symbols, Consumers and Research, and he is currently working on a research methods book, Let’s Pretend: A Handbook of Projective Consumer Research Techniques. Dr. Rook recently served as program co-chairperson for the 2002 Association for Consumer Research annual conference.

Julie A. Ruth is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Rutgers University School of Business, Camden. Her research focuses on affect-laden aspects of consumer behavior, including consumer emotions, gift exchange, consumers’ relationships with significant others, and consumer response to co-branding marketing strategies such as brand alliances and joint sponsorships. She has published articles on these topics in the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and Journal of Business Research, among others. She serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Advertising. She teaches undergraduate and MBA courses in advertising, promotions, and marketing management, and has received numerous teaching awards, including the Rutgers University Provost’s Award for Teaching Excellence. She received her PhD from the University of Michigan.

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John F. Sherry, Jr. joined the Kellogg Marketing faculty at Northwestern University in 1984. He is an anthropologist (PhD, University of Illinois, 1983) who studies both the sociocultural and symbolic dimensions of consumption, and the cultural ecology of marketing. He has researched, taught, and lectured around the globe. He is a Fellow of the American Anthropological Association as well as the Society for Applied Anthropology. Sherry is a past president of the Association for Consumer Research, and a former associate editor of the Journal of Consumer Research. He sits on the editorial boards of four other journals, and is an ad hoc reviewer for a dozen journals.
in the fields of social science and management. He frequently serves the American Marketing Association as a Doctoral Consortium faculty member and Dissertation Competition Judge. He is an evaluator for the National Science Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Marketing Science Institute. He is also a consultant to Fortune 500 companies in foreign and domestic operations. Sherry’s work appears in a score of journals (including the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Retailing*, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*), in numerous book chapters, in professional manuals, and proceedings. He has edited *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook*, as well as *Servicescapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Markets*; he is coeditor of *Advances in Consumer Research*, (Vol. 19). He has won awards for his scholarly work and poetry. Time permitting, he is an avid flatwater paddler, and is still trying to perfect his 15-foot jumpshot.

Wesley Shrum is Professor of Sociology at Louisiana State University, where he has taught since 1982. His primary interests are the sociology of science and technology, with a particular focus on the globalizing effects of technology. He is currently engaged in a long-term study of the effects of the Internet on science in Kenya, Ghana, and India.

Debbie Treise is a Professor in the Department of Advertising at the University of Florida, and is an affiliate faculty member in the College of Natural Resources and Environment. She received her PhD from the University of Tennessee in Communications in 1992. At the University of Florida, she serves as graduate coordinator for the Health/Science Communication master’s track. She teaches courses in advertising campaigns and graduate seminars in science/health communication and qualitative research methods. She was named as a University of Florida Research Faculty Fellow (3-year appointment) and has twice received the College Faculty Research Award. She has received over $1.5 million in grants from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation investigating her research area, science and health communication. She has contributed chapters in several books, and articles in *Journal of Advertising, Health Marketing Quarterly, Science Communication, AIDS Education and Prevention, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, Journal of Advertising Education* and *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*. She serves on the editorial board of *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*.

Joyce M. Wolburg is an Associate Professor in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Marquette University in Milwaukie, Wisconsin. She received her PhD at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Advertising*, the *Journal of Advertising Research*, the *Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, *Research in Marketing*, *Journalism and*...
Mass Communication Quarterly, and World Communication. Her research interests include ritual behavior, risk communication, public service announcements, and alcohol/tobacco issues.

Stacy L. Wood is Assistant Professor in the Department of Marketing, Moore School of Business, the University of South Carolina. Her research investigates how consumers change—specifically how consumers adopt innovations, learn about new products, and engage in emerging cultural trends. She has published articles in the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Psychology, and Journal of Retailing, among others. She and her coauthors were the recipients of the 1997 H. Paul Root Award given to the paper appearing in the Journal of Marketing that made the most significant contribution to the advancement of marketing practice. She serves as a reviewer for both the Journal of Consumer Research and Journal of Marketing Research, and as the conference track chair for the Emerging Business and Technology track of the 2003 American Marketing Association Winter Conference. She received her PhD in marketing from the University of Florida in 1998.

David B. Wooten is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Michigan. He was previously on the faculties of the University of Florida and Columbia University. His research interests include consumption rituals, social influences on consumption, and impression management theory. He has published in the Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, and Advances in Consumer Research. He earned a PhD in marketing from the University of Michigan.
How many consumption rituals have you found yourself engaged in, or have engaged you, in the past few months? As we were preparing this introduction, Cele was looking forward to attending the wedding of a colleague, and had bought a gift, made the necessary beautification appointments, and was following the reception plans with interest. Just 2 weeks before, she had hosted a “Hello Kitty” birthday party for her 8-year-old daughter, complete with the requisite cake and candles, party horns, gifts, birthday song, matching table settings, and goodie bags (which seem to get more elaborate every year). At around the same time, Tina was involved in the emotionally and physically arduous ritual of moving and reestablishing a household (see Marcoux, chap. 12) and in the upcoming months would be socialized with regard to the inner workings of gift giving and other workplace rituals at her new job (see Ruth, chap. 9).

Even during the relatively “down” time of summer (at least for academics), there is no escaping ritual participation. Nor do people necessarily (always) want to escape the family reunions (or even the ones created by commercial interests such as Saturn), birthdays, graduations, weddings, and seasonal holidays that give our lives structure, provide us with a sense of community, and even transform our lives with defining, memorable moments (Driver, 1991). As Rook (1985) demonstrated in his seminal article on ritualistic consumption—and as he echoes in the concluding chapter of this book—the use of products and services in activities that are expressive, symbolic, dramatically scripted, and performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity is an exciting and challenging topic through which to study the intersection of consumption, collectivity, and culture.

Rook’s (1985) work and the countless others that have been published or presented in consumer behavior outlets notwithstanding, it is unfortunate
that whereas marketing scholars have often chosen to integrate the literature on consumer rituals from other disciplines in their own work, for some reason the reverse is not always the case. A few years ago, Cele was compiling a readings packet for an undergraduate honors course on rituals in contemporary culture at the University of Illinois. Sifting through and selecting the material for this course was both gratifying and frustrating at the same time. It was gratifying because many of the best readings were recent articles from her home field of consumer behavior, Articles such as the classic piece on sacred and profane consumption by Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), as well as those that explored aspects of more specific rituals (e.g., Sherry’s, 1983, often-cited framework for studying gift exchange, and Wallendorf and Arnould’s, 1991, piece on Thanksgiving) demonstrated the broad and dynamic nature of the topic of ritualistic consumption, and pointed the way to seminal readings in other areas.

Yet, creating a readings packet for this course was also frustrating because it brought home the point that scholars in other disciplines did not seem aware of the frenetic level of ritual scholarship that was helping to transform consumer behavior from a field traditionally focusing on the internal psychological aspects of search and purchase behavior, to one where understanding the symbolic function of goods and services was an equally legitimate approach. Ironically, many scholars who were hacking their way through this symbolic wilderness in marketing departments had received their original training in some of these more established social science disciplines. Yet it is fair to say that scholars in these other fields were not necessarily recognizing the contribution that this new generation was making, in terms of enhancing the understanding of ritualistic consumption.

It was the experience of compiling that readings packet, as well as our own interaction with scholars in other disciplines, that motivated the creation of this interdisciplinary anthology on consumption rituals. The scholars in this book reside in departments of communications, history, marketing or business administration, religious studies, and sociology. More of them do claim the field of consumer behavior as their home, but that is not surprising, given our own backgrounds and circles of scholarship in which we typically travel. Yet even within the marketing scholars, there is quite a bit of diversity. Some are anthropologists who teach in marketing programs. A few studied under the pioneer of the study of symbolic consumption in the marketing field, Sidney J. Levy, himself a psychologist. What they all have in common is the recognition that understanding why and how consumers imbue goods and services with meaning during rituals is a fascinating and seemingly never-ending research well from which to draw.

In short, perhaps no other area of study within the social sciences demonstrates the fuzziness of disciplinary boundaries like that of ritualistic consumption. In this volume, a religious studies scholar talks about the media representation of ritual, communication scholars discuss the transformational aspects of rituals surrounding alcohol consumption, a marketing scholar demonstrates the relevance of organizational behavior
theory to understanding gift-giving rituals in the workplace, and an historian

describes how the marketing of Kwanzaa was integral to its successful
adoption. And so it goes.

This collection also follows on the heels of a fairly extensive stream
of booklength treatments of ritual, all of which continue to demonstrate
the interest that the topic holds for scholars in many disciplines. Recent
contributions by historians include The Battle for Christmas (Nissenbaum,
1997), Celebrating the Family (Pleck, 2000), and A World of Their Own
Making (Gillis, 1996). From anthropology, there is Yan’s (1996) booklength
treatment on gift exchange in rural China; from sociology, there is Carrier’s
(1995) discussion of the difference between gifts and commodities; and, as
this book was being prepared for production, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
published The Wedding as Text, an examination of how cross-cultural
weddings contribute to identity, by Leeds-Hurwitz (2002). Moreover, several
edited volumes have been published that typically explore aspects of one
ritual, such as the anthology on Christmas that was edited by Miller (1993)
and one on gifts as well (Ottes & Beltramini, 1996). By both enhancing
and supplementing these longer works, we hope to provide readers with a
sourcebook that demonstrates the depth and diversity of scholarship in the
area of contemporary ritual studies.

We have organized these submissions into five broad topics: consumer
rituals and the media, holidays and consumption, wedding rituals across
cultures, gift exchange, and “pushing boundaries” (e.g., new consumption
rituals). These represent many of the areas that interest contemporary scholars
The first is “Drinking Rituals Among the Heaviest Drinkers: College Student
Binge Drinkers and Alcoholics” by Joyce Wolburg (Marquette University)
and Deborah M.Treise (University of Florida). This chapter examines the
commonalities of ritualized drinking behavior that appear in multiple
published studies pertaining to two groups prone to alcohol abuse—college
students who engage in binge drinking and alcoholics. The authors analyze
these behaviors by applying both structural and functional frameworks for
understanding ritual. They discuss strategies recommended for treatment
that recognize the ritualistic nature of consuming this product.

In “Consuming Ritual: A&E’s Sacred Rites and Rituals,” Ronald L.Grimes
(Wilfred Laurier University) reflects on his experience as a scholarly advisor
in the creation of a program by the Arts and Entertainment network that
continues to air. Grimes discusses both the rites depicted by the program
and the ritualization processes surrounding its production. He examines
the choices of rituals included, the criteria used by producers that result
in an inaccurate representation of the potential scope of ritual behavior,
the analysis of the meaning of ritual symbols in the program, and the tacit
racism and sexism that pervade it. He concludes by comparing the “tourist
aesthetic” (or television version) of ritual to the “contemplative aesthetic,”
or scholarly posture toward the subject.
Part II, “Holidays and Consumption,” contains four chapters. Chapter 3, “Ceremonial Disrobement and Moral Choice: Consumption Rituals at Mardi Gras” by Wesley Shrum, Jr. (Louisiana State University), discusses the development and structure of a new deviant consumption ritual of public disrobement within the context of New Orleans’ French Quarter at Mardi Gras. Shrum argues that deviance in a sacred context requires legitimating symbols that can be adapted from preexisting ritual practices and results in the innovation of new ritual paradigms. Public disrobement is examined in terms of cultural codes involving market relations, gender, and hierarchy.

Chapter 4, “Kwanzaa: The Making of a Black Nationalist Tradition 1966–1990” by Elizabeth H. Pleck (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), explores the emergence of a new holiday estimated to now be celebrated by one in seven African Americans. She describes the ways Kwanzaa, which was originally designed to resemble the rituals of an African harvest festival, was transformed from a critique of capitalism to one that was successful because it was commercialized to include such elements as shopping, the sending of cards, gift giving, and home decorating.

While both Mardi Gras and Kwanzaa seem to involve expanding boundaries, Chapter 5, “The Evolution, Transformation, and Demise of a Ritual: The Case of May Day” by Mary Ann McGrath (Loyola University), traces the demise of the holiday in the United States. McGrath discusses the evolution of May Day from its roots as a pre-Christian celebration of spring and fertility to its more recent role as an international day honoring labor, but points out that the celebration of any part of this historical continuum on the first day of May has virtually disappeared within the United States. McGrath discusses the reasons for the disappearance of the holiday in this country.

Chapter 6, “Consumer Fairy Tales of the Perfect Christmas: Villains and Other Dramatis Personae” by Tina M. Lowrey (University of Texas at San Antonio) and Cele C. Otnes (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), argues that consumers’ experiences while shopping for Christmas gifts reveal the participation of most of the essential characters encountered in the literary genre of the fairy tale. Drawing on data collected with the same informants over a 7-year period, they describe how the dramatis personae that Propp (1928/1970) claimed are found in literary fairy tales also inhabit and influence their informants’ gift-buying experiences.

Part III offers two chapters that focus on different aspects of one ritual—the wedding. Chapter 7, “Love Without Borders: An Examination of Cross-Cultural Wedding Rituals,” by Michelle R. Nelson and Sameer Deshpande (both of the University of Wisconsin-Madison), argues that increased mobility and the globalization of world cultures have contributed to the growing number of interracial, interethnic, and interreligious marriages. Using introspection, participant observation, and in-depth interviews of a dozen couples, this chapter examines the wedding ritual from the perspective of bicultural couples. Processes of communication, negotiation, and compromise are explored as couples select and combine cultural and
traditional artifacts and scripts for their weddings. Questions of identity as well as family influences are also considered.

Chapter 8, “Dowry: A Cherished Possession or an Old-Fashioned Tradition in a Modernizing Society?,” by Özlem Sandicki and B.Ece İlhan (Bilkent University), demonstrates that as an important rite of passage for many women, the wedding involves a rich palette of objects, roles, and behaviors. In Turkey, dowry is a very important part of the wedding ritual, representing the transition from childhood to adulthood as well as the parental support and confirmation of the wedding. The authors explore how the meanings and practices associated with dowry change over time and over social space, through life history analyses of women from two different sociocultural groups in Turkey.

Part IV includes chapters that explore gift exchange. In Chapter 9, “Gift Exchange Rituals in the Workplace: A Social Roles Interpretation,” Julie A.Ruth (Rutgers University) argues that although research on gift exchange in the workplace has examined gifts between firms as a means of achieving business objectives, omitted from such inquiry has been gift giving among coworkers, marking work-related holidays such as Secretaries’ or Bosses’ Day. Gifts among coworkers can be distinguished from those among friends and family because of the additional pressure on givers and recipients in the workplace to carry out work roles. Ruth examines the social roles that emerge during coworker gifting, providing insight into the generalizability of consumer gift-exchange theories, as well as the dynamics of consumers-as-coworkers balancing rituals, relationships, and organizational culture and roles.

In Chapter 10, “In the Spotlight: The Drama of Gift Reception” David B. Wooten (University of Michigan) and Stacey L.Wood (University of South Carolina) employ dramaturgical analysis to illustrate the importance and difficulty of the recipient’s role within the gift exchange process. The authors dissect the gift exchange ritual in accordance with the elements of a theatrical performance, from initial stage fright (i.e., recipients’ anticipated anxiety) to the final encore (i.e., the role of thank-you cards). They discuss the routine verbal elements and the spontaneous nonverbal cues that make or break these performances. In addition, they contrast the performances of veteran actors (i.e., adults) with those of ingenues (i.e., children).

A different kind of gifting process is explored in Chapter 11, “Ritual Desire and Ritual Development: An Examination of Family Heirlooms in Contemporary North American Households” by Carolyn Folkman Curasi (Georgia Tech University), Eric J.Arnould, and Linda L.Price (both of the University of Nebraska). The authors focus especially on the intergenerational transfers of special and inherited possessions. They draw attention to consumers’ longing for ritual, the behavioral latitude that ritual can absorb, and the characteristic bricolage through which people compose ritual activity. Contemporary family rituals are often an elective bricolage of new and borrowed rituals. The authors argue that inherited possession
family rituals are performed in narrow and shallow, loosely structured
groups that combine vertical and horizontal relationships.

Finally, Part V, “Pushing the Boundary of Ritual,” contains discussions
of new and emergent rituals in contemporary consumer culture. Chapter
12, “Moving on to Something Else: The Social Relations of Women During
Separation,” by Jean-Sebastien Marcoux (Haute Ecole Commerciale,
Montreal) presents the results of an ethnography conducted in Montreal,
Canada, between September 1997 and July 1999. By accompanying his
informants throughout the entire process of moving, from preparation to
resettling, Marcoux reveals that women often use the changes in residence
and the sorting out processes tantamount to such changes to define their
material environment and redefine themselves as subjects. As such, moving
appears to be a critical ritual governed by a symbolic logic of order.

Chapter 13, “Sacred Iconography in Secular Space: Altars, Alters, and
Alterity at the Burning Man Project,” by John F.Sherry, Jr. and Robert
V.Kozinets (both of Northwestern University), is a photo essay focusing
on the transformational power of altars discovered through a consumer
ethnography of the Burning Man project in 1999 and 2000. The Burning
Man project is a utopian celebration and art festival, which began in 1985
in San Francisco, California. The resulting data reveal a rich and varied use
of altars in consumption and anticonsumption contexts. With emphasis on
its photographs, this chapter returns to the visual and attempts to address
concerns raised in the important Crisis of Representation Critiques.

In the afterword of this book, Dennis Rook (University of Southern
California), whose award-winning 1985 article in the Journal of Consumer
Research brought the topic of ritualistic consumption to the attention of
scholars in marketing and consumer behavior, reflects on the contents
of these chapters, and on the current state of scholarship pertaining to
ritualistic consumption.

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that those who pursue scholarship in this area find it useful in considering ways to further broaden our understanding of ritualistic consumption.

REFERENCES


Part I
Consumer Rituals and the Media
Drinking Rituals Among the Heaviest Drinkers: College Student Binge Drinkers and Alcoholics

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I have watched the people I love most lose everything to drugs and alcohol, and yet I still drink in excess. About a year ago, we were a family ravaged by addiction and on the brink of disaster. So why, after all the suffering...do I continue to drink in excess, often to the point of alcoholism myself? The answer: I'm young, I'll live forever, and it will never happen to me. (Wolburg, 2001, p. 29)

This quote reflects the questions that heavy drinkers ask themselves during moments of introspection, as well as the glib denial of the problem and its consequences. Considering the risks that drinkers take, the question—“Why do I continue to drink in excess?”—baffles not only the drinkers themselves, but also many university administrators, psychologists, and developers of public service announcements (PSAs).

To find some answers to the question of why people drink, this chapter examines the ritualized drinking behavior as reported across multiple published studies. In particular, it examines the behavior of two important groups, college student binge drinkers and alcoholics, who “literally keep the industry afloat” (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Jacobson and Mazur estimated that members of these two groups make up the 10% of the adult population who drink about 60% of all alcohol consumed (p. 165).

Defining the two groups presents a set of challenges in itself. Binge drinkers are traditionally defined by the amount of consumption, whereas
alcoholics are defined by the amount of dependence on alcohol. A team of Harvard researchers defined binge drinkers as men who drink five or more drinks at a single sitting and women who drink four, regardless of dependence on alcohol or level of impairment (Wechsler, Moeykens, Davenport, Castillo, & Hansen, 1995). In contrast, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism uses the term *alcoholic* to specify alcohol dependence regardless of consumption level, although it is typically excessive (NIAAA Report, 2002). The person who is alcohol dependent experiences cravings for alcohol; loss of control over amount of consumption; physical dependence, which includes withdrawal symptoms when alcohol use is stopped; and greater tolerance for alcohol, which requires greater amounts of alcohol to “get high.” The NIAAA distinguishes between those who are alcohol dependent and those who merely abuse alcohol. It defines alcohol abuse as a recurring pattern of heavy alcohol intake that results in one of the following situations within a 12-month period: failure to fulfill major responsibilities; drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as driving; having recurring alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested; and continued drinking despite relationship problems. For this chapter, the term *alcoholic* refers to those who are dependent on alcohol.

The chapter asks two research questions:

1. What insights are gained for understanding the meaning of drinking among the heaviest drinkers (binge drinkers and alcoholics) by examining alcohol consumption from a ritual behavior perspective?
2. How can these insights be incorporated into treatment strategies and PSAs?

The first research question is important because the ritual behavior perspective offers different insights into excessive alcohol consumption than other perspectives. It provides a way of making sense of this seemingly inexplicable behavior, which is important because many people, moderate drinkers and non-drinkers in particular, have difficulty understanding why drinkers put themselves and others at such risk. In the case of alcoholics, the repetitive, self-destructive behavior can be partially attributed to the addictive nature of alcohol. However, college students have had less time to become dependent on alcohol. Their abuse of alcohol is more likely to be by choice than addiction.

Excessive drinking among college students would be easier to understand if binge drinkers consisted only of students with the lowest GPAs. Although one of the consequences of excessive drinking is poor academic performance (Presley, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1993), many binge drinkers are intelligent students with high GPAs. Parents, school administrators, faculty members, and others who promote responsible drinking are often frustrated and dismayed by the behavior of intelligent students who should “know better.” The ritual behavior perspective offers insights into the benefits and the meaning of drinking that go beyond the intoxicating effects of alcohol.
The second question addresses applications of the insights gained through the first question. Because PSA developers typically create messages aimed at the general population, they have not attempted to promote abstinence but instead encourage “responsible drinking.” Most of these messages call for drinking in moderation or behavior modifications associated with drinking (e.g., designating a driver). In contrast, those who treat alcoholics typically set a goal of abstinence rather than drinking in moderation.

This question also addresses the need for message strategies that treatment providers and PSA developers can utilize. Past efforts often have tried to communicate risk through fear appeals in the logical hope that drinkers will take heed and modify their behavior (LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997). However, because not all drinkers are fearful, nor do they necessarily behave rationally, the strategy has been less effective than expected. This in turn has prompted a search for other approaches and message strategies to curb drinking. Because the ritual approach allows us to identify elements of drinking behavior that constitute ritual enactment and to understand the functional benefits of the drinking ritual, we can get past a superficial understanding of the behavior and look at what drinking means to the participants.

Before attempting to answer the research questions, we briefly examine the great toll alcohol takes on society.

**SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM**

The problems and costs that alcohol consumption present in the United States are overwhelming. Alcohol misuse has been associated with numerous behavior problems, including domestic violence, rapes, child abuse, fires, accidents, and falls, and alcohol consumption has been associated with diseases such as cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and heart disease (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). The estimated “cost of illness” of alcohol abuse in the United States was $185 billion in 1998, up from $148 billion in 1992 (Harwood, Fountain, & Livermore, 1998). Diminished productivity topped the list of losses from alcohol-related illnesses at $87.6 billion in 1998. The NIAAA (2002) estimated that nearly 14 million Americans abuse alcohol or are alcoholics, with several million more engaging in risky drinking that could lead to alcohol abuse or dependency.

The most sobering statistics are those obtained for motor vehicle accidents among young people. Although fatalities for youth alcohol-related accidents have fallen 5% since 1995, the figures remain quite alarming:

- In 1999, 2,238 youth (ages 15–20) died in alcohol-related crashes—or 35.1% of their total traffic fatalities.
- In the 18-20-year-old group, 41.7% of traffic fatalities were alcohol related, as compared to 37.9% for the total population (National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration, 1999).
In April 2002, the NIAAA released a report that outlined the problem of high-risk drinking on U.S. college and university campuses. The institute made the following claims:

- Nearly 1,400 students die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries including motor vehicle crashes.
- More than 500,000 students are unintentionally injured while under the influence.
- More than 600,000 students are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.
- More than 70,000 students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape.
- More than 400,000 students had unprotected sex, and more than 100,000 report they were too intoxicated to know if sex was consensual.
- Between 1.2% and 1.5% said they tried to commit suicide due to drinking or drug use (NIAAA Report, 2002).

Despite well-funded, comprehensive campaigns targeted to college-age binge drinkers, the national percentage of students who binge drink has held steady at 44% from 1993 to 1999 (Wechsler, Kelley, Weitzman, San Giovanni, & Seibring, 2000). For example, a 5-year, $770,000 campaign to curb binge drinking at the University of Delaware resulted in only a 3% drop (from 62% to 59%) in the number of students who binge drink (O’Sullivan, 2001).

The Center for Science in the Public Interest reported that college students spend $5.5 billion on alcohol—more than that spent on books, soft drinks, and other nonalcoholic drinks combined—and more college students are expected to die from alcohol-related causes than those who will later receive master’s and doctorate degrees combined (Had Enough Campaign, 2001).

RITUAL MODELS

According to Rook (1985), ritual behavior involves four tangible components: ritual artifacts, a ritual script, ritual performance roles, and a ritual audience. Alcohol consumption easily fits Rook’s model of ritual behavior because the act requires an artifact (the alcohol itself, as well as the proper clothes and accoutrements), a script (rules that specify who can and cannot drink legally, when drinking can occur, where it should occur, transportation arrangements to and from places where drinking will occur), a performance role (how to drink, how much to drink, how to behave while drinking), and an audience (peers, bartenders, campus personnel).

While Rook (1985) focused on the structural elements of the ritual, Driver (1991) focused on the needs that are satisfied through ritual behavior and identified the functional elements. Driver’s functional model names three
Drinking Rituals Among the Heaviest Drinkers

“social gifts” of ritual that provide: order in society, a sense of community, and transformation. Order is achieved because routines are strongly established, which are not only comforting in themselves, but also give participants the security that their behavior is enacted correctly. Community is established because ritual not only brings people together in close physical proximity but also bonds them emotionally. Finally, transformation occurs because “social life in general...requires ceremonies and rites, those quasi-dramatic enactments that define people’s relationships and also make possible their transformation as part of the social dynamic.... These events change things, and do so by the technique of ritual—that is, by magic” (p. 169).

Clearly, when the drinking ritual is examined within Driver’s functional model, evidence for the three social gifts easily emerges. The discussion returns here to the first research question (What insights are gained for understanding the meaning of drinking among the heaviest drinkers by examining alcohol consumption from a ritual behavior perspective?) and examines behavior guided by the functions of order, community, and transformation.

RITUAL BEHAVIOR AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT BINGE DRINKERS AND ALCOHOLICS

To consider the evidence for Driver’s functionally based model, we examined five studies, all of which used qualitative research and directly or indirectly addressed ritual functions. (See the Appendix for a detailed account of methodology for each study.) Three studies focused on the drinking behavior of college students (Parker, 1998; Treise, Wolburg, & Otnes, 1999; Wolburg, 2001) and two addressed the drinking patterns of alcoholics (Treise, Taylor, & Wells, 1994; Wolburg, Hovland, & Hopson, 1999). To date, the most comprehensive investigation of college student drinking from a ritual perspective is by Treise et al. (1999). The researchers organized the data around Driver’s (1991) functionally based model to provide an in-depth look at binge drinking at two large universities in the Southeast—one with 46,000 students and the other with 25,000. Both universities rank within the top 10 “party schools” in the United States in 2001 (Mansfield, 2001). The study first addressed order.

Order

Treise and her colleagues (1999) observed two primary ways that their participants found order in the drinking ritual. The first is temporal. For example, nearly all participants had specific days set aside for drinking—usually Friday nights and Saturdays—although many students also drank on Thursday nights because Friday class loads are usually light. Several participants also planned their day around drinking. Drinking decisions
often dictated how to dress, what classes to attend, which ones to cut, what assignments to complete, and what to eat beforehand. Students who want to stay in control eat before drinking and those who want to “get drunk” choose not to eat.

In a study at a private university of 10,000 students in the Midwest, Wolburg (2001) found that the meaning of the drinking ritual can be significant enough to affect college students’ perception of risk. The strength of the ordering function is evident in this participant’s comment: “Some start to drink right after the last class on Friday. You go to lunch at noon and have about six beers, go back home, have some more from about 3 p.m. till 5 p.m. Then your friends come over and you keep drinking until 10 p.m. Then you go to a bar or party” (Student #35, p. 32).

Holidays—such as St. Patrick’s Day, Halloween, and, more recently, Cinco de Mayo—have become heavy drinking occasions for students. Sporting events and fraternity parties are other drinking-related events that require careful planning. Students structure their drinking depending on the timing of the event. For example, one female student explained that on days when the university football games are scheduled at night, drinking starts by mid-afternoon, but when the game is in the afternoon, drinking starts by late morning. Drinking often continues throughout the game, despite the fact that it is prohibited (Treise et al., 1999).

Order was not only maintained by drinking on certain days and times, but also by drinking with the same people, even sitting in the same place in the same bar. For many, the nightly bar specials determined the time and place they drank. One participant from the study drank until midnight every Thursday at a bar that promoted “Ladies Night” with free admission until midnight. After midnight, she went to another bar to take advantage of a different special. Most students found enough specials from competing bars to plan where to drink every night of the week. The most frequent quitting time for the night was when the bar closed.

One last type of temporal ordering goes beyond the occasion, the time of day, and the day of the week. Instead, it reflects an attitude that the college years are the best time of life for drinking. Wolburg (2001) found that students reflect back on high school as a time when authority figures restricted their access to alcohol. After graduation from college, they expect the responsibilities of the job to get in the way of heavy drinking. Comparatively speaking, the college years are the best time in their lives to drink, and many are determined to make the most of the opportunity.

The second type of ordering function is spatial. Driver (1991, p. 79) observed that ritual places are very meaningful; they help individuals “construct alternative worlds...different from ordinary life...in the cracks between the mapped regions of what we like to call “the real world.”” This function was observed in the selection of different bars by different types of students. Some bars were for “geeks,” whereas more alternative places drew the “artsy, eccentric” people. According to Treise et al. (1999), “People tend to go where they know their friends are going to be versus the places they
don’t know anyone. It is very much a pattern... You see the same people every weekend and every night” (p. 23).

The choice of place is also somewhat determined by the age of the drinkers. The underage crowd often chooses bars that do not “card hard,” but after turning 21, many prefer the more restrictive bars (Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Some underage students go to bars hoping that a legal drinker will order drinks for them.

Wolburg (2001) noted that drinking at house parties requires a different performance role than drinking at bars. Age is not monitored, which means that IDs are not required. Although it is illegal, most hosts charge admission and provide a cup that can be refilled an unlimited number of times. Compared to the bar scene, the party setting also facilitates a wider variety of drinking games, which orders the way alcohol is consumed. The games vary somewhat from group to group (e.g., doing keg stands, drinking Jell-O shots made with vodka), but they typically result in heavy consumption.

Parker (1998) applied a meaning-based, reader-response model of advertising and examined how life experiences and alcohol-related myths in beer ads influence the interpretation of ads among college students. Her data provided an interesting twist on the function of order and demonstrated that alcohol can both create and destroy order. One participant’s life theme centered on her need to maintain control (order) over her life and her inability to tolerate lack of control. In theory the ordering function of the drinking ritual might have appealed to her, but this was not the case. She rejected the type of order that the drinking situation provided because it ultimately lead to loss of control, which is a type of ritual transformation that she found unacceptable. Her response to four Miller TV ads was that the advertiser was trying to convey an image of order and control—that beer makes the party and at parties everything is under control. However, she found the image of control to be false: “They wanted you to see the party. Everyone looks like they’re having fun. When you go to a party, someone is out of control or doing something stupid. Everything here [in the ad] is under control” (Kim, p. 104).

Alcoholics, the second group of heavy drinkers, also experience order as part of the drinking ritual. Treise et al. and Wells (1994) sought to understand the meaning of alcoholic-beverage advertising to recovering alcoholics and found that advertising presents several triggers to further drinking, many of which tap into ritual functions.

For example, several recovering alcoholics referred to established drinking routines that they associated with certain times and activities, which advertising and media images helped them recall. One participant said, “When I see Crown Royal billboards, they bring back old memories, things I always did. I remember the times when I was fishing. I always took three gallons of that stuff” (P12, p. 24).

Similarly, other participants suggested that media images of certain activities brought back associations with previous routines. One said, “If I saw 15 inches of snow [in a commercial] I think that I’m normally
skiing at that time of year, and I always did drink a lot with that.” Another participant summed up the order dimension with the statement about certain commercials, “Sports equals beer,” and that is the association that forever will be made for these participants between drinking and sports.

A study by Wolburg et al. (1999) adds indirect evidence for ritual meaning among alcoholics. The researchers examined the messages in beer ads for themes that appear particularly relevant to alcoholics, who are regarded as the heaviest of the heavy drinkers. These themes were identified through earlier research by Hopson (1993), who explicated four problematic modes of experience among recovering alcoholics. Hopson found that the addictive experience is characterized by intense feelings for which language is inadequate, a disruption in the experience of the passage of time, alienation from oneself and others, and lack of sense of agency, self-efficacy, or capacity for self-regulation. Wolburg et al. (1999) found strong support that beer ads are encoded with elements related to all of the experience modes of alcoholics.

The findings also support Driver’s (1991) three “social gifts” in a number of ways. For example, the frequent references to time in ads, especially the implications that product usage can make time move at a more rapid pace or make the passage of time a pleasant experience, convey the need for order among the target market. This is relevant when considering that the disruption in the passage of time that alcoholics experience is usually characterized by the feeling that time drags or passes slowly. Examples of ads with time references include Coors Light ads, which used a slogan of “Keep on Movin,’” and Miller ads, which incorporated time in its long-standing “Miller Time” campaign. An ad from the sample tells viewers:

Song: Time is on my side. Yes it is. Time is on my side. Yes it is.

VO: The time is 5:01. The beer is Miller High Life. And the reason is clear. When the time is your own, it must be Miller Time…(p. 190)

Michelob has also used a long-standing campaign with a variety of time-related slogans including “The night belongs to Michelob,” “Weekends were made for Michelob,” and “Some days are better than others.” A sample ad with the “Some days” message asks viewers:

VO: Did you ever have one of those days that starts off with a bang? When things take a turn for the best? When you practically walk on water?

Michelob salutes the PGA golfers and golfers everywhere, and those special moments that make some days better than others. (p. 191)

Several ads use space metaphorically to suggest a spatial ordering function. Miller Genuine Draft ads told viewers, “The world is a very cool place; get out of the old and into the cold,” and Busch beer used cowboy imagery in a
series of ads encouraging users to go where “the land is pure, unchained and free, and there’s no place that I’d rather be. Come on, come on head for the mountains of Busch Beer” (p. 191). The imagery used to signify the change in place can also help viewers feel transformed.

In summary, we find strong evidence for the function of order from the drinking ritual among both college students and alcoholics.

Community

Drinking together unites people emotionally and establishes a bond between them. As a “social lubricant,” many people find that it puts them at ease, intensifies the relationship, and enhances the experience. Treise et al. (1999) found that even as high school students, their participants looked forward to the camaraderie that would come with being a college student in the drinking scene.

Wolburg’s (2001) participants also spoke to the community function and the immediate benefits of fitting in. One student said, “When you go to college, you realize that alcohol is the one thing that you probably have in common with all these strangers around you. It almost makes sense to drink—aside from the fact that it is illegal…and dangerous” (Student #42, p. 32).

Wolburg’s participants noted that the need for bonding is especially true of freshmen, many of whom have just left a high school environment where they feel accepted by friends, only to come to a new city where they are among strangers and feel isolated. Drinking provides such a strong opportunity for bonding that it is difficult to resist, particularly when saying no to drinking risks social alienation. One of Parker’s (1998) participants reflected this feeling with the comment that “I feel like an outsider if I don’t drink” (Chas, p. 108).

Certain performance roles (Rook, 1985) are natural outcomes of the community function. One is the designated driver or caretaker, which has been promoted through years of public service announcements. In theory it establishes a role for the nondrinker, but in practice many are reluctant to deprive themselves of the meaning that the ritual provides. Some designated drivers do not abstain; they merely drink less than they would otherwise.

Because many bars and parties are within walking distance from campus residence halls, many students entirely avoid the drinking and driving dilemma. The caretaker, or “babysitter,” is the logical evolution of the designated driver role for occasions when driving is not required. Typically, this role requires overseeing the safety of members of the group—making sure that individuals do not leave the party with a stranger, or walking them home at the end of the night. On the surface, the tactic of designating a caretaker is a logical way to decrease the risks involved; however, the benefits are mixed. Growing concerns exist that students in groups with caretakers drink more than they would have otherwise because they know that someone else is responsible for their safety (Wolburg, 2001).
Treise et al. (1999) found that some students did not participate in either the designated driver or caretaker role because they simply did not care or did not want to think about it. Often these students had no recollection of how they got home; instead of being concerned for their safety, they bragged about their accomplishment. One female participant who showed no concern for danger explained, “There have been several times when I blacked out and I don’t remember a whole lot. There were days when I asked someone how I got home. When I woke up the next day, I never felt like I was in danger—even with the influence of a lot of alcohol” (p. 24).

To maintain the sense of community, participants found it important to drink according to the rules established by the drinking ritual. Not only did they feel compelled to drink in the prescribed way and in the prescribed amount, they appeared to exert pressure on others to do so as well. None of the participants felt they would be openly criticized for not drinking, yet they could not bring themselves to risk being different, standing out, missing their turn to buy drinks, or missing out in general (Treise et al., 1999). The ritual seemed to offer very little latitude for deviating from what constitutes acceptable drinking behavior. Certainly, not drinking was not an option. One female participant explained:

I’ve tried several times not to drink, but it’s really hard out in the social crowd not to. It doesn’t really make sense…. No one I know really enjoys the taste…. So if I’m not wanting to get drunk, there is no purpose to drink. But there is that pressure to drink. I mean if you’re out on a Friday night, I guess I’m going to drink. I mean, when you’re surrounded by it, it’s just the thing to do. (p. 26)

The community function was also quite apparent for the recovering alcoholics in the Treise et al. (1994) study, because not only did “sports equal beer” as mentioned in the previous section, but sports were also associated with good times and friends. Several participants cited the long-running Miller beer commercials and slogan: “It doesn’t get any better than this.” They believed that the typical male-bonding activities being depicted (fishing, hunting, etc.) in the commercials “give the feeling that the beer is what’s making it happen.” Many of these participants were troubled by the qualities of commercials that most closely mirrored their own drinking situations with their friends, and clearly they missed these activities:

Stroh’s beer has the people playing volleyball on the beach and everyone’s having a good time. (P9, p. 133)

Everything and everyone revolves around the food and alcohol. (P4, p. 133)

It (advertising) makes me miss the activities surrounding it…yeah, the good times…the drinking…the unity, so to speak, of the activities of the group… the energy you get from that. (P8, p. 134)
Advertising sometimes reminds alcoholics of their own alienation from others. One participant said, “I’ve always wanted to fit in so bad, the commercials remind me of that sometimes…. The camaraderie looked so inviting” (P14, p. 134).

Interestingly, for the alcoholic in recovery, alcoholic beverage advertising oftentimes can make the loss of community acute. For example, one participant said, “It [advertising] bothers me. I feel uncomfortable. I feel like I’ve lost something and that I can’t be like that” (P16, p. 134). Another recovering alcoholic echoed that belief and said, “That’s what the [alcoholic beverage] ads make me feel—lonely—that I want the good times again” (P10, p. 134). Thus, the drinking ritual both creates and destroys community for the drinker who becomes an alcoholic.

The community function is also supported by Wolburg et al. (1999) in their investigation of elements in ads related to the alcoholic’s sense of interpersonal alienation. In particular, the researchers observed that the majority of beer ads presented the drinker in social settings and utilized strong appeals to affiliation. Although this may be somewhat appealing to all drinkers, it may hold special promise to the person who feels alienated or isolated from others and still holds to the belief that alcohol can make their life different.

The two most common types of interaction involved friendship and sexual attraction. A humorous “buddy” ad featuring two anthropomorphic bears ends with a recommendation to drink “Molson—of Canada. Because good friends deserve a great beer” (p. 192).

Other evidence of the community function in beer advertising comes from a Budweiser ad:

Beer is about friendship. It’s about making friends. It’s about relationships. It’s about going out and meeting new people, and I don’t believe there is a better beverage to do this with than a Bud. It’s part of the good life. It’s part of a life with friends. It’s part of enjoyment, relaxation, sporting events, and ball games. It’s part of America. (Treise et al., 1999, p. 23)

Transformation

Transformation, the third ritual function, allows people to release inhibitions, induce relaxation, and assume a different identity. Because alcohol is a drug, it offers its users more forms of transformation than most ritual artifacts. However, the drinking ritual offers opportunities for transformation that transcend the drug effects. Most drinkers find welcome relief from stress because the ritual encourages them to escape the harsh realities of their lives. The drinking ritual also takes away the fear of rejection in social settings. Outside the drinking environment, many people feel too ill at ease to socialize with a stranger; however, in a bar or a party setting, many are magically transformed into outgoing, fun-loving types who become the life of the party.
Treise et al. (1999) found two main transformative themes: escape and coming of age. Students often described highly stressful lives that held coursework, social activities, and other pressures in a precarious balance. Some students simply live by a “party hard” ethic, whereas others live by a “work hard, party hard” ethic. The latter group feels that partying hard is the reward for dealing with heavy academic pressures. Regardless of the source of the pressure, they often drank with a mission: “to forget, to become more comfortable, to relieve stress, to cheer up, to forget about people and to be part of the social scene” (p. 25). One female explained, “We call it our mission…. we’re in the mood to drink. We’re sick of everything…and then there’s the night when it’s our mission to meet guys. Then there’s the night when we hate guys and it’s our mission to go out and drink and forget them” (p. 25).

Sometimes the drinking missions were more positive: “to have a good time, to meet someone of the opposite sex, to be with friends, to celebrate passing an exam or a difficult class, to get a buzz, or to ‘get good and drunk’” (p. 25). The mission determined the performance roles, and regardless of the mission, some form of transformation occurred.

The second transformation occurred with age. Many participants reported a change in attitude when they reached age 21. One female participant explained that “the attraction to alcohol is so much more when you’re younger…. The joke is once you turn 21, it’s not exciting anymore. The thrill of getting through that door and trying to get served is gone because you’re legal” (p. 26).

From the participants’ perspective, it was as though the drinking ritual offered an artificial passage into adulthood. They could behave as an adult without fulfilling the necessary requirement of turning 21. Once they actually became legal drinkers, they did not need the drinking ritual to accomplish the transformation. Not all students consume less alcohol with age but, nevertheless, the ritual meaning changes.

Wolburg’s (2001) participants also spoke to the transformation function of the ritual. In addition to the age themes already identified, they found that alcohol allowed them to change from people governed by strong moral codes that forbid immoral or “bad behavior” into those who are unencumbered by codes. Most felt they can get away with “bad behavior” while intoxicated and are not held responsible for acts performed while drinking. Thus, they used the common excuse, “I was so wasted.”

One of Parker’s (1998) participants experienced a similar need for transformation. Tom’s primary life theme involved a struggle between his need to break free of societal barriers and his need to obey the rules imposed by society and “do the right thing.” When he interpreted a Miller Lite Ice print ad that used the headline, “New rules!,” he commented that it means it’s a “different, different game now. They make it different,” (p. 106). However, he continued, “New rules doesn’t go with beer very well. Breakin’ the rules would be a cooler thing! Beer and rules don’t go together. You think of rules as not a laid-back thing” (Tom, p. 106).
On the surface, his response to the ad seems to reflect the function of order, and in one sense it does. However, the deeper function is transformation. The ad implies that there are rules that go with drinking, but they are not the rules that impose restrictions on people. The rules that apply to drinking allow “bad behavior,” which in turn allows people to be who they want to be.

Sensation seeking and the desire for thrills also emerged as transformation themes in Wolburg’s (2001) study. Students believed that drinking brings a rush of adrenalin that cannot be achieved by other activities. One participant explained:

In a setting with friends and no parents, it is exciting and thrilling to try to do things you shouldn’t be doing. When an underage person gets into a bar for the first time, the feeling is a rush—you can get unlimited drinks, there are older people around, and there are other sorts of entertainment that you just don’t get from hanging out at a friend’s dorm room on a Saturday night. (p. 33)

Treise et al.’s (1994) data also showed strong evidence for the need for transformation among alcoholics. Many participants discussed alcoholic beverage advertising as containing blatant suggestions that “you too can become this fun-loving partier.” For example, one participant said, “They have billboards everywhere for Colt 45 and the like, the way the characters dressed and posed...all very up front about wanting you to buy the product so you will look and feel like the models...it’s the whole ambience of the situation” (P12, p. 132).

Wolburg et al. (1999) discovered a fantasy world in beer ads, which offers rich opportunities for transformation on many levels. The researchers specifically examined beer ads for elements related to efficacy through skill, power, and accomplishments for a possible connection to alcoholics’ feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-efficacy. What they discovered were ads filled with fun-loving people, who are successful in relationships and able to perform superhuman stunts. Through the use of fantasy and “limit violations,” a term that denoted the stretching of reality beyond its limits, people in billboards came to life while others performed daredevil acts of skill that defied gravity. This happened in a magical world where beer cans forged through mountains, snowstorms came out of beer bottles, frogs and bears talked, and monsters walked through cities while women watched in amusement.

Other transformations included the cowboy figure, who is called a “modern-day hero,” and the “mountain man,” who draws a number of attractive women to his side. Each male viewer is challenged to be a “mountain man,” and beer makes the transformation complete, as in the following ad: “Have you got what it takes to be a mountain man? All it really takes are the two cool beers of the mountain man. Smooth Busch Beer and easy drinking Busch Light. So, be a mountain man. All you gotta do is head for the mountains” (p. 194).
The transformations in beer ads probably have wide appeal to audience members; however, the alcoholic who struggles to feel capable of meeting the demands of life may find these ads particularly appealing. Regardless of whether or not advertisers have knowingly tried to tweak the needs and feelings of their “best” customers, Wolburg et al. (1999) concluded that advertisers know this audience well. Advertisers may not formally speak the language of ritual function, yet they are adept at appealing to human emotions and needs.

Finally, it is worth noting that the evidence of ritual functions in ads can lead to multiple interpretations. First, the presence of ritual functions in ads may be a reflection of behavior that already exists within the culture in an effort to make the advertising more relevant. Second, Pollay’s (1986) “distorted mirror” perspective suggests that the inclusion of ritual functions in advertising not only reflects existing behavior, but also helps construct, maintain, and perpetuate the ritual. Following these lines of thought, advertisers who are aware of the ritualized behavior among alcoholics and other heavy drinkers have perhaps incorporated ritual functions in the ads to make the ads resonate better and make the product more appealing. However, when advertisers incorporate ritual functions in ads, with or without conscious knowledge of ritual behavior, they are able to strengthen the ritual itself, help maintain it, and so forth.

**IMPLICATIONS OF A RITUAL-BASED PERSPECTIVE FOR DRINKING MODIFICATION STRATEGIES**

We now address the second question (How can these insights be incorporated into treatment strategies and PSAs?) and offer suggestions for applying the ritual insights. The three ritual functions clearly provide meaningful rewards to alcoholics and college student binge drinkers, despite the fact that the cost and availability of alcohol, the strength of the drinking culture among peers, and the stigma of drinking all affect the specifics of ritual enactment. Order fills the need for security, community fills the need for intimacy at best and connectedness at the very least, and transformation fills the need for escape and thrill while also offering a rite of passage.

On the surface, asking students and alcoholics to modify their drinking behavior appears to be a logical, commonsense request to avoid the negative consequences; however, modifying their drinking presents them with a different set of risks: the loss of order and security, the loss of a community of friends, and the loss of escapism and other forms of transformation. To effectively ask people to curb their drinking or abstain from drinking, it is essential to find ways to resolve the loss of ritual functions.

Treise et al. (1999) offered three themes for PSA development aimed at college students that take into consideration the “social gifts.” The first has the overall objective of imposing order on drinking habits with a social norm.
that suggests the right number of drinks. The PSA uses the theme, “Make three your limit.” The second theme addresses the need for community and offers a new social role while using a term familiar to students, “Be a real drinking buddy.” Instead of using the term “drinking buddy” in the usual sense, which implies being someone to share the experience of heavy consumption, the PSA uses the term to imply a higher order of friendship that requires taking charge if drinking gets out of control. The third PSA theme promises transformation and plays off the language of the drinking ritual. Students on a mission to “drink to forget” are now encouraged to “drink to remember.”

The communication challenge is different for alcoholics than for students. There are no current PSAs in mainstream media outlets that ask for abstinence. Instead, recent announcements have tried to undermine the “cool” image of alcohol, have asked drinkers not to drive drunk, or have asked adults not to buy alcohol for minors (Andsager, Austin, & Pinkleton, 2001). Most likely the recovery process for alcoholics requires a more aggressive commitment to abstain from drinking than what most PSAs generate.

Treise et al. (1994) found that some alcoholics, particularly those who have been in recovery for a long period of time, are not affected by the alcohol advertising they see. Others, however, find that the alcohol advertising triggers the desire to drink. They in turn develop a variety of strategies to deal with ads—including avoiding the ads they encounter, reinterpreting the messages, and adding their own cognitions to the ads. Adding their cognitions often requires recalling the negative aspects of alcohol dependency that do not appear in the advertising. One participant in the study explained that “Beer commercials don’t show it when the ambulance gets there. Those commercials don’t show the families that are broken or the pain that the drinking starts…when you would do anything for a drink” (P14, p. 135).

The researchers suggest that counselors in treatment programs should incorporate instructions on how to deal with advertising as part of the overall therapy. They also note that proposals to limit alcoholic beverage advertising to “tomb-stone” approaches have merit when the rights of alcoholics to recover are considered paramount.

Similarly, Wolburg et al. (1999) proposed that alcoholics in treatment should learn to “talk back to beer ads” as a relapse prevention strategy. By talking back, they are counterarguing the messages in ads and giving the ads a new interpretation. If advertising were easy to avoid, alcoholics could simply remove themselves from the persuasive message that encourages drinking; however, the ubiquity of alcohol advertising makes avoidance an inefficient, ineffective strategy. The reinterpretation of ads and the insertion of one’s own cognitions are forms of oppositional decoding that allow alcoholics to cognitively restructure their world. The researchers recommended that key areas for decoding should focus on the four experience modes, which also include the three ritual functions.

Treatment of alcoholism can impose a new ritual that has the potential for replacing the drinking ritual. Instead of the community of drinkers who are
united by their consumption of alcohol, they become part of a community of recovering alcoholics, particularly as members of Alcoholics Anonymous or other self-help groups. Recovering alcoholics may also regain emotional bonds with family members that were broken as a result of drinking.

Treatment programs also impose a certain order or structure, whether it comes with a complete change in routine through hospitalization, or simply through attendance of meetings for self-help groups. Twelve-step programs often emphasize the need to take “one day at a time,” which addresses the need for temporal ordering.

When alcoholics become recovering alcoholics, they also experience a type of transformation. Key to their success is finding meaning in their new transformation so that they do not revert back to the drinking ritual. This may be the most challenging part of recovery for many because the transformation that alcohol produces is so meaningful to them. By recognizing the social gifts of the drinking ritual, caregivers in treatment programs may help recovering alcoholics replace those functions by creating new rituals based on abstinence.

The research we examined offers strong support that drinking is a meaningful ritual that offers order, community, and transformation to college students and alcoholics. It validates and is validated by Rook’s structural framework and Driver’s “social gifts” of ritual. Furthermore, we demonstrate that a theoretical framework of drinking-as-ritual can be used to improve the efficacy of persuasive messages targeted toward each group. For college students, we show that the ritual framework can be used to create PS As that can both incorporate aspects of that ritual and invert those aspects to encourage moderation. For alcoholics, we recommend ways that those in recovery can cognitively restructure their world when the impulse to drink is triggered by advertising. Ultimately, we believe that strategies from the ritual perspective can successfully contribute to social change.

APPENDIX:
SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGIES FOR THE FIVE STUDIES

1. Treise, Taylor, and Wells (1994)

Depth interviews with 20 recovering alcoholics were conducted at an alcohol-dependence treatment program in a midsize city in the southeast. Participants included 15 men and 5 women between ages 25 and 64. Transcriptions were analyzed using analytic induction to determine common themes.


Seven student informants (3 female, and 4 male) from a large midwestern university participated in life story interviews and gave in-depth descriptions of a series of ads for alcohol. Interpretive analysis was used to demonstrate
how ad interpretations are a function of individual cognitions and alcohol
advertising.

3. Treise, Wolburg, and Otnes (1999)

Participants were students at two large southeastern universities. A series of
qualitative techniques were used, including interviews with key informants
to provide grounding—one campus police officer, four bartenders, and one
resident assistant; systematic observations in bars near campus; eight focus
groups ranging in size between 8 and 11 students, with a total of 25 female
and 30 male students between ages 21 and 25; and 20 in-depth interviews
with 10 male and 10 female binge drinkers across both campuses. Focus
groups and individual interviews began with “grand-tour” questions in four
topic areas: typical drinking occasions, drinking amounts, decisions about
when to quit drinking, and typical driving decisions. Transcriptions of data
were analyzed for common themes.


Document analysis was applied to television ads for two product categories:
beer and automotive parts. Forty-one hours of sports programming produced
50 unduplicated ads in each category. The three authors used a team
approach similar to that used in phenomenological research and examined
ads for evidence of four experiential modes, use of transformational or
informational strategy, use of standard advertising appeals, and depictions
of time. Themes were noted and recommendations for treatment strategies
were given.

5. Wolburg (2001)

Research was conducted at a private, midwestern university. A series
of qualitative techniques were used, including interviews with key
informants—four campus administrators, two campus security officers, and
one counselor from student health; four focus groups of five students each
among binge drinkers, moderate drinkers, abstainers, and residence hall
personnel; written essays from 51 students who earned extra credit in an
introductory advertising class; and in-depth interviews among 10 students
who met the definition of binge drinkers. Interview questions focused on
the meaning of drinking, the potential risks and consequences of drinking,
and risk management strategies. Analytic induction was used to generate
common themes.

REFERENCES

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