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Move me: On stories, rituals, and building brand communities

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This paper takes on the challenge of understanding behaviour change through the lens of anthropology. In the field of market research, the goal is to find the leverage points of emotional connection that will inspire a desired behaviour. But traditional approaches to research have relied on methods that neither capture these triggers of change, nor inspire connection. Alternatively, an approach to research based on rituals induces transformational experiences that by their very definition are grounded in emotional connection. This paper details a framework for ritual-based research, and provides case studies of how and when rituals might be used for gathering market insights. We conclude with recommendations for extending the approach into engagement opportunities and creative executions.

INTRODUCTION

Why do you decide to buy a new laundry detergent? Or to purchase your favourite yogurt a few more times each week? Or to spend $350 on a pair of shoes? Or $350,000 on a new house? Of all the many details that define these opportunities, which will prove most salient for you? Which will persuade you to do it?

These are the kinds of questions that face market researchers every day. To answer them, they must uncover the leverage points that inspire people to do something different. If we are to create a new path forward for a brand, our role is to discover ways that bring people along on that journey. In an ideal scenario, the results inspire compelling, effective creative work.

Ironically, the world of traditional market research relies heavily on the past: on retrospective narratives collected through focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Frequently, reports detail why a person *chose* a brand, or what they *felt* when they *shopped* a certain store, or how often they *bought* something in the *past year.* But as Herman (2004) demonstrated, the cognitive models that shape our understanding of a story change with new events and new experiences, so that our assessment of past choices will alter based on the subsequent outcome of those decisions. Essentially, our explanations of our motive change as we see the consequences of those choices unfold in time. Thus these retrospective accounts are invariably of limited use in helping market researchers capture the proactive triggers of emotional connection or new behaviours.

When traditional research methods attempt to get prospective data, the questions are often hypothetical, if not fanciful. Methods include having people view video footage of others engaging in the desired behaviour, and then reflecting on their own willingness to do so. Alternatively, researchers posit inquiries such as, *"If your yogurt went to a party, who would it*

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be? What would it be wearing?" Or, *"Pretend your brand is no longer available. Write an obituary for it. What would you miss?"* While certainly creative, this methodology fails to capture reality. They are, by default, fictional accounts of what I might do under speculative circumstances or in alternate worlds. Again, they fail to capture moments of change and the emotional drivers thereof.

If we are to understand the impetus for behavioural patterns and change within a cultural context, there is value to looking at how cultures themselves cue such moments. With this in mind, we turned to the ethnographic literature for inspiration on the ways in which real communities inspire and guide different choices among their members. This led us to the terrain of narrative and ritual.

THE ELEMENTS OF A GOOD STORY

Narratives are the lifeblood of marketing and communications, much as they are the driving force of cultures as well. In both instances, stories serve to connect people around a shared model on the world: on expected patterns of events, on the accepted roles for different people, and on a moral interpretation of those events and persons. While they take multiple forms, ranging from fantastical fairy tales to rich historical narratives, stories link us to each other by crafting an interpretative thread across time, place and persons. Through their telling, they draw people together toward a shared cognitive and experiential framework.

It is this ability to pull people to a particular understanding that underlies the appeal of narrative within marketing. Marketers rely on stories to transform people. Sometimes poignant, often funny, occasionally scary, marketing campaigns leverage stories to inspire, to prod, and to influence. The most powerful communications interweave narrative with sounds and images to lead you to a new place – one where you use that detergent, eat those yogurts, wear those shoes, and buy that house.

Stories accomplish this through two important tactics. First, through structuring a plot. Jerome Bruner (1990) argued that stories become compelling by creating a culturally meaningful connective thread between two events. Narratives are a kind of linguistic bridge that allows us to make sense of how the characters get from Point A to Point B. Granted, these threads will vary according to how cultures define "meaning-filled" events. In this respect, stories connect events and motivations in a way that makes our arrival at Point B feel both inevitable and proper within our cultural context.

The second way in which stories move us is through the specific use of language for character development. As Ellen Basso (2010) has demonstrated, the use of personal pronouns – I, We, You – brings the audience into the discourse, and allows them to envision themselves as the protagonists. In fashioning ourselves as the agents of the story, we live their adventures and empathize with their emotions.

Bakhtin (1981) integrated both points in his discussion of the dialogic nature of novels: our engagement with a story hinges on the experiences and ideas we bring to its reading (Bruner's culturally-meaningful threads) and our ability to imagine ourselves in the position of the characters (Basso's personalization). We are in conversation with narratives, which

implies that the narrative must "make sense" and be in a language that is accessible and sensible to us, the readers.

Pivotal to the power of stories to achieve this transformative potential is content. There must be a plot and there must be characters who face choices, live in tangible (at least describable) worlds, and who engage with others to move the story from Point A to Point B. In the absence of content, there is no story. A truly great narrative, then, weaves together rich content into a compelling plot with characters who we embrace (even if we do not like them), and who lead us on a journey.

Within market research, then, the challenge becomes soliciting strong content: stories that detail these emotional connections and triggers for desired behaviors – the transition from Point A to Point B – in a compelling and understandable way. Returning to traditional market research, what we find is at a base level, research gets data. It provides basic information, but in an uninspired and uninspiring way. For example, understanding that you purchased laundry detergent seven times in the past year is "data." Valuable research yields information, such as a story about how my laundry smells when I use my favourite detergent. This provides richer material for the narratives that become marketing campaigns, but still fails in capturing opportunities for change or connection.

Truly differentiated research, however, yields useful information. By this, we mean stories that detail leverage points for emotional connection. These are real-time narratives that walk through the complex terrain of a series of actions (e.g., trying something new, engaging with something more frequently), detailing the challenges, the unexpected opportunities, and the shifting sense of self as the actor moves through the experience. Returning to the laundry detergent example, useful information would include a narrative about purchasing a different brand, using it for a week, a daily discussion around how your clothes both felt and smelled, and how that affected you as a person.

ON RITUALS

In the course of traditional ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists capture this useful information through participant-observation. We watch these encounters and conversations unfold in daily life over the course of the months and years that make up our research. We are present as informants negotiate new experiences, struggle with choices, or go about their daily routines. We detail these moments, and probe in real time about motivations, triggers and consequences.

In market research, we do not have the luxury of such time. We cannot wait to watch events unfold in the natural course of life. Nor do we have the latitude or ability to plop ourselves into someone's life the way we often do during fieldwork. We must find ways to shortcut the learning process. And so the challenge becomes: how do we find those moments of intense emotion? How do we identify transformational events?

Cultures have a genre of transformational events which anthropologists and other researchers describe as rituals. As Turner (1970) argued, rituals are *culturally salient experiences designed to transform a person, and thus their relationships to others and to material goods*. Rituals accomplish this through two key features. First, they are often highly sensory in nature, employing sound, images, touch, smell and taste to instantiate the lessons through an

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embodied experience. Building a sensory world around the meaningful messages establishes future triggers for the teaching, as well as permanent reminders of the event (c.f., Basso 1992). Second, rituals create a shared experience within a culture. By undergoing the same (or similar) pedagogical process, it provides a common template for engagement and a more consistent frame for understanding future events (c.f., Shore 1998).

Returning to the challenge of a good story, rituals provide an experiential thread that transports you from Point A to Point B using language that creates a shared identity between you and others, and building upon a sensory-rich moment in time. This is why they so often generate *communitas*: an intense feeling of solidarity, togetherness and belonging created through shared experience (Turner 1995 [1966]).

Rituals are often one way in which cultures structure or instigate behavioural, emotional and cognitive changes within their members. Rather than teach all lessons through modelling and subtle interpretation, rituals force people into sensory-rich, emotionally complicated moment of change, and guide them on the interpretative journey to a new way of engaging with and understanding the world around them. In essence, they are highly condensed moments of teaching and learning and transformation.

Rituals thus offer a way out of the dual challenge of time and quality faced within market research. Given the restricted schedules which govern most projects, rituals allows you to instigate changes for a group of people in a time-limited situation. Moreover, because they are sensory-rich, transformative experiences, they generate what we termed "useful information" about real-time behaviors and emotions. Thus thinking through the challenge of marketing "stuff," as Daniel Miller refers to it, rituals can be deployed as a research framework to understand the challenges and opportunities of different projects.

To date, we have identified three broad categories of rituals that we use as research tools: rituals of initiation, deprivation, and remembrance. Each addresses a particular challenge in marketing: new product launches, highly familiar products, and products that defy description. We conclude the paper with a discussion of lessons learned, and potential ways to expand the system.

Initiation

One of the frequent challenges in marketing is an introduction. Occasionally companies are launching a new product, one that will transform the way we think about an entire category of things. More often, companies want to introduce their product to a new audience, one that may be unfamiliar with their brand, its heritage, and how it is different from other competitors.

The real challenge, however, is not about the product. The real challenge is to help people see themselves differently, as owners and users and ambassadors of these things. As Bourdieu (1977) noted, the material goods we use every day quite literally make us, thus the introduction of a new thing is often met with hesitation because it requires us to re-imagine ourselves. Who would I be if I owned those shoes, or ate that yogurt, or used that dish detergent, or lived in that house? What if I do something wrong? What if I don't know what is required? What if it means other things need to change too?

Cultures use rituals of initiation to guide members through the process of embracing a new social role. Elders – those familiar with the new status and its expectations – usher you through this process, teaching you the rules, sacrifices and joys that await on the other side. As with other rituals, they guide this transition through an emphasis on language, physical comportment, and challenges. Weddings and marriage are a classic example. From the engagement through the ceremony, the betrothed pair are ushered along through the process by a host of "elders," including parents, religious officials, married friends, and culturally-sanctioned experts. They are informed of the guidelines and expectations around timing, costs, attire, and attendance at the wedding. They are taught the expectations around behaviour and emotional comportment within the marriage that reflect communal values on the meaning of union within the culture.

The task within market research then is to help people find an approachable way to become familiar with the new role as owners of different stuff. They need to "try on" an identity, and to experience the transformation. Following a model of initiation rituals, we have paired "brand novices" with "brand elders" who introduce them to the product, usher them through the experience and help them see themselves as potential owners of a thing.

Case study: Luxury sports cars – Luxury sports cars attract a niche following. But for some younger Americans, this poses several challenges. First, the exclusivity runs counter to a broader ethos around sharing and accessibility. Second, this younger community does not have an emotional connection to these cars that defined previous generations. Finally, their understanding of particular brands tends to be negative: several of our informants called them *"a mid-life crisis car for rich men,"* echoing the way these autos often appear in American films, television shows, and music.

We were asked to introduce a specific brand of these cars to a younger American community. Their preliminary description of the cars – having never driven them – followed that standard cultural script. They described the cars in generic terms: expensive, showy, and loud. As one reported, *"It's about speed. Speed, speed, speed, and speed."*

To push past this standard narrative, we explored the value of approaching the opportunity as an initiation ritual. Certain features of the category translated well to the model: it presents a highly sensory experience; it requires specialized knowledge to fully understand the experience; and there is a clear "in group / out group" dynamic grounded on cognitive and emotional barriers.

We could not create an authentic initiatory experience, but strove to replicate elements of it as we approached the challenge. We recruited 20 younger people (ages 25-40 years old), paired them with aficionados of this particular brand, and sent them on a drive. They took photos, and they spent about an hour or so in the cars out in public. Their "elders" began with an introduction of why these cars are unique from an engineering and design perspective, and how they came to love the cars. As they drove the cars, the "initiates" learned more about the responsibilities and joys of owning this particular brand.

The post-drive narratives were significantly different from the pre-drive expectation. We heard phrases like:

"The horsepower is second to none. You feel like you're in control."

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> "It feels like it's pushing you. It puts adrenaline in you. It's designed for speed. It was fast. You can't go slow. … It's such an aggressive car."
>
> "The torque is amazing!"
>
> "The displays were unbelievable. It drove like a sports car. It handled like a sports car. It was simply unbelievable."
>
> "I'm trying to be as good as the car. You're never going to be as good of a driver as the car. It's so much better than you at what it does. But I'm learning every time."
>
> "It's untamed, like a wild horse"

As we hoped, by approaching the challenge from an initiatory perspective, we uncovered much richer, passionate, intense narratives. Moving beyond speed and cost, the post-drive stories offered a window into the experience that helped us to understand how and why these cars might appeal to a new community. This was not a group particularly interested in the details of engineering, which was the focus of the current campaign language. They loved handling, performance, and responsiveness. They wanted a challenge, and found it in these cars.

The other lesson from the initiatory structure was the development of communal ties. By pairing novices with elders – non-owners with current owners – the process enabled potential owners to see themselves as owners. No longer confined to the caricatures of the drivers they saw in popular media, the "initiates" bonded with a "person like me," which helped create a connective thread from Point A (non-owner) to Point B (nice person, just like me, owner). The potential ruptures to Self-instigated through the acquisition of new things were avoided by seeing themselves in the current owners.

DEPRIVATION

At other times, the challenge is quite the opposite from an introduction: something is so familiar or basic to our everyday lives that we no longer think about it. This is part of what Miller (2009) implied by stating that things "whisper." We take them for granted precisely because that is what we want them to be: background to other things that matters to us. The intention is not to be dismissive or entitled, but to function in the midst of busy lives by narrowing the field of choices we must make every day.

Just as the introduction of new "stuff" forces an evaluation of our core Self, so too does the removal of those things that are central to the way we navigate in the world. Their absence requires us to assess the motivation underlying their meaning in our lives, and to explore alternatives to our typical routines. Katherine Newman (1999) detailed this tendency among the downwardly mobile American middle class: they held on to their "stuff" as long as possible because these items (houses, cars, clothing) signaled "middle class." Losing them

meant relinquishing that treasured and culturally valued status. Deprivation and loss create a rethinking of Self as much as the acquisition of new stuff.

This "backgrounding" mentality is precisely what cultures and religions seek to overcome through rituals of deprivation. In rituals such as Lent, Ramadan, or Navratri, the devotee actively gives up something that is valuable for a specified period of time. In each case, the goal is to develop a renewed appreciation for the absent thing/behaviour, and to create an appreciation for other facets of life.

When products or categories fill this essential "background" role, the challenge becomes helping people to appreciate why that item matters in their lives. From a research perspective, the broader goal is to help them see who they are and how their lives function in the absence of the item. In this respect, crafting a ritual of deprivation creates moments in which participants can reassess the role of these things in their lives.

Case study: Food storage and disposal products – Many household goods are quintessential commodities: mass-produced, interchangeable, generic things. Companies often struggle for some way to break through and create a connection with people. But understanding that point of connection within a commodity space is much more challenging. The obvious links may not be the most emotionally salient.

To understand what could bond people to their kitchen products (e.g., trash bags, storage bags, food wrap, containers, etc.), we approached the challenge through the lens of deprivation. Our initial foray into the conversation about preference and choice elicited standard responses: "it's strong," "it works," "it's just what I buy," or "it's what my mother always bought." We hypothesized that through removing these items from homes, we might elicit a deeper emotional narrative about the role of these products beyond the obvious link to food or function.

We recruited twenty-five households and deprived them of all the kitchen products made by the client: no foil, no plastic containers, no wax paper, no parchment paper, no trash bags, no freezer bags. They were allowed to come up with alternatives, but they could not use any items from these categories – not our brands or any competitor brands. Each day, they did a video diary about how the day went in their homes, and more broadly, in their lives. They had several prompt questions, and were encouraged to talk beyond those.

Day One videos, before we took the products away, were brief and direct – usually about 2 minutes long. People talked about their favourite recipes, their families, and how the day went. As noted, their reasons for buying these brands and products were quite vague: based on family tradition, price ("It's cheaper, so we got it."), and convenience ("It's just what my husband got last time."). There was no emotional connection, and from our perspective, nothing usable for a moving, compelling story.

Once we took away the products, the participants were vocal. By the end of the project, each video was to 6-8 minutes of emotion-laden, "I can't wait for this to end" narratives about why the day went all versions sideways:

> "This was really, really difficult. I use plastic storage every day, all the time, it's such a convenience to my life, it was killing me. It was so hard that it made me not want to cook."

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> "I really took for granted the easy access and easy way of doing things when you have these products with you."
>
> "I did not like the restrictions [of the project]. I felt as though items that have been in my kitchen for years were not available when I needed them. It created a feeling of disappointment and let down, not to mention the extra work / clean-up it created for me."
>
> "Today I decided not to take the kids to the park. Normally I would pack a picnic and we would go play in the morning. But it was too much work to think about the picnic with all these containers. And you never know when they'll get hungry. So we just stayed inside this morning, and went to the park after naptime."

What we learned is that these products are only vaguely associated with food. What they really enabled was connection time. In the hectic lives of today's households, the ability to simplify food prep and streamline clean-up, and to make things portable, and to know that your products will work every time, means that people can get on with thinking about each other and spending time with each other rather than focusing on the work of being at home.

Moreover, the products themselves facilitated community. The simplicity and reliability of the goods enabled participants to share household chores with other members of the home. They allowed participants to host large events by making food preparation and storage a worry-free experience. They let people be spontaneous and have impromptu get-togethers because food could be stored and transported to alternate locations for shared consumption. In short, they facilitated moments of togetherness.

REMEMBRANCE

When truly transformative events happen in life, communities mark them with symbolic memorabilia: physical objects that serve as powerful reminders of the events. They are not ordinary things, but rather, a category of meaning-filled objects that define who we are and how we became this person. While these can be anything, some typical examples include items such as wedding rings, heirlooms, children's attachment objects (e.g., teddy bear, doll, blanket), trophies, awards, and so on. These things take on a life of their own, vested with stories, reminders of powerful people, places and moments in our lives. They are a physical record of who we have become.

Cultures and religions institute rituals of remembrance as a way to reinforce lessons and create a group habitus through repeated re-visitation to and reflection upon the event. Consider the ritual of communion in the Catholic Church. The ritual, performed explicitly "in remembrance of me [Jesus]," transforms a simple wafer into the "body of Christ," and leads the congregation through his final hours of loyalty, betrayal, loss and redemption. The bread becomes a reminder to people of why they are asked to make choices and sacrifices and to uphold a code of conduct that may differ from the wider society. On a more personal scale, events such as birthday parties and anniversary celebrations serve this same role of helping us to remember and reflect upon the journey.

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Certain physical objects lend themselves to rituals of remembrance because the behaviors that surround them are often explicitly ritualized. For example, jewellery is often vested with meaning beyond physical beauty. The necklace that married Hindu women receive at their wedding becomes a reminder of their marriage promises when they put it on each day. Similarly, a mug can become vested with symbolic associations when it is the sole vessel for one's morning coffee or tea: its weight, shape, and handle being tactile cues that are part of the daily ritual of transition from slumber to engagement.

The presence of these symbolically charged items in people's lives renders them particularly useful mnemonic devices for prompting rich conversation around these experiences. This is particularly true when the rituals are enacted privately versus in a communal setting. In such cases, it can be challenging for the participants to understand the collective implications of their actions.

Case study: Running shoes – In the world of competitive sports, athletes are very particular about their equipment. Yet this specificity is often a barrier to an articulate discussion about the role of sporting gear in their lives. Their use of the equipment is both highly ritualized and highly personal: each player or competitor engaging with the objects in a unique fashion, but always in the same way. For example, hockey players tape their sticks differently from each other, but they always tape their personal sticks in precisely the same manner so the equipment will feel and function in a way that is familiar and comfortable.

In the case of team sports, it is easy to observe the patterns and differences in how players engage with gear. The challenge is more complicated in solo sports, such as running. Talking to runners about the experience of running or about their running shoes quickly leads to dead-end conversations that are highly individualistic. Their shoe preference is strictly based on what feels right and what seems to help them run better. They report: *"Shoes are very personal. You can't really understand your relationship to the shoe until you can put in many miles on it."* They are loathe to recommend shoes to other runners because "it's personal." They run because it is a *personal* compulsion, and they are clear about it. They all have idiosyncratic race-day rituals that range from magical shoelaces and safety pins to the restorative powers of chocolate milk and protein bars. Finding a connective strand in the narratives of elite runners poses a challenge.

With this in mind, we turned to rituals of remembrance. Observations revealed that all runners save something from races they have run. As we reviewed the "running collections" of our participants, we noticed a tendency to save race-day bibs (the numbers you pin on your shirt to identify yourself within the race). These became our mnemonic device and the symbolic item to trigger a kind of ritual of remembrance. We asked the runners to hold the bibs and tell us about each race. As they talked, the connective thread emerged. Running, for this community, was not about winning. Running was about each step in every practice and in every race:

> "I conquer myself with each step."
>
> "Just one more step, I tell myself. Just one more step."
>
> "Out the door. That's the goal each day."

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"Don't give up. Push through."

"I am a better me because I run."

It was the discipline of putting one foot in front of the other when every fibre of their being wanted to do something else that made them runners. They do it because it is transformative: the act of running makes them a different person. Through running, they become runners.

By holding the bibs and focusing on each race, the runners could recapture the mental and emotional space of those specific runs and of their daily runs in a way that moved us beyond the highly personal nature of the sport into a terrain where they connected through a shared challenge: facing each step. By using the bibs much as one might a wedding ring or a communion wafer, these symbols became mnemonic devices that prompted the rich emotional depth of competitive long-distance running.

From a community standpoint, they provided a bridge in a space where people often feel isolated. The intensely personal nature of running, and the reluctance to acknowledge the continuing challenge of each step at elite and competitive levels, makes it easy to assume you are the only individual who struggles with wanting to give up. By creating a ritual moment where this feeling is paramount – holding the bib, the symbol of *participation*, not *winning* – we found the connective thread that rendered an individual experience into a communal act of defiance and transformation.

CONCLUSION

What began as a creative challenge became a doorway into rethinking why and how we approached the fundamentals of the research process. But it was a necessary shift that inspired us back into our roots.

Anthropology as a discipline is founded on engagement. When we look to Malinowski's foundational tome on fieldwork, anthropology was and always should be a *participatory* science. He implored us: "put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations" (1922:21). He rallied against "armchair ethnography," pushing anthropologists to get out, join in, and learn through experience.

Malinowski and subsequent generations of ethnographers understood that participation fundamentally transforms our understanding of a process or situation. When we do something, we learn it and know it through a different lens: when we try to live another's life, we gain perspective, empathy, frustration, compassion, and wisdom. It forever changes how you understand yourself in this world, and how you engage others.

Our goal in creating a research practice centered on ritual was to take the participatory lessons of anthropology to the field of market research. We have found that the changes evoked through a ritual-like structure provide a richer understanding of how "stuff" functions in our lives. Moreover, they reveal the emotional and practical triggers for our

habits and choices, thus providing insight into how to alter these. Finally, rituals enabled moments of connection with others, small examples of communitas if we are so bold, in which participants found solidarity and a shared identity with strangers.

On a practical level, one of the key benefits of our approach is efficiency. Time is always a limiting factor in business, and rituals streamline the process of traditional participant-observation. Beyond this, the methodology provides some insight into efficacy. Rituals provide preliminary data about what will work before launching the strategic and creative process. While some campaigns are wonderful and endearing and generate "buzz" around the execution, they may not compel people to do something different. By pushing people to do things they would not have done otherwise, rituals yield stronger information on the meaningful connective threads that will draw people to Point B.

These methods may be familiar to ethnographers who work in the field of market research. What proved helpful for our purposes was framing them into a coherent system based on categories of challenges. We fully expect that there are additional rituals to incorporate into the system as well, and we position this paper as the start of a broader conversation around expanding and enhancing the approach.

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