

# EXPLORING CONSUMER EXPERIENCES AS RITES OF PASSAGE

A. COMAN<sup>1</sup>    C. SAS<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Conceptualising consumer experience as a rite of passage holds the potential for designing products entailing stronger attachment. We integrate theoretical perspectives from three disparate research areas: sociological theories of rituals, models of consumer's rituals and those on the value of objects for the sense of self, to explore the ritual types and objects which consumers engage in throughout their key life transitions. We report on secondary data analysis of six qualitative studies on consumer's rites of passage. Our contributions include an initial framework integrating the lifecycle perspective with the typology of consumer's rituals and objects, and implications to better support consumer's experience in rites of passage.*

**Key words:** *consumer experience, rites of passage, sense of self, consumption and disposal.*

## 1. Introduction

The last decades have been marked by an increased interest in rituals, both in academia and the large public. The long history of ritual studies originating in the sociological and anthropological theories has been accompanied by a more recent revival in consumer research. The value of conceptualizing consumption as ritual is reflected in designing for *transcendent consumer experience* which, as an emotionally rich and highly memorable experience holds the potential for product attachment and brand loyalty (Schouten et al., 2007). Consumption rituals have been defined as consumption of goods around sacred events, bearing similarities with the rites of passage described in sociological theories (Bartholomew, 2011). Two important concepts in both rituals and consumer behaviour is sense of self (Belk, 1988) and life transitions (Erikson, 1982) when people take on new socially acceptable roles. There has been however limited research integrating these theoretical perspectives and exploring consumer's rites of passage throughout the lifecycle Ozanne (1992). To address this, we describe a secondary analysis of six studies on consumer's rites of passage, answering the following research questions:

- Which are the types of consumer's rites of passage across life stages?
- Which types of products are being used as ritual objects?
- What aspects of self become relevant in consumer's rites of passage?

## 2. Rituals Theories Informed by Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

Most work on rituals has emerged from cultural anthropology and ethnography studies (Summers-Effler, 2006; Rossner and Meher, 2014), where the development of ritual

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<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, [alina.coman@unitbv.ro](mailto:alina.coman@unitbv.ro)

<sup>2</sup> Lancaster University, UK.

theories has been marked by the seminal work of van Gennep (1960), Durkheim (1965), Turner (1967,1973) and Goffman (1959). Van Gennep (1960) was the first ethnographer to explore *rite of passage* as a specific type of ritual enacted to support individual's transition to new social roles. Rites of passage involve redefining participants' obligations within the group through deconstructing their previous social status with the aim to transform them into responsible members. Van Gennep developed a ritual scheme which distinguishes three ritual stages such as separation from the old role, transition to the new role, and reincorporation into the new role (Schouten, 1991). Van Gennep introduced the concept of threshold or *limen* marking the ambiguity and lack of order experienced during the transition stage when protagonists stand between previously held roles and the new ones that the ritual fosters. Rites of passage are universal and enacted primarily during biological milestones in human life such as birth, marriage and death (Norbeck, 1992).

Durkheim (1965) noted the importance of emotional enjoyment during ritual. His theory of ritual (1995) builds on ethnographic accounts of aborigines' ritual behaviour and outlines the role of the group. The sacred objects used during rituals provide affirmation of the group's values and norms, which further strengthen members' conformity and group solidarity (Summers-Effler, 2006). Durkheim advanced the thesis of structural functionalism, that public rites are enacted by society to control its members in order to maintain the societal status quo (Norbeck, 1992). His theory focuses on religious rituals, suggesting that it could be also extended to secular rituals. Durkheim described ritual objects as totemic emblems, sacred objects and bodies. Totemic emblems represent specific animal or plant considered sacred by the tribe members. Sacred objects include natural materials such as stones or wood made sacred by association with totemic emblems. Finally, the bodies of ritual protagonists are also sacred, with human blood or hair being used to mark totemic emblems. Durkheim described the importance of human touch in passing on sacredness from a sacred object to one yet to become sacred.

Turner (1967) was one of the first anthropologists to revise the structural functionalism by highlighting the fundamental role of rites of passage in challenging the social order and effecting social change. He defined ritual as prescribed formal behaviour intended to influence mystical forces according to actors' goals. Ritual symbols include activities, objects, words and gestures (Deflem, 1991) which reveal key social and religious values. By manipulating the ritual symbols, the actors access their power which in turn has a transformative impact on actors' attitudes and behaviours. Turner (1967) distinguished between the dominant and instrumental symbols, which are used across multiple or unique ritual contexts, respectively. The dominant symbols are characterized by three properties: polysemy which captures symbols' ability to represent different meanings, unification of distinct meanings, and bipolarity of meaning capturing both the social order and individual's desires. Turner unveiled rites' quality of being antithetical and subversive, opening possibilities for new social relations (Norbeck, 1992). Turner (1973) focused on sacred symbols which represent social tensions that the rituals aim to address. Emphasizing such intra-group tension, several theories described ritual as a medium of integration for opposing sociocultural forces (Bell, 1992). The symbolism of liminal state in public rituals is negatively charged, relating to death, decomposition or pollution. It marks the limitations of the outdated status which needs to be erased in order to allow the transition to the new status. In Turner's theory, liminar individuals are forced to submit to the power of the community through which their old status is erased and the new status imprinted (Davidheiser, 2005). Turner emphasised the importance of the initiated's body

in rites of passage, being made sacred through cleansing, oiling, sacred clothing, tattooing or adorning. Additional sacred objects are those of natural material such as plants (Turner, 1967).

Goffman's approach (1959) to ritual aligns with Turner's argument against structural functionalism. However, rather than focusing on the traditional religious rituals, Goffman (1959) is one of the first sociologists to explore rituals as informal, everyday social practices. He investigated how people harness ritualized mundane social encounters in order to strengthen or alter the projection on self. His theory focuses on how society and its rituals create the self, unlike Durkheim's focus on how rituals create society (Rossner and Meher, 2014). For this, Goffman developed a dramaturgical metaphor where social interaction is described as a performance emphasizing the social norms that constrain people's behaviour in informal interactions. The symbols in Goffman's interaction rituals include verbal and nonverbal responses and the self.

The above ritual theories highlight the performative aspect of rituals, where stereotyped activities are performed to influence the supernatural forces (Turner, 1973, 1967). These theories emphasize the value of rituals in strengthening the social order and solidarity, but fail to account for the specific emotional needs of community's members. Key concepts across most of the above ritual theories include symbols and emotions which are shared, strengthened and manipulated through social interaction during ritual enactment (Rossner and Meher, 2014). While most ritual theories acknowledge the value of ritual objects, there has been limited focus on exploring the specific meaning of objects (Silver, 1996; Sas et al., 2016). Such ritual objects include the bodies of ritual protagonists, objects for body adornment, hand-made religious objects, and totemic emblems, sacred objects of natural material infused with collective meaning, as well as plants or trees. The actions on symbolic objects prioritize cherishing and touching for ensuring contagiousness of the sacred. An important limitation of these rituals is that they do not include personalized rituals and to address this gap, we now turn our attention to the rituals in consumer behaviour.

### **3. Rituals in Consumer Behaviour**

We offer a brief overview of the most influential models of consumer rituals and practices which draw from rituals theories (Rook, 1985). In his seminal work on the ritual dimensions of consumer behaviour, Rook (1985) identified objects, scripts, performance and audience, and a typology of ritual behaviour focusing on five distinct sources of meaning, i.e., the body exploited in greeting rituals, individual's aims and emotions in grooming rituals, group learning in fraternity initiation, birthday and holiday celebrations, cultural values addressed in rites of passage like graduation or marriage, and cosmological values addressed in religious rituals. Rook (1985) also noted that while rites of passage tend to have clear scripts, roles and audience, they lack clarity of ritual objects.

Relevant here is also McCracken's (1986) typology of consumption rituals, i.e., possessions, grooming, exchange and divestment, which ensure the transfer of social meaning of goods to individuals. For example, possessions rituals involve showing off, comparing or reflecting on personal possessions; grooming rituals involve maintaining the good appearance of both oneself and one's possessions, exchange rituals involve gift giving and receiving, while divestment rituals aim to erase personal meaning attached to a good to be disposed of. This model has been criticised with respect to the unidirectional process of meaning generation, with scholars arguing that people not just uptake but also

create meaning, and that this occur also in everyday behaviour not just in the context of rituals (McKechnie and Tynan, 2006). Later, Holt (1995) has developed a typology of consumer practices, i.e., consuming for experience and play (hedonic purposes), and consuming for integration and classification (instrumental purposes). While consuming as experience (one's response to the consumption of object) and integration (personalising objects as part of one's identity) focuses on engagement with objects for individual identity, consuming as play (socialising with others) and classification (evaluating oneself against relevant others) focuses on engagement with other people for social identity (McKechnie and Tynan, 2006).

Another relevant theory is Erikson's (1977, 1982) model of ritual significance building on his theory of human development. This model identifies eight developmental stages, i.e., infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age, each marked by a specific psychosocial tension which requires negotiation in order to become a healthier and better adapted individual. Such tensions include mistrust versus trust in infancy, shame vs autonomy in early childhood, guilt vs initiative in play age, inferiority vs industry in school age, diffusion vs identity in adolescence, isolation vs intimacy in young adulthood, stagnation vs generativity in adulthood, and despair vs integrity in old age. Erikson argues that the challenges of each stage are reflected in rites of passage and everyday rituals.

To conclude, these theories of consumer's rituals identify personal rituals as closely aligned with Holt's (1995) integration rituals where highly symbolic objects are personalised as they become part of one's identity, McCracken's (1986) possessions and divestment rituals, and Rook's (1985) personal rituals and rites of passage. However, neither of these theoretical perspectives has provided in-depth accounts of ritual objects. Moreover, Rook (1985) has mentioned that some rites of passage lack articulation of ritual objects. To address these limitations, we further outline relevant work on the importance of objects for the sense of self, as captured by consumer research scholars.

### **3.1. The Value of Objects for the Sense of Self**

Belk (1988) has explored the relationship between possessions and the sense of self. By drawing from anthropological findings on the value of symbolic objects during death rituals, research on self-perceptions, and findings showing the "diminishing of sense of self when possessions are lost or stolen" (Belk, 1988, p. 139), he provided evidences that possessions are integral to the sense of self. Central to the extended self is the concept of personal possessions which can extend the self both physically and metaphorically. Belk (1989) identified five such categories of objects, i.e., collections, money, pets, other people, and body parts. Collections of stamps or coins are acquired through investment of time and money serving the function of self-enhancement. When money are part of the extended self they are an end rather than a means to an end, and while they can support self-esteem and social status, extreme use of money can also have negative impact. Belk's theory of extended self (1989) suggests the value of consumption in supporting, strengthening and changing identity. He also suggested how intelligent use of possessions during life transitions and their rites of passage can facilitate the identity change by discarding or neglecting possessions no longer relevant to the current or the ideal self, and retaining or acquiring those which are. Interestingly, apart from special collections, Belk does not reference unique symbolic objects as part of the extended self.

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) has addressed this gap by exploring the value of household objects for the sense of identity. He identified three ways in which objects strengthen the sense of self through: objects of power, self continuity, and relationships. The former include those with masculine qualities such as kinetic objects, i.e., cars, boats, tools or appliances, or those of great mass such as estate properties, as well as objects with feminine qualities such as clothes, jewellery or fine furniture. Object representing the continuity of self through time include mementos of the past and present, and markers for the future. These also have gender-based qualities and include instrumental objects such as electronics, or objects requiring nurturing such as household plants, textiles or photographs. Finally, relationship objects are those capturing the essence of significant others, with findings indicating that warm houses have more objects symbolizing strong ties with the immediate family. This classification of household objects and their roles in the sense of identity has been less explored from the perspective of rites of passage.

### **3.2. Secondary Data Analysis: Objects in Consumers' Rites of Passage**

Rites of passage are powerful personal rituals supporting individual at critical transitions during the lifecycle such as birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, adulthood, old age or death. This section discusses six typical rites of passages across life stages, namely puberty, young adulthood, adulthood and old age. While rites of passage have been explored both in tribal societies and consumer behaviour, we know little about the value in contemporary societies of objects' consumption and disposal during rites of passage (Ozanne, 1992). We illustrate this discussion through six case studies where we review previous findings on rites of passage addressing grooming, drinking, career progression, home improvement, self transformation and dispossession. We selected these studies predominantly from consumer research, informed by McCracken's (1986) typology of consumption rituals, and Rook's (1985) ritual dimensions of consumer behaviour.

***Adolescent girls' grooming as rite of passage towards womanhood.*** Gentina and colleagues (2012) interviewed 25 girls between 14 and 18 years old to explore the micro rite of passage of using makeup to support the construction of personal identity and transitioning towards womanhood. The authors identified different dimensions of the symbolic meaning of makeup such as sacredness, i.e., makeup practice is private and intimate taking place in the most secret and sacred place which is girl's bedroom, involving initiation and experimentation with trusted girlfriends and away from parental authority. This ritual and the consumption of cosmetic products is intended to enhance female beauty and attractiveness and increase girls' self-esteem and confidence to face the world. It also supports girls' claim for independence and separation from parents, particularly mother, towards the development of emotional autonomy. The authors conclude with suggestions for the makeup product design and marketing to support sense of autonomy and experimentation, and private makeup trial areas in retail stores.

***Young men's drinking as rite of passage towards manhood.*** Beccaria and Sande, (2003) reported quantitative and qualitative studies of alcohol drinking among young men in Italy and Norway, and how such rites of passage support transition to manhood, by exploring new identities and social relationships within the peer group. The symbolic meaning of drinking practice as initiation among young men involves playing with the limits between intoxication and death to push the personal and group's "limits within the local social and cultural order" (Beccaria and Sande, 2003, p. 110). The main ritual artefacts are the different alcoholic beverages played out in the drinking place. Just like in

girls' grooming rituals described above, young men also engage in experimenting, albeit in this case with drinking within the peer group, outside the reach of authority of parents, priests or teachers. This also suggests the ritual value in supporting separation.

***Adult women' career progression as rite of passage towards executive job market.*** Solomon and Anand (1985) reported a survey study with 90 graduate business students to explore the gap between the current and the ideal self in workplace, and the value of clothing to support career progression. Findings indicate that the larger the perceived gap, the greater the need of ritual symbols. This gap is the largest when new social roles are experienced. The authors discuss how the dressing code in the executive job market goes beyond the feminine pursuit for fashion, to communicate competence and achievement. However, while the dress code, norms and role models for men at strategic management level are clearly defined, women who only recently have started to enter this level have no ritual scripts or objects to rely on. Hence, a less risk strategy is to adopt a two piece suit as the equivalent of male's conservative business suit. The authors conclude with a discussion of business clothing as a specific type of ritual artefact: a totemic emblem as a physical expression of a higher social order, and how the critical career transitions to new roles represent *windows of vulnerability* heightening people's acceptance of and reliance on such objects.

***Adult men's DIY home improvement as rite of passage towards domestic masculinity.*** Moisio and colleagues (2013) explored the practice of DIY home improvement as a rite of passage towards the construction of domestic masculinity. They report an interview study with 23 male participants with either low or high cultural capital measured through occupation and formal education. Findings indicate that DIY practice is a classed practice. Men with high cultural capital engage in DIY home improvement as a leisure practice for productive consumption where they enact the craftsmanship role for whom the labour of one's hands is autotelic and therapeutic rather than outcome-oriented. They also use ritual artefacts such as working uniform and professional brands of power tools as masculine assets. In contrast, men with low cultural capital perceive home as a workplace for home improvement where chores need to be completed by enacting the provider's ideal and handyman's role, which are safeguarded as exclusively masculine.

***Adult people's rites of passage in grief therapy towards better adaption to loss.*** Sas and Coman (2016) reported interviews with 10 psychotherapists with expertise in grief rituals to explore the symbolism of objects and action that people use in their personal grief rituals. A relevant finding is the identification of rituals of self transformation which focus on talking stock of one's life by identifying negative feelings from the past, as well as dreams for the future. They also identified a range of symbolic objects used in such rites of passage including personal possessions, as well as new objects acquired or found from organic or inorganic materials such as crafted clay vessels or flower seeds. Findings indicate that such objects support the capturing of both negative emotions from the past, and positive ones of dreams and aspirations for the future. While the first type of objects is disposed of, the latter are cherished, or in the case of seeds and seedling imbued with positive emotions, let to germinate in the ground. This study offers a unique perspective on the value of objects in rites of passage which shows that the emotional meaning and temporal oriented content as key for deciding their consumption or disposal.

***Older people's voluntary disposal as rites of passage towards better adaptation to aging.*** Price and colleagues (2000) interviewed 80 people over 55 years of age to explore their cherished possessions and disposal practices and their value in life review and

adaptation to aging. Findings indicate many meanings of cherished possessions such as objects representing mnemonic tokens of life narrative, totems as symbols of skills and achievements, and emblems signalling familial relationships. Among disposal strategies, relevant is the disposal through rites of passage such as family wedding, birthdays or anniversaries, when elderly people engage in ritualized gift giving to transfer cherished possessions and their meanings to younger family members. When confronted with a diminishing self, typical to the aging process, elderly people enact such rituals to ensure the endurance of their sense of self by continuing to influence “the future lives of others and the biographies of special things” (Price et al., 2000, p. 196). Authors conclude with suggestions that cherished possessions should be able to convey their stories, and that disposal should not be total, as retention of special possessions (even in the context of home downsizing) is important for their sense of identity.

#### 4. Implications for Supporting Consumer’s Experience in Rites of Passage

This secondary analysis of empirical findings across the six studies outlined above reflects the value of framing consumers’ rituals as consumption or disposal around key life transitions within the lifecycle. This supports Erikson’s (1977, 1982) model of ritual significance in adolescence, adulthood and old age, particularly as rites of passage as informed by sociological literature. This cross-cutting approach to the exploration of the rites of passage throughout life transitions has been limited (Ozanne, 1992) but needed. By extracting key themes across these studies, we sketch an initial framework integrating the lifelong perspective with the typology of consumer’s rituals and objects (Table 1).

*Initial framework of consumer’s rites of passage* Table 1

Erikson’s stages	Rites of passage	Ritual objects	Dimension of self
Adolescence	Grooming	Bodily adornment (makeup)	Body
Young adulthood	Initiation	Bodily intoxication (alcoholic drinks)	Body
Adulthood	Transition to professional or domestic new roles	Bodily attire (uniforms) Skills (power tools)	Competencies, skills
	Transformation through grief therapy	Newly crafted objects from collages of possessions, or natural material (old/ ideal self)	Emotions: grief (past), dreams (future)
Old age	Cherishing possessions or disposing of them to the extended family	Possessions as markers of life narrative, achievements or familial relationships	Emotions: positive (past)

An important outcome is that consumer’s rites of passage are aged, gendered, and classed constructs, to ensure transition to both traditional and untraditional gender roles across life stages and social classes. Rites supporting transition to traditional gender roles include girls’ grooming in adolescence (Gentina and colleagues, 2012), and young men’s drinking as initiation towards adulthood (Beccaria and Sande, 2003). Here we found that rituals benefit from clear objects which are ritualistically consumed, emphasizing the physical body which young girls aim to adorn, and young men to intoxicate.

We also looked at the value of rites for supporting transition to less traditional gender roles such as female professionals climbing the executive ladder (Solomon & Anand, 1985), and males assuming domestic DIY roles in the home (Moisio et al., 2013). Here

we found that in the absence of clearly defined ritual objects and scripts, people rely on traditional ones which they appropriate. For example, in the absence of role models, female use business suit, a male clothing item, as totemic object of empowerment; while high cultural men aim to emulate the craftsman's identity for which they acquire and employ specific working attire and professional brands of power tools. Interestingly, while women's gender identity continues to be challenged as female identity sits awkwardly within the executive arena, men's reclaiming their masculinity within the domestic space, a traditionally feminine one, is less challenging.

In contrast to the above rites which focus exclusively on the future self, self-transformation grief rituals (Sas & Coman, 2016) involve the processing of negative emotions around the no longer relevant self. In the absence of adequate rituals scripts, people co-design their rituals by selecting appropriate objects to enact them. This is achieved through the disposal of newly crafted objects of natural materials capturing the essence of the old self. The ritual script for enacting transition to the ideal self also involves the crafting of new objects such as photo collages or organic objects such as seeds which are sowed.

We also looked at ritual objects in old age (Price et al., 2000) including tokens of life narrative, totems as symbols of achievements, and emblems signalling familial relationships. Finding showed that in the absence of scripts, older people use existing rituals such as anniversaries or weddings to ensure that their cherished possessions continue to exist and be taken care of by their extended family. Such rituals facilitate older people to cope with their increasingly diminished self characterising old age, by ensuring the endurance of their possessions. This is not a genuine disposal like in grief therapy, but a transfer of a "porous ownership" to people who are already extensions of their sense of self. While the above rites of passage involve acquiring objects for enacting an ideal self, authentic disposal to purge the undesired self occurred only in grief therapy.

The rituals objects extracted from the reviewed studies echo *human body* and *other people* from Belk's (1989) categories of objects of the extending self, but less so collections, money or pets. Findings also confirm Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) typology of household objects representing the self including gendered objects of power such as tools for men's DIY practice and makeup products for girls' grooming practice; or objects of continuity and relationship such as tokens of life narratives or emblems of familial relationships the elderly people have kept and ensure that remain in the family to be kept for the future. In addition to these objects, we also identified other body-related objects for intoxication in initiation rituals, skill and achievement-related objects, or newly crafted objects capturing the ideal self or no longer relevant self. This larger array of objects than the ones described in consumer research, confirms the value of objects for body adornment, hand-made totemic objects, or natural material objects (Rossner and Meher, 2014) identified in sociological rituals theories.

We now reflect on the value of our findings for product designers and consumer researchers interested to ensure consumer experiences as rites of passage. Our findings suggest the importance of understanding consumer values within the larger lifecycle trajectory, and in particular through the lens of rituals which may facilitate transition to new social roles. In adolescence, such products may include those for body adornment, in adulthood, goods for competencies and skills, while in old age, those for representing life narratives, sense of continuity, and familial relationships. Our initial framework offers guidance on the range of ritual objects which may support such rites of passage. Findings

also suggest the importance of accounting not just for the various development stages, but also for ritual scripts and objects as gendered or classed concepts, potentially borrowing from findings from gender studies (Coman, 2004; 2005; 2012). In addition, when people seek transition to socially prescribed new roles, they can rely on available ritual scripts. However, more support is required for the development of rituals for new roles such as women entering the executive job market, and even more so for consumers and their transitions which challenge the present social norms, i.e. transgender or childfree people.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper explores consumer's rituals by employing three different theoretical perspectives: sociological ritual theories, consumer research ritual theories, and material culture research on the value of objects for sense of self. We have employed a secondary data analysis by reflecting on previous empirical findings from six studies. Our findings indicate new types of objects which have received less attention in consumer research, but echo findings from the sociological ritual theories, suggesting the value of integrating ritual theories from sociological perspective with those from consumer research and sense of self. The main contribution of this paper is an initial framework of consumer's rites of passage integrating Erikson's (1977, 1982) model of ritual significance and consumer's rituals (Rook, 1985; McCracken, 1986) with theoretical perspectives on the value of objects for the sense of self (Belk, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). We have just started to populate this framework through the six reviewed studies. Future work should explore a broader range of consumer's rites of passage to include children's rituals and to deepen the findings on ritual objects for adult's rituals, i.e., by extending them to virtual possessions whose disposal can be particularly difficult (Sas and Whittaker, 2013).

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