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Investigating the Celebration of Black Friday as a Communication Ritual

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Abstract

This study proposes a culturally based method for achieving greater customer-centricity in marketing by examining Black Friday as a communication ritual. It enables more effective marketing strategies because it explores the meaning of participating in ritual for the consumers. A total of 65 interviews were conducted over a two year period. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Owen 1984) and were broken into theory-driven categories adhering to Philipsen's (1987) definition of ritual. Data analysis revealed that shoppers engaged in a sequential set of symbolic acts: looking for deals; deciding where to shop; mapping out stores; developing in-store action plans; and assigning roles to perform. Furthermore, Black Friday shoppers celebrated four sacred objects: materialism; relational bonding; Christmas; and tradition. The findings are interrogated for their potential implications for more effective marketing strategies for these shoppers.

Keywords

Ritual, cultural values, consumer-centric, marketing communication, customer experience management

Each year, millions of shoppers participate in one of the largest events in America: Black Friday (Mui 2009). Black Friday is the Friday following Thanksgiving Day in the United States (US), resulting in Black Friday occurring between the 23rd and the 29th of November. Traditionally, Black Friday has been considered as marking the start of the Christmas shopping season (Criswell 2009). Although Black Friday is not an official holiday, it has become a universally understood part of American culture. An 'estimated 195 million people visit shopping malls and online retailers to celebrate Black Friday Thursday through Sunday' (Mui 2009, para. 2). The combination of having the day after Thanksgiving off and being courted by retailers' low prices has traditionally produced a substantial surge in consumer presence at brick-and-mortar stores.

Retailers have implemented numerous strategies for drawing customers to the stores. Many stores open their doors at 5 a.m., or earlier, to accommodate eager shoppers; some even remain open all night.

Retailers advertise heavily and promote special sales to attract customers. Many businesses provide incentives, such as 'door buster' and 'early bird' sales, to entice shoppers to come to their store—and to come early (Horovitz 2009). Most large retailers post their Black Friday advertisements, coupons and offers online in advance, giving consumers insight about upcoming sales so shoppers can plan their purchases and Black Friday strategies (Katz 2008).

Shoppers can also find Black Friday deals through popular social media tools. Twitter and other social media websites, such as Facebook and Myspace, are helpful for sharing information about the best sales during Black Friday (Rosenbloom & Cullotta 2009). 'Twitter permits public communication via short, to-the-point messages' and has been very useful for grabbing Black Friday shoppers' attention (Rosenbloom & Cullotta 2009, para. 5). Electronic communication extends the ways in which Black Friday is experienced by customers, but also presents challenges to Black Friday itself. A newly emergent tradition is Cyber Monday. According to Swilley and Goldsmith (2013), consumers who shop on Black Friday may enjoy the experience, but some may find Cyber Monday more useful for meeting their shopping needs. This presents a challenge to the previous dominance of brick-and-mortar stores, which will need to continually develop innovative marketing strategies to keep consumers physically visiting their stores, instead of shopping online.

This study explores the meaningfulness of Black Friday to the consumers who participate in the event at brick-and-mortar stores. The theoretical framework used to study Black Friday is 'communication ritual'. We position Black Friday as a ritual practice, which is performed annually in the US. Rituals produce latent, if not obvious, impacts on participants and outcomes. In particular, ritualistic behaviour is a symbolic expression of cultural meaning (Neville 1984). Indeed, rituals are present in everyday face-to-face interactions (Goffman 1967) as well as in significant life events like marriage, death or major life transitions (Rook 1985). However, our focus is on the repetitive, symbolic, sacred role of ritual through participation in Black Friday as a major annual event in the US.

We are particularly interested in the ways in which Black Friday shoppers perform a communication ritual on Black Friday. According to Carey (1989, p. 5), the 'ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs'. Positioning Black Friday shopping as a form of ritual communication has several communicative functions, including 'sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith (or goal)' (Carey 1989, p. 4). As shoppers participate in Black Friday year after year, they portray the communicative ritualistic nature of this event and confirm, by participation, that Black Friday continues to hold sacred meaning. Finally, Black Friday as ritual communication, as participation, is the 'basis of fellowship...produces social bonds that untie individuals together...and creates social bonds' for shoppers and patrons (Carey 1989, pp. 8–9).

Examining the Black Friday ritual offers insights into why shoppers annually participate in this event. Our study provides deep, detailed descriptions of the rituals shoppers engage in to celebrate Black Friday and the myriad ways in which they perform the rituals. We argue herein that information derived from such a study can provide a basis for developing more creative, effective marketing strategies for promoting the Black Friday at the brick-and-mortar stores.

In the next section, we engage in a discussion of ritual theory and situate our examination of Black Friday as a communication ritual. After reviewing the methods used to conduct research, data are presented and analyzed. Finally, we discuss the findings, implications of the findings for marketers, limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Black Friday

While the importance of Black Friday is widely acknowledged from a business perspective, very little research has addressed the consumer's point of view of this annual event from a communication perspective. Most information conducted about Black Friday is not academic in nature. Instead, it comes from major news outlets, which detail how many people participate each year and describe how Black Friday emerged in the US. One exception is a small study by Thomas and Peters (2011) who interviewed 38 females about their shopping consumption rituals.

Thomas and Peters (2011) positioned Black Friday as a pseudo-holiday and compared shoppers' consumption rituals to those employed in other holidays (that is, Christmas and Valentine's Day). They concluded that shoppers feel a sense of competition and urgency to purchase sale items on Black Friday. They also revealed two themes similar to those reported by interviewees in our study: familial bonds and strategic planning. First, they explain that participation in Black Friday is an act of family bonding, where members 'share the shopping ritual with family and friends to grow closer to them' (Thomas & Peters 2011, p. 533). They also report that shoppers engage in strategic planning as 'a detailed plan of action' for shopping on Black Friday when compared to going without a plan on Christmas or Valentine's Day (Thomas & Peters 2011, p. 533). An in-depth discussion of family bonding and strategic planning as it pertains to our study is further explicated in the results and discussion section.

Ritual Theory

'Ritual provides identity and solidarity, is one of the oldest human activities...and are pervasive in today's society' (Neale et al. 2008, p. 2). Several research studies have investigated several different rituals, including: (a) college binge drinking and drinking rituals (Wolburg & Trise 2004); Mardi Gras consumption rituals (Shrum 2004); Kwaanza (Pleck 2004); wedding rituals across cultures (Nelson & Deshpande 2004; Sandicki & Ihan 2004); gift exchange and reception (Curasi et al. 2004; Ruth 2004; Wooten & Wood 2004); and social relations, space and boundaries (Marcoux 2004; Sherry & Kozinets 2004). However, to date, ours is the first study to examine Black Friday as a communication ritual.

Despite significant attention to ritual, scholars' definitions describing ritual vary. Focus on the communicative elements and meanings of rituals serves as a guide for this review of literature. Among researchers who have ventured definitions, most tend to agree that rituals are socially standardized and repetitive communication activities (Kertzer 1988) that are imbued with symbolism (Lukes 1975), pay 'homage to sacred objects' (Philipsen 1997, p. 133) and are tied to core cultural values (Packanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983).

Many scholars expanded upon Philipsen's (1987) definition of ritual. Notably, Hall (1998, p. 172) stated that rituals are a 'universal form of communication and those examples of rituals can be found in every cultural group or community'. He further claimed that the primary tasks of rituals are to 'affirm and reaffirm certain types of relationships and teach values that are important in a particular cultural community' (Hall 1998, p. 178). By performing a ritual, participants orient towards and reaffirm the cultural value. As a result, studying ritual is one way for scholars to apprehend the key values of a cultural group. To constitute communication ritual, we draw upon a combination of these definitions

and employ Philipsen's (1997, p. 133) characterization of ritual as 'a structured sequence of actions, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object'. Since Black Friday shoppers participate in a 'structured sequence of symbolic events' (Philipsen 1997, p. 133), ritual provides a fruitful framework for exploring consumer values associated with Black Friday.

The Importance of Ritual to Marketing and Creative Communications

Regarding ritual in the context of consumption and marketing communication, 'consumption has been interpreted as the essential ritual of modern life' (Rook 1985, p. 252). Ritual marketing communication research has briefly explored how to use marketing strategies to further engage shoppers in performing ritual (Solomon 2006; Wertime 2004; Yingfeng 2011). However, research investigating why rituals are powerful in marketing lacks significant scholarly attention (Yingfeng 2011). At the core, ritual marketing communication is centred upon 'building brand recognition', with the goal of connecting consumers to particular products and corporations (Yingfeng 2011, p. 1334). Theoretically, Black Friday is a national celebration in the US and provides product corporations with a significant opportunity to create and market their particular brand for various ritual artifacts, or products consumed (Rook 1985; Yingfeng 2011). It would be advantageous for corporations to develop marketing strategies to target consumers who perform Black Friday rituals.

The need for customer-centric marketing has been widely noted. Traditionally, marketing involved a focus on the product more so than the customer (Kumar et al. 2008). Despite the widespread call to change the paradigm to make the attention more customer focused, Hart (1999) points out that this is easier said than done due to the seemingly amorphous idea that lacks a plan for implementation. Many of those who promote the shift towards greater customer-centricity note the need to pay attention to the customer at the individual level (Cross & Smith 1995; DeBonis et al. 2003; Selden & MacMillan 2006). This call for the analysis of each individual may be one reason that customer-centricity has been so difficult to achieve. Selden and MacMillan (2006, p. 110) argue that companies need to pursue research to 'continually improve their understanding of who their customers are and what they need'. While we support the call to understand individual customers, knowledge of each individual customer is challenging, costly and for most large companies, unattainable.

We propose that ritual provides a means of becoming more customer-centric in marketing because: it provides insight into meanings guiding behaviours (for example, what is the symbolic meaning guiding the actions?); it reveals important values held by the customer (for example, what sacred objects are acknowledged through the ritual?); and it yields insight into some predictable consumer behaviours (for example, what is the structured sequence of the acts performed?). Our study of the communication ritual on Black Friday provides a means of better understanding how patterned behaviour is girded by a culturally informed system of meaning.

By learning what patterns people are enacting and the reasons for enacting those behaviours, marketing strategies may more effectively align with customer actions and the motivations for those actions. In addition to aligning with customer actions and motivations, retailers can also engage ritual to 'create strong and distinctive brand values' that can extend beyond the ritual itself (Gilde et al. 2011, p. 629). In other words, a better understanding of Black Friday as a communication ritual can promote better sales during the Black Friday 'holiday' and throughout the rest of the fiscal year.

Research Questions

As noted earlier, Philipsen (1987, p. 133) describes ritual as ‘a structured sequence of actions the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object’. To investigate this communicative phenomenon, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ 1: What structured sequence of actions do Black Friday shoppers engage in?

RQ 2: What are the sacred objects to which Black Friday shoppers pay homage?

Methodological Framework

Semi-structured interviews with 65 individuals participating in Black Friday were conducted over a two year period. The decision to focus on Black Friday as a communication ritual was guided by the heightened media excitement and perceived shopper hysteria surrounding this retail holiday. All participants were interviewed while waiting in line at large chain stores on the east coast. The research team’s decision to interview shoppers waiting outside stores allowed researchers to interview participants who were currently performing the Black Friday ritual in a naturally occurring setting. Moreover, these actions assured researchers that the resulting data would be situated in ‘local time and space’ (LeCompte & Schensul 1999, p. 8).

Sample

Criterion-based selection was employed to recruit 65 participants who were interviewed about their previous or first-time Black Friday shopping experiences (Lindlof & Taylor 2011; Schensul et al. 1999). Participants interviewed represented shoppers in a large, metropolitan city in northern Virginia. The research site for this investigation and participants chosen for this study were selected and recruited using the non-probability sampling technique, convenience sampling (Keyton 2009). Of the participants, 28 were men and 37 were women. Participants were interviewed between 7:30 p.m. and 12:45 a.m. on Black Friday eve. Overall, participants were pleased to be interviewed since it offered a way to pass the time as they waited for stores to open.

Developing the Interview Schedule

Researchers employed a questionnaire to explore interviewees’ experiences of participating in Black Friday. Interviewers asked open-ended questions to elicit participant responses about their Black Friday action plan, their preparation for the Black Friday shopping day and their rationale for shopping on Black Friday. Since interview participants were seen as co-constructing their worlds (Steier 1995), a semi-structured interviewed schedule (LeCompte & Schensul 1999) was employed to invite interviewees to share their attitudes, thoughts and behaviours associated with Black Friday. This enabled participants

to disclose any information they felt was relevant to the question. A semi-structured interview schedule also allowed participants to describe events relevant to their lives and encouraged their reflections about their participation in Black Friday.

Data Reduction

All data were transcribed verbatim. The average interview ranged from 5 minutes to 25 minutes. Transcription length ranged from two to seven pages, single spaced, depending on the length of the interview, producing a total of 151 pages of data. After initial transcription, the principle investigator listened to the audiotaped recordings of each interview to ensure complete and accurate transcriptions. After transcribing the interviews, the principal researcher analyzed the data for patterns and themes, which were separately reviewed and confirmed by two other coders.

Coding Procedures and Data Analysis

Coding Procedures

The first author followed the following code procedures when becoming familiarized with the data content. *Initial coding* was employed to ‘separate data into categories and to see processes’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 51). During initial coding, researchers attempt to understand data by developing codes that help to explain the data. Next, *incident by incident coding* was employed to ‘compare incidents to conceptualizations of incidents coded earlier to identify properties of the emerging concept’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 53). Thereafter, *focused coding* was helpful for examining the ‘most frequent or significant codes’ and utilizing these codes ‘to sift through large amounts of data’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 57). Essentially, to refine the codes, established codes were compared to determine if codes overlapped or conveyed the same sentiment. Finally, *axial coding* was helpful for ‘relating categories to subcategories’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 60). In this final stage, axial coding ‘specifies the properties and dimensions of a category’ so that researchers can better understand a major category by considering the smaller categories that should be included under a larger category (Charmaz 2006, p. 60).

Thematic Analysis

Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis was used to parse the data into theory- and theme-driven categories. According to Owen (1984), when narrowing, data researchers should look for recurrence, repetition and forcefulness. *Recurrence* involves observing similar utterances and meanings between different interviews. *Repetition* refers to ‘the duplication of key words and phrases’ (Petronio et al. 2004, p. 41). Finally, *forcefulness* refers to ‘vocal inflections and dramatic pauses that stress or subordinate some utterances’ (Petronio et al. 2004, p. 41). We were attentive to stories that participants shared in common with other Black Friday shoppers throughout the data analysis process. When the interview themes were widespread among the individuals interviewed, we concluded that we reached theoretical saturation and that the resultant themes may potentially explain how Black Friday shoppers perform this communicative ritual.

Verifying the Results

To verify that the findings accurately reflected the thoughts of the Black Friday shoppers interviewed, we conducted member checks and respondent validation with additional individuals who self-identified as Black Friday shoppers to verify and clarify our themes (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). Taking these steps helps researchers to accurately represent the patterns and thoughts held and enacted by individuals who belong to the same community.

Results

Structured Sequence of Symbolic Acts

Individuals who perform similar behaviours formally establish Black Friday as a ritual (Bell 1997). Data indicate that shoppers engage in the 'structured sequence of symbolic acts' of: searching for deals via Internet and newspaper/strategizing; mapping out stores to patronize; preparing to wait in line (sometimes overnight); amending Thanksgiving meal plans; and developing in-store action plans/assigning fellow shoppers roles to perform. This structured sequence is further explicated next.

Searching for Deals/Strategizing

First, shoppers began their preparation by searching for cost-saving deals. Of the 65 participants, all interviewees reported looking online at various websites to find the best deals. One male participant communicated, 'I go to BlackFriday.com and sign up to be sent e-mails about Black Friday sales'. Other shoppers described a more detailed process stating, 'We look at all the papers, all the stores' brochures, all the flyers and coupons, and we ask our friends and family where the best deals are. We do this three months in advance!' Similarly, another male interviewee disclosed, 'My brother and I looked through all the Black Friday ads online to compare the ads for various stores. We looked through them by category to find the best price. We even called the stores to see how many items they had!' Another male participant mentioned, 'I look online at the sale ads, and I usually start about a month before, so I really prepare to shop for this'. Some rudimentary planning seemed common to almost every Black Friday shopper interviewed.

Some shoppers evidenced even more detailed planning, such as the woman who acknowledged, 'I do a spreadsheet of what my kids want, and then where, what store I can find it at and what time the store opens. And then I shop in that order.' One interviewee told the researchers that she made 'a plan of attack'. She said, 'I look on-line for all the leaked Black Friday ads over the weekend [before Thanksgiving]—I get emails from different stores. I hunt for coupons.' Another participant explained her family's 'game plan'. She said, 'we looked at the items, picked out a big list of what we wanted, narrowed it down to a smaller list, and then figured out where we are going to be when'. Some made detailed planning an important part of their ritual performance.

The data revealed that planning to perform this ritual involves adhering to a similar set of sequential acts. Specifically, searching for good deals is symbolic. That is, shoppers' actions are ritual-like, as they are premeditated (formalism), repeated (invariance) and enacted (performance) year after year (Bell 1997). After shoppers found the best prices, many participants revealed that they map out the store.

Mapping Out the Store

Mapping out the store is a complicated, time-consuming and formal process. In order to map out the store, a female interviewee explained, 'I need to know the lay-out of the closest store to me'. To accomplish this, another participant described his process for mapping out the store. He stated, 'I went to the store two days before Black Friday and looked where everything was'. Another female interviewee described mapping out the store in detail, exclaiming, 'Oh my God, we map it out! We even map out the stores in location to our town. We want to know where the deals are.' As this particular participant was interviewed, she physically drew a map of Wal-Mart stating that she wanted 'to find deals quickly when the doors opened'. The careful mapping is meant to strategize the most efficient plan.

Waiting in Line

Shoppers also formally plan for the time they expect to spend waiting in line. One female participant stated, 'Waiting in line is part of the tradition and the excitement for me'. Others described their preparations for waiting in line. One man explained, 'I get pillows, a comforter, a tent, food, and drinks. And, when I run out of food, my wife brings me more food.' Similarly, a woman noted, 'We have chairs, pillows, we have the whole works! I even have the right shoes and the right bra on!' Participants recognized the potential discomforts associated with Black Friday and made plans to minimize them.

Often, preparation for waiting outside the store includes checking the weather. One participant shared how he prepared for the weather he might encounter, 'We have a tent, which you are standing under right now, to avoid getting completely rained on'. An additional participant said, 'To prepare for this we get, uh, warm clothes. Lots of sweatshirts, hats, gloves, laptop, pillows, blankets, sleeping bags, cards and hot chocolate.' Yet another exclaimed, 'I get warm and cozy in my tent and just sit and eat. We go to the gas station on a food run if we get hungry!' Another interviewee claimed, 'If it gets too cold, I go and sit in my car for a while.' Clearly, in colder climates, staying warm and dry can require careful planning.

Amending Thanksgiving Plans

Shoppers also struggle to coordinate their action plans around Thanksgiving Day festivities. One participant shared how he rearranged his schedule: 'I have to cook fairly early. Today, I stopped cooking at 9 a.m. We finished dinner around 2 p.m., ate, and ran out the door to wait in line.' Another participant commented:

We were at Thanksgiving dinner and we drove by here on the way home to check if there was a line. We were going to come out at midnight, but uh, there's already a line, so she [his wife] dropped me off and then went back and got our blankets, laptop and everything else we needed.

The significance of making these adjustments lies in the apparent importance of Black Friday to the participants. While most people would acknowledge Thanksgiving as a major American holiday, the willingness of participants to adjust their Thanksgiving plans demonstrates the level of their commitment to participating in Black Friday shopping.

Action Plans/Roles

Shoppers developed in-store action plans and assigned roles to perform once the retailers' doors open. One participant described her action plan, 'We have the Black Friday ads in the car, and each person is assigned certain items on the ads. When the store opens, we are going to each run inside and get that

item. Then we run and pay.’ Another interviewee stated, ‘I will run in, push people, get the item, and run out’. Similarly, another participant shared, ‘Our action plan is, well, divide and conquer! We know what we are going in for depending on the store. We have a list. One person gets in line to pay and the other person runs to find the items.’ One interviewee, who described herself as the leader and organizer, said, ‘I give the orders, and other people follow the orders’. By engaging in these behaviours for several years, Black Friday shoppers perform ritual. Attention now turns to examining the meanings and values guiding these ritual behaviours.

Constituting Homage to a Sacred Object

The data revealed that Black Friday shoppers’ participation in this ritual constitutes homage to four sacred objects: materialism (that is, getting good deals); relational bonding; Christmas; and tradition.

Materialism

All 65 participants claimed that they shop on Black Friday ‘because of the deals’. Participants disclosed this information when responding to the first interview question: ‘What do you think is so great about shopping on Black Friday?’ Interviewees felt drawn to Black Friday shopping because ‘You can get a large ticket item for what appears to be, one or two hundred dollars cheaper than the regular prices’. Similarly, another participant noted, ‘Black Friday is the only day that I can buy almost everything that I want...when I shop on Black Friday and find a good deal, it is inspiring, and I want to come back [the next year].’ Another interviewee maintained, ‘There’s a big sale [on laptops] so that’s why I’m here! I came out because I saw some deals [on the Internet]’. Yet another said, ‘I come out to get some good stuff for a very cheap price. I see all these deals online, and I want to go and get them [items] and bring them home to my family.’ Shoppers celebrated materialism by engaging in Black Friday shopping practices to get a great deal.

Interestingly, shoppers wanted a bargain on Black Friday regardless of whether they self-identified as ‘all-year bargain hunters’ or merely Black Friday shoppers. Of the 65 interviewees, 56 indicated that shopping on Black Friday is an isolated event. One interviewee described budgeting and shared, ‘We don’t budget, we know what we want and we go’. Similarly, another participant said, ‘Uh, I don’t budget all year long; I just go with what I’ve got’. Finally, an interviewee acknowledged, ‘Do I save? No! That’s what these little plastic things [credit cards] are for.’ Data indicate that shoppers celebrate Black Friday and pay homage to getting a ‘good deal’ regardless of whether they budgeted for the day or not.

Relational Bonding

Data revealed that shoppers not only perform Black Friday to get a good deal but also because they enjoy the relational aspect. As indicated by the data, Black Friday shoppers enjoyed forming relationships with other Black Friday shoppers. For example, ‘My [new] friends, they have camped out before, and I didn’t know them until I met them here. It all worked out, for two years in a row [now], we camped [together].’ Another explained, ‘even if you do not know other people [in line with you] you meet others who are trying to find the same thing, a good deal’. Further, a participant posited, ‘I made new friends here, and now we’re going to eat, play cards, and tell funny stories...and we’re going to stop people from cutting in line.’ Some shoppers enjoy meeting new people on Black Friday.

Black Friday shoppers also enjoy spending time with family and close friends. During an interview, one participant stated, ‘While shopping on Black Friday, you bond over this time, and you get good deals

and camaraderie while bonding'. Several participants echoed this sentiment. One mentioned, 'Shopping on Black Friday is a good experience that I like to do with friends'. Another stated, 'a lot of people go out with family members and they bond over it [Black Friday]'. Moreover, participants viewed Black Friday as a time to bond with family members. For example, 'My dad and I come, and we talk about life, how I'm doing in school, and I ask him any advice that I want to ask him'. Similarly, one woman said, 'everybody gets together. We stay up all night, we buy lots of stuff, and...we don't have our kids. It is like my husband told me, Black Friday is a holy day for women.'

Though individuals enjoy bonding with family while shopping on Black Friday, data also revealed that shoppers do not have to buy anything to enjoy building and strengthening relationships with friends and family. For example, one interviewee remarked, 'I'm just here hanging out with my friends. I came to help them find what's on their [Black Friday] grocery list and to assist them in whatever they want to get.' The use of Black Friday shopping for bonding was not exclusive to women. In some ways, it seemed that some men used the opportunity to enact existing relationships that might often be accomplished at a campout. One man explained, 'My dad and I just come for tradition even if we do not buy anything. We've never really been too close because he's always been working, so we come out on Black Friday for a bonding time. We always come out and talk.' The wait for the stores to open allows ample time for the kinds of social interaction that are not available to some participants on other days of the year.

Christmas

Data revealed that shoppers also shop on Black Friday to celebrate Christmas. Specifically, data indicate that Black Friday shoppers purchase Christmas gifts and celebrate the start of the Christmas shopping season. For example, 'I am shopping for my kids' Christmas gifts. I am able to buy my kids things that I would not normally be able to afford.' When interviewers asked participants the purpose of their shopping trip, Christmas was frequently mentioned, second only to the phrase 'the good deals'. Several interviewees commented, 'It's for my kids' Christmas presents', 'I am shopping for my daughter for Christmas' and 'I am getting toys for my son, for Christmas'. Another explained the integral role Black Friday has for her holiday season, 'My favorite part about shopping on Black Friday is the excitement, the start of Christmas, um, just the excitement in the air where everyone is kind of getting ready to, get ready for Christmas'. Despite the ever-increasing length of the marketing season for Christmas, in many shoppers' minds, Black Friday remains associated with the beginning of the shopping and holiday season.

Tradition

In addition to performing Black Friday ritual to get a good deal, to bond with friends and family and to celebrate the start of the Christmas shopping season, interviewees maintained they participated because 'Black Friday is a family tradition, and I am carrying it on'. One interviewee explained, 'Black Friday is a huge tradition in a lot of families...it is an experience like nothing else you'll ever experience.' Another woman stated, 'Black Friday is a tradition that we [her daughter and she] do every year'. Yet another stated, 'It's a tradition that people do every year. People do it [shop on Black Friday] like they do the Super Bowl.'

Though some interviewees described Black Friday as a tradition, others explicitly referred to the event as a ritual. For example, 'Black Friday is a ritual. Look at all these people. I don't know how to explain it.' Another interviewee contended, 'Black Friday is a ritual for some people. It's a ritual; people

come out year after year to get the good deals.' In fact, the data indicated that people do shop on Black Friday every year. Of the 65 participants interviewed, 52 of them shopped on Black Friday every year for between one and 17 years. Thirteen of the participants interviewed were participating for the first time. Despite a growing number of alternatives to participating in Black Friday, many retain the practice as a matter of tradition.

Conclusion

Data indicated that Black Friday shoppers participated in a structured sequence of actions by searching for deals/strategizing, mapping out the store, preparing to wait in line (sometimes overnight), amending Thanksgiving meal plans and developing an in-store action plan/assigning people roles to perform. These actions help to provide a picture regarding the lengths people go to so that they may perform the ritual successfully. By repeating these behaviours year after year, shoppers perform Black Friday as a ritual. As we turn to the second research question, the data suggest the system of meaning underlying the actions. The second, and perhaps more important research question, addresses participants' motivations for participating in the ritual. People go to great lengths to perform the above-mentioned structured action because of that which they hold sacred. Four sacred objects emerged in the data from our Black Friday shoppers: materialism, relational bonding, Christmas and tradition.

Materialism

As may be expected, materialism and purchasing are a primary focus of Black Friday. Regarding the rampant consumerism and materialism encouraged by Black Friday, we contend that participants paid homage to sacred objects outside of mere conceptualizations of materialism—they spent money to celebrate Christmas, to bond with family members and to engage in the behavioural tradition components of Black Friday. The other non-materialistic values consumers have invested in Black Friday offer insight into ways in which the ritual shopping behaviours have become deeply woven into their lives. Black Friday provides a vehicle for strengthening old relationships and building new ones. It is also associated to a feeling of the Christmas holiday celebration process. Finally, waiting outside the stores, while often long and uncomfortable, is a part of a cherished tradition.

People are going to shop for Christmas. If consumerism is going to happen, we might want to give consideration to where the money actually goes. Perhaps making the physical trip to the store on Black Friday has also become imbued with meaning (by marketers, admittedly) that one is supporting workers (clerks, gift wrappers, etc.) in their local community. As we consider the move towards cyber shopping, we need to question what do we potentially stand to lose? If we move to all online Black Friday shopping, other meaningful sacred objects are lost, like relational bonding from standing in line, camping outside stores and the overall Black Friday shared experience. Moreover, in towns suffering economic hardships, the local economy may be negatively impacted by the shift away from brick-and-mortar stores to online purchases. If we examine Black Friday materialism from this perspective, perhaps we see a small shift in the meaning of the ritual that is more people-centred than materialistic. It would be interesting to explore how we could use marketing rituals to keep retail stores functioning more at a community and family level.

Theoretical Comparisons and Implications

Regarding theoretical implications within past and current considerations of ritual, our findings regarding communication ritual and ritual theory support existing theorizations about consumer rituals and their definitions. Specifically, our results confirm that Black Friday as a consumer ritual involves 'behavioral repetition, symbolism, and behavior' (Davis-Floyd 1996; Neale et al. 2008, p. 4; Rappaport 1999; Winn 1996). Black Friday shoppers performed ritual (Moore & Myerhoff 1977) as 'a structured sequence of actions, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object' (Philipsen 1987, p. 133). Black Friday ritual is a major celebration; however, as a ritual it does not contain a religious element which some ritual scholars argue must be present in ritual (Blanchard 1988).

Our study supports earlier definitions of ritual and demonstrates how ritual continues to persist in twenty-first century society. Rook's (1985, p. 252) definition of ritual, like Philipsen's (1997), can also be utilized to frame the Black Friday experiences participants reported here as '...a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time...Ritual behavior is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity'. Finally, our study demonstrates that with the development of new emotional, symbolic or cognitive rituals, the behavioural performance element of ritual continues (Ibrahim 1988; Malley & Barrett 2003; Neale et al. 2008, p. 4).

Practical Implications

This research explored Black Friday as a communication ritual. In accordance with Philipsen's (1987, p. 133) definition of ritual, 'a structured sequence of actions, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object', Owen's (1984) thematic analysis revealed that Black Friday is indeed a communication ritual. Of particular concern to marketers are the sacred objects shoppers acknowledged celebrating through this ritual: materialism, relational bonding, Christmas and tradition.

This study holds potential practical benefits for scholars and marketing departments alike. We argue that the study of communication ritual is an important extension of marketing literature because of its heuristic affordances. More specifically, it provides an avenue for scholarly exploration of the value system underlying consumer behaviour. Communication ritual provides a means of understanding patterned action that is deeply meaningful to those participating in the ritual. The data yielded from empirical research involving interviews provide a solid understanding of both methods of consumer engagement with an organization as well as the motivations guiding that engagement.

Understanding the ritual elements of consumer behaviour is highly beneficial from a practical marketing perspective. Cross and Smith (1995) argue that bonds between an organization and a consumer are formed through awareness, identity and relationship. The authors stress that in order to have effective marketing, organizations must be aware of the 'values and emotions customers associate with your brand, product, or service' (Cross & Smith 1995, p. 27). Further, Otnes et al. (2012) offer a model of marketplace ritual suggesting that it provides an avenue for enhancing the customer experience and differentiating the brand. The claims of these scholars, combined with the findings of this study, demonstrate how companies would be well advised to better understand their cornerstone sales events and that which drives customers to participate.

Based on our findings, there are several opportunities for marketers to better utilize resources to promote strong Black Friday sales. It seems highly unlikely that, after waiting outside of a store for several hours, a customer will leave the store empty-handed. It becomes highly strategic, then, for a retailer to seek and attract those 'first through the door' customers. Each sacred object associated with Black Friday shopping represents an opportunity for retailers. We will explore how each sacred object might be addressed vis-à-vis marketing strategies.

First, the materialistic drive to get a 'good deal' suggests that customers would welcome materialistic 'perks' for waiting outside. For example, offering deals (through physical coupons or quick response [QR] code scans on smart phones) for special discount only for the Black Friday shoppers waiting outside a specific store or shopping within a specific store at that time would serve as a motivator for shoppers to go to that store. If marketing strategies can be employed during those hours which heighten the customer excitement and perception of getting a good deal, visiting that particular brick-and-mortar store may become part of their holiday shopping rituals. Interestingly, during data collection at numerous store locations, no attempts were observed of a retailer seeking to make contact with the consumers waiting outside.

The data on relational bonding suggest that the Black Friday event provides a venue for celebrating relational bonds. Marketers could respond to this consumer value and promote customer-centricity by enhancing opportunities to promote relational bonds. Small games or contests could be organized for customers waiting outside the store. For example, the largest family group waiting among the guests outside could receive a prize. Trivia sheets could be completed in groups to 'earn' additional discounts. Store floor plans could be distributed to consumers waiting outside to facilitate team 'game plans' for shopping. Group pictures could be made and given to shoppers congregating outside. For stores catering to primarily male consumers, retailers can capitalize on the parallels between Black Friday 'camping' to traditional camping and to tailgating. Hot chocolate or warm apple cider could be provided. Shoppers who do not prefer to pass the time this way would not need to participate. Based on our observations, however, some would clearly welcome the additional attention.

The third sacred object identified was that of Christmas. Retailer recognition of the Christmas holiday could be accomplished before the store opened by holding performances outside the store. For example, an occasional Christmas carol could be sung, Santa's sleigh could make a journey through the parking area with Santa waving at the waiting customers or dramatic readings of Christmas poems or stories could be performed. Once the customers pass through the doors, they are focused on getting the shopping work accomplished. During the wait outside, many would likely welcome some holiday spirit.

Finally, shoppers celebrate tradition through Black Friday. Due to online shopping opportunities, the actual need to journey to a brick-and-mortar store has become obsolete. It is important for retailers to recognize that a recollection of traditions from bygone years is drawing some customers. The store can enact annual attractions such as those just mentioned that become part of the tradition. In doing so, the store can establish longer-term relationships with the consumers at a time when most retailers are ignoring them.

Given the fiscal importance of Black Friday to retailers, it seems counter-intuitive to ignore customers during a time in which they are enacting enthusiasm and commitment for shopping at their brick-and-mortar store. If the retailer shows little more than the standard awareness of the consumer, it is reasonable to expect that the consumer will not be building a relationship with that retailer. Several of the strategies suggested involved cost. Most marketing strategies do. Retailers have a somewhat captive audience outside their store preceding the Black Friday store opening, yet little is made of this opportunity

beyond, perhaps, a few Tweets. We contend that knowing why those consumers are there can position marketers to show awareness of the consumer, build relationship and foster a positive retail identity that will enhance bonds with the consumer.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations and suggestions regarding future Black Friday research. First, the retail outlets where research was conducted could be considered a limiting factor. Electronics retailers offered researchers the opportunity to interview more male participants and provided access to shoppers targeting a specific type of purchase, namely, electronic and technology-related items. Similarly, toy stores offered researchers the ability to interview more female participants shopping for their children. It is possible that individuals shopping at different stores may have different motivations for shopping on Black Friday. Further, interviewing shoppers at different sites may have yielded different results. Our results came from a single case site in northern Virginia. Although the findings may represent other shoppers' Black Friday experiences, the findings are limited to northern Virginia and cannot be generalized to the larger population. With the goal of qualitative research in mind, we sought to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences regarding Black Friday participation (Lindlof & Taylor 2011).

Second, since we interviewed individuals standing in line, it is possible that some interviewees were able to hear responses given in previous interviews. However, researchers took several actions to avoid this limitation. For example, researchers did not interview more than one person from a group of Black Friday shoppers. Also, after each interview, researchers skipped five or more people (in line) before approaching another individual to interview.

Additionally, many interviewees purchased tents to stand in and sleep so as not to sleep out in the cold, rainy weather all evening. Therefore, interviewers were actually invited into tents and were therefore able to interview participants in solitude. To pass the time in line, most shoppers listened to music or talk shows on the radio or played cards and board games with family members and friends. As a result, whether from the rain, the radio or chatter with friends and family, shoppers made a lot of noise as they stood in line—making it difficult to overhear conversations taking place with people five or more spaces ahead in line.

This research represents a first step in better understanding of how the study of communication ritual can inform marketing strategies. Future research could explore the specific motivations of the consumers for those stores and use marketing strategies that celebrated those sacred objects most explicitly. Of course, it would also be worth exploring whether participants prefer their established traditions for celebrating Black Friday without any involvement with the retailer during those early morning hours. Finally, retailers need to clearly understand the reasons behind why the consumer chose their store to wait outside on Black Friday. A better understanding of the meanings of the Black Friday shopping ritual affords better opportunities for building the kind of relationship that the consumer is actively seeking.

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