

Mythic Agency and Retail Conquest

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Abstract

This paper expands agency theory by identifying mythic agency as a lens through which retailers can view spectacular events during which consumers act heroically to achieve an important consumption goal. Partaking in a stressful and challenging retail experience invokes the stages of a quest, through which successful consumers emerge transformed and where they challenge, at least in part, the culturally prescribed role of bride. Retailers who create events that evoke and support consumers' heroic actions can develop powerful, meaningful, and enduring relationships with their customers.

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Introduction

Each of us engages in culturally scripted roles. We might perform the role of bride, groom, wife, husband, partner, child or parent. While roles are dictated by cultural norms and mores, they invariably include a market component. For example, in the role of the bride, a woman can spend an average of \$40,000 on the execution of the wedding ritual by considering hundreds of market-mediated decisions, from invitation and location selection to choosing flowers, photography and cake. The most important decision in the construction of the wedding ritual is the wedding dress (Otnes and Pleck 2003). This powerful ritual artifact constitutes a substantial portion of the wedding budget and is imbued with rich cultural meaning (Ingraham 2008).

When purchasing a dress, most brides enact a “traditional” or “status quo” narrative. The status quo narrative proposes that the market facilitates the choices and processes that benefit both consumer and producer, and that this fairly rational process results in the selection of a dress. This narrative is best illustrated by reality TV shows like “Say Yes To The Dress” (TLC 2010) where a bride-to-be shops for a dress with a group of friends and family, is meticulously waited on by dotting saleswomen and ultimately made to stand on a pedestal for said group to assert its opinion.

Perhaps most significantly, the bride is sometimes convinced to choose a gown that more greatly reflects the desires and opinions of the group than her own (field notes 2010).

In stark contrast to this traditional narrative, some brides engage in what Arnould (2005, p. 93) termed “narrative reframing”, enacting a “mythic agency” narrative. The behavior of this type of consumer is agentic, and is characterized by a desire to assert control over “marketer-determined identities” and construct what Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 660) termed “creative, subversive, idiosyncratic, communally relevant, or resistant alternatives.” This consumer's behavior is mythic in that it appears she “is called” to the nontraditional retail experience that is structured very similarly to a quest. The quest is a monomyth that reflects our view of social reality. As children we learn that heroes engage in quests during which personal strife enables them to gain or regain power and triumphantly assume a new station in life. Participating in an extraordinary retail experience that is reflective of the heroic quest (hereafter referred to as “the Sale”) requires forethought, intentionality and self-reflection, representing what Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) termed “social agency.” By choosing to purchase the talismanic wedding dress in a way that challenges social norms, these consumers creatively assert control over an otherwise ritualized transition from one social role to another. Thus, mythic agency constitutes the consumer's choice to actively assume a mythic identity when it aids in achieving significant social and/or personal goals.

This study examines the actions taken by a group of very determined consumers shopping for an important cultural object within a prescribed social ritual. These consumers engaged in

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a shopping experience that resembled a mythic quest and were in turn transformed from an ordinary bride to a hero-bride. As such, our research questions ask: how does a consumer enact mythic agency within a culturally scripted role and how does she experience transformation through her heroic actions and the successful completion of a retail quest? What follows is a review of the relevant literature on agency, transformational retailing and consumer mythology. We then present our data from the Sale, followed by a discussion of its contributions to agency theory and retailing practices.

Literature review

Agency theory

Bandura (2003) described agency as the ability to exercise control over nature. He outlined several key components of agency: (1) it is temporal in that it includes an element of forethought and intentionality, (2) it is self-regulatory to the extent that actions are self-reactive, and (3) it is self-reflective, meaning that one's capabilities to act are reflective of some meaning or purpose. Bandura also described three modes of agency: (1) personal, (2) proxy, and (3) collective. Collective agency is characterized by a socially coordinated and interdependent effort. In general, humans act agentically, not just when stimulated to act, but also when willing to seek out new experiences and explore and manipulate their environments in order to attain what they are seeking to control. Those who enact agency "transcend dictates of their immediate environment to shape and regulate the present to fit a desired future (Bandura 2003, p. 168)." Those who act agentically engage in reflexivity wherein they produce representations, retrospectively affect them, and then employ them as a basis for ascription (Anderson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg 2008).

Consumer agency is characterized by the degree to which consumers engage in a marketplace with the goal of achieving "freedom or emancipation in reflexively...subverting market signs in favor of meanings that are more expressive of their individual identities (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 660)." Firat and Venkatesh (1995) more critically stated that those who take an agentic approach to the marketplace choose to subvert the dominant market discourse rather than be seduced by it. Either way, our ability to act agentically allows us to take control of our social reality, gives us latitude for making mistakes and, in this study, provides a mechanism for achieving transformation.

In their exploration of the effects of globalization on consumption, Ger and Belk (1996) posited that consumer agency entails consumers' ability to transform and play with the meanings of goods that are not originally produced for them. Eckhardt and Mahi (2004, p. 137) extended Ger and Belk's work on consumer agency and globalization by concluding that "by accepting, transforming, or rejecting meaning, consumers are exerting their agency and playing a crucial role in shaping the globalization process by their choices that affect product successes and failures."

Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 658) blended Ger and Belk's ideas about playing with meaning within traditional sociological

perspectives of agency and found that consumers who frequented a particularly spectacular retail setting (ESPN Zone, Chicago) engaged in "ludic agency" whereby consumers interacted with the retail environment in a playful way. They concluded that within this particular retail environment consumers were capable of resisting rules and reconciling their experiences with the retailer-scripted experiences in a process they call "interagency". And while he presented a strong critique of agency elsewhere (see Arnould 2007), Arnould (2005, p. 93) did acknowledge its role in the consumer-retailer relationship when he concluded that consumer agency facilitates the relationship between a "consumer's self, life project and goals with the firm-provided resources."

That some consumers act agentically is not a novel insight (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004; Ger and Belk 1996; Kozinets et al. 2004). It is, however, difficult to determine "how" consumers act agentically, whether it is while undertaking culturally prescribed roles, or while reacting to or against certain structural elements. Hitlin and Elder (2007), and Anderson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg (2008, p. 69), lamented the lack of evidence that helped to explain how market actors engaged in market actions, calling for more research into the "concrete actions" of market actors that would provide a richer understanding of how they navigated the marketplace within the larger "world of events". In this study, these "concrete actions" lead to transformation.

Transformation

Research in retailing has examined issues that were key to understanding transformation as it related to the consumer experience. Experiential marketing has been defined as the marketer's attempt to increase competitive differentiation by creating an experience that resulted in the consumer being more "entertained, stimulated, emotionally affected, and creatively challenged" (Schmitt 1999, p. 29 as quoted in Naylor et al. 2008, p. 50). Experiential marketing was studied within interesting or unlikely service encounters like river rafting or skydiving (Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) and also was studied within the context of interactions between consumers and retailers attempting to create a "spectacle" environment (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Kozinets et al. 2004).

Most work to date on transformative retail environments, however, has focused primarily on atmospherics. Naylor et al. (2008) found that previous research on the retail experience centered on music, scent, tactile input, and color. Naylor et al. (2008) and Braun-LaTour and LaTour (2005), additionally found that retailers attempted to shape consumer experiences using transformational appeals. These transformational appeals were delivered via advertising messages and were found to influence consumers' hedonic and emotional responses more than their functional responses. What is less clear is how transformation occurs within consumers once they actually encounter nontraditional retail settings. While service encounters such as sky-diving and river-rafting understandably facilitate transformation vis-à-vis challenging environments, it is unclear whether

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