Extending the dramaturgical framework in marketing: Drama structure, drama interaction and drama content in shopping experiences

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Abstract
The dramaturgical framework in marketing provides a rich theoretical framework for understanding shopping experiences. The purpose of this paper is to extend the current dramaturgical framework on shopping experiences by distinguishing between drama structure, drama interaction and drama content. The extended dramaturgical framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which cultural resources, active consumer agency and formal components of shopping performances contribute to shopping experiences.

INTRODUCTION
Marketing researchers use the term ‘dramaturgical’ to refer to marketers’ impression of management efforts (Goffman, 1959) and to the idea that shopping environments can be construed as theatres (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Grove and Fisk (1992: 455–456) characterised services as drama: ‘insofar as it is a discourse involving articulation, definition and interaction... concerned with the tactics and strategies employed by people to create and sustain desirable impressions before an audience’. Grove and Fisk (1992) also construed shopping environments to be theatrical stages involving a setting, actors, an audience and the performance. Marketing researchers used the dramaturgical framework to analyse consumer–product (Deighton, 1992), consumer–consumer (Gorn, 2002), as well as consumer–marketer encounters (John, 1996). Researchers have also found the dramaturgical framework useful for analysing how performances should be organised (John, 1996), and how shopping performances may facilitate
consumer satisfaction (Deighton, 1992). Some have used the dramaturgical framework to understand how shopping performances create either positive (Clark and Salaman, 1998) or negative customer value (Grayson, 1998).

Despite these contributions, the dramaturgical framework fails to provide much insight into the role of interactive (eg McGrath and Otnes, 1995) and co-constructive marketer–consumer practices in service production and delivery (eg Rodie and Kleine, 2000). Work on the dramaturgical framework generally represents consumers as passive agents who embrace various behavioural rules and expectations under the marketer’s authority (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Furthermore, the dramaturgical framework provides little conceptual help in analysing drama content (Stern, 1990). This should be of concern to marketers since successful dramas are always stories about something (Stern, 1996). Dramas communicate aspects of everyday life in a meaningful form by resorting to convention (Turner, 1986). Hence, dramas use selective cultural resources that cast the performance as meaningful. Drama is a cultural vehicle through which the actors, the plot and performances can be organised to facilitate various experiences (Boller, 1990).

To push the dramaturgical framework further, this paper introduces conceptual distinctions between drama structure, drama interaction and drama content. The term drama structure refers to the set of theatrical components: setting, actors/audience and performance, or the formal components of drama (Grove and Fisk, 1992). The concept of drama structure does not address adequately the active role of the consumer in drama performances, however. In order to capture this role in staging shopping experiences, this paper builds upon Firat’s (1977) notion of the human involvement dimension in consumption and defines drama interaction as the level of consumer involvement or activity, ranging from active to passive, that can shape, redirect and structure the unfolding of the drama performance. The active role of drama interaction exemplifies drama performances that incorporate active consumers’ agency and assimilate their spontaneous actions into the unfolding of the drama performance, such as those seen in studies of brand communities (eg Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). The passive role of the human involvement dimension can be seen in studies that treat the consumer as a managed component of service delivery supporting the prevailing script (Kellogg et al., 1997; Rodie and Kleine, 2000), or as an ‘audience’ rather than as ‘actors’ who have the ability to shape the unfolding performance (Grove et al., 1998). Few treat consumers as participants in performances, with roles ranging from a passive, segregated audience to an audience that is involved and integrated into the performance (Deighton, 1992).

To provide a conceptual vehicle for understanding the cultural resources
that organise performances into meaningful wholes, this paper offers the drama content concept. Drama content refers to the cultural resources that ‘infuse... activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure’ (Goffman, 1959: 30). Drama content provides an organising resource that integrates meanings, the plot and the characters in order to cohere and facilitate enriched shopping experiences. This paper distinguishes between two basic types of related cultural resources: cultural self and cultural other.

Cultural-self-related resources originate from connections to the cultural self and in-group community (Arnould and Price, 2000). Cultural-self-related dramas capitalise on narrative resources related to the cultural self (ie imagery, ideas, myths, events, places and people related to the culture of production), examples of which are the National Western Stock Show (Peñaloza, 2000), Thanksgiving celebrations (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), or the Florida Classic (Stamps and Arnould, 1998).

Drama content can also capitalise on resources from the cultural other (ie imagery, ideas, myths, events, places and people related to foreign countries). While research on tourist experiences (Costa, 1997), branding (Batra et al., 2000), advertising (O’Barr, 1994), third-world souvenirs (Jamison, 1999) and exotic food consumption (May, 1996) has noted the role of cultural otherness as a cultural resource, marketing researchers have not addressed the role of cultural otherness in shopping environments. This paper focuses on elaborating how shopping experiences can capitalise on cultural-other-related resources and how they contribute to drama content.

METHOD
The site of this study was a small-size European grocery store in a small midwestern town in the USA. This grocery store’s market positioning strategy made it suitable for the study: the grocery store portrayed itself as specialising in ‘European’ food products, suggesting that it could be a site for cultural-other-focused drama. Its business model built on the putative appeal of cultural otherness, specifically European, Anglo-French cultural otherness. In addition, the small size of the grocery store induced spatial proximity between the participants and facilitated interaction between them (Price et al., 1995), which made the grocery store a suitable site for investigating drama interaction in situ. The research used a market-oriented ethnographic design (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), using approximately ten hours of participant observation, more than 100 photographs and two interviews.

FINDINGS

Drama structure: The components of the theatrical performance

Setting
The setting component of the drama structure (Grove and Fisk, 1992) refers to the physical environment in which the drama unfolds or its substantive staging. The setting of this study represents a type of servicescape termed ‘marketscape’ (Kozinets et al., 2002; Sherry, 1998), defined through the references it makes to foreign places and cultures. For instance, chalkboards located outside the grocery store referred to foreign countries such as Britain, Italy, France, Japan and the Netherlands and used foreign terms (see Figure 1). The chalkboards described ‘European’ everyday products, a number of which had a foreign spelling, used foreign words, or represented products otherwise alien to everyday US meals and cuisine. These verbal and symbolic references on the chalkboard, the windows and the door of the grocery store represent ‘spatial brackets’ (Goffman, 1974): they set the grocery
store apart from its midwestern cultural context. In addition, these spatial
brackets help to build ‘dramatic
anticipation’ (Durgee, 1988) by
providing the consumer with the
expectation that they can experience
culturally-other culinary experiences in
the grocery store as well as encounter the
‘exotic’ cultural other.

Inside the grocery store, the
consumers’ exposure to cultural
otherness was intensified. The grocery
store was full of cultural artefacts,
posters and other merchandising that
linked it to foreign places (see Figure 2).
As illustrated in the following excerpt
from the field notes, the management
had tagged and symbolically marked the
foreign origin of the displayed products
using small pieces of blue paper:

‘Ritter sport bars, from Germany $2.25 each
all varieties’ with small varieties depicted in
small letters . . . The second shelf contains three
big glass jars with blue papers glued on the side
“catllebaut baking choc. Bittersweet
Chocolate” with similar descriptions for the
remaining two jars. Next to them is located a
metallic basket filled with small-sized chocolate
bars with a blue paper taped on top of the
handle: “Sugar-Free Chocolate Bars from
Israel $1.50”.’ (Field notes, 10-26-02)

These small pieces of blue paper
represent what MacCannell (1999) called
‘truth markers’, or signs that cement a
bond between the consumer and the
attraction. The truth markers
communicate to the consumers that the
grocery store is a repository of genuine
cultural otherness and help to imbue the
setting with meanings of cultural
otherness. In addition, French music
played in the store made the cultural
other present:

‘anything but country music. Um, because
that’s not [laughs] the type of thing you would
play in a European [grocery] . . . We play a lot
of French music. Um, a lot of modern French
music. Like um, I, this band I’ve heard of, that
my French teacher in high school used to play
for me called Louisa Atch . . . Or older French
music like Eddie Piaf . . . some Italian . . . It’s
still a store in the United States, but we want to
not portray . . . like for instance playing
country music again would not be a good thing
to, to do in this store. Just to keep it as far from
like American type of thing as possible.’
(Interview, W-F-20s)

The music played in the grocery store
asserted by negation the non-North
American character of the setting (Wilk,
1997). The managing owner and the
employee deemed this practice of
playing foreign music important. In fact,
according to the younger employee,
playing ‘country music’ in the grocery
store would have been so out of line that
the managing owner would have
reprimanded her for such actions,
actions that can be described according

Figure 1: Photograph of the exterior of the grocery store
to Goffman (1974) as being ‘out of frame’. Following McCracken (1986), the music can be interpreted as a sign-vehicle that moves meaning from the cultural category of cultural otherness to the setting and the props it contains.

**Actors/audience**

The second component of the drama structure comprised the grocery store’s actors and audience (Grove and Fisk, 1992). In this grocery store, the management and part-time employees represent ‘actors’, while the ‘regulars’, gift shoppers and occasional shoppers represent the ‘audience’. With regard to the actors, employees have multicultural competence acquired through foreign travel, stays abroad and knowledge of foreign languages. Their role was to be competent representatives of the cultural other who provided audience members with images and experiences of the cultural other. This significance of the role-related expectations (Solomon et al., 1985) could be seen in the fact that the managing owner took care to provide employees with training that made them competent actors in their roles.

‘Whenever an employee works by themselves the next day, or if they come in and I leave, I always leave a list of instructions of things that need to be done that day. But when I hire somebody new, they usually work with me for a while just to see how I talk to people. That’s why “Noelle” is so good, because she always works with me. So she’s always watching me. And she knows how I talk to people. But I try to educate my employees on our products. They get, um . . . 20 dollars worth of free food every month, so they can take whatever they want and try it out at home. And then I quiz them and say you know, what did this taste like? Did you like it? Why did you like it? Oh, you didn’t like it. Why didn’t you like it? Okay. So you didn’t like it, but a customer comes in and they ask you about it. How are you going to describe it so that it still sounds like it has some sort of good quality to it?’ (Interview, W-F-30s)

When employees did not possess the necessary knowledge of the cultural other, they needed to be educated. Both the managing owner and the audience of the grocery store expected them to possess intimate familiarity with the cultural other. For their part, the consumer audience had to possess certain cultural skills to participate in the performance. The manager depicted the regulars as consumers who came from the upper echelons of the Midwestern community.

‘It’s not one cookie cutter person . . . within the age group of say 30 to 70. So it’s really, you know like 40 years there, or 50 years I guess. Thirty to 70 years old. Most of them are college educated. I would say a good number of them probably have a Masters degree. Um, a good number of them . . . are at least upper middle class. Um . . . a lot of them . . . have traveled in Europe, or have lived in Europe . . . as a whole, our customers are probably quite different from the people who shop at Wal-Mart.’ (Interview, W-F-30s)
The regulars were a negation of the kind of consumer who shops at Wal-Mart. They implicitly negated the mythological themes recognised in an examination of Wal-Mart’s promotional flyers: homo economicus, family, America, community and hometown (Arnold et al., 2001). Regulars represented consumers of cultural difference, the upwardly mobile middle class seeking encounters with the cultural other through travel or food consumption (May, 1996). From the perspective of the performance, the regulars represented an audience that became engrossed in cultural-other-related themes evoked by the setting and the actors.

Performance
The third component of the drama structure is the performance (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Performance refers to the set of activities that occur before an audience. In this grocery store, the managing owner described the performance in the following way.

‘they come in, and, and I say “hi, how are you?” And then they’ll say something, and then I’ll ask them if I can help them with anything. And hopefully they’ll say yes, ‘cause then it makes it nicer for me; ‘cause I can actually help them. Um, so we’ll talk about what they need. And then I try to, I generally try to keep the conversation going. Because I do care. I’m curious. So, yeah, I’ll just talk about, why you are buying this. And if they’ll say, ‘oh, well, I just got back from France. I’m having my friends over, I’m gonna do a French meal. Then, always I’ll say, “oh, wow, that’s excellent! So where did you go?” And they’ll tell me about their vacation.’ (Interview, W-F-30s).

Upon entry into the grocery store, the salesperson greeted the consumer and encouraged them to share their stories about cultural experiences. The performance also involved the salesperson’s demonstration of cultural skills.

‘we get a lot of people who aren’t familiar with anything. And they come and just look around. Or they’ve heard of one thing, and they, um, want to find something. So, I’m supposed to always ask, um, if I can explain what something is. If I can help. Because a lot of times they don’t know anything about European products.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

The salesperson took the role of the cultural interpreter. Consumers expected the sales personnel to be able to translate the writings on product labels, to describe how consumers could use the products and to know how the products tasted. For their part, the consumers expected the sales personnel to possess intimate familiarity and knowledge of foreign cultures.

‘Or if somebody comes up to me and asks me where I’ve traveled in Europe and then we can talk about that. And then for other people in the store who aren’t so talkative, they can at least listen to the conversation about Europe.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

At times, the performance involved the active display of the mastery of foreign languages.

‘mostly American people want me to speak. They just wanna hear, you know, a foreign language. They find that interesting. Uh, uh, the little kids, the parent will be like she’ll speak French to you, and all this, all this stuff... They just ask me to say something in French.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

The consumers expected the sales personnel to demonstrate detailed knowledge about the foreign products offered in the grocery store. These expectations were internalised in the form of ‘dramaturgical loyalty’ (Goffman, 1959) that makes actors hold themselves responsible for meeting the expectations that they have attached to their roles.

Overall, the performance was enacted using imagined scripts for small-town, French retailer–consumer relationships. These scripts involved the use of first names, invitations for self-disclosure and encouragement of consumers to share their cultural-other-related stories. The performance simulated the imagined experience a consumer might undergo in France as a French consumer.
Drama interaction: The role of active consumer agent in performances

Drama interaction is a new dimension of shopping dramaturgy defined as consumer involvement in, or an activity that can shape, redirect and structure the unfolding performance. In the grocery store, the consumer was involved in the shaping of the performance in three different ways: enacting oral performances, sharing stories and speaking in foreign languages.

Once the consumers had entered the grocery store, the most involved regulars engaged in ‘oral performances’ (Harris et al., 1995). During these acts, consumers took the dominant role in the interaction.

‘The salesperson cuts the meat and the female begins to describe her recent experience with olive oil: she had bought last year some olive oil during her visit to Italy. She tells that this oil was cold pressed by the family of the person she knew in Italy, “stoccio oil” which was “... to die for!!”, she says. The SP nods and the female asks for crackers “do you have crackers you recommend?” to which the SP responds “Australian crackers” and directs her to the stand on the left-hand side saying a moment later after finishing the meat cutting “well that olive oil sounds really good!”. The female responds by saying that she will save some oil for the SP so that she [the salesperson] can get to taste it.’ (Field notes, 10-26-02)

While both consumers and the sales personnel shared thoughts and experiences related to travel, food consumption experiences and foreign products, consumers took an active role in selecting the topics and directing the progression and terms of the interaction. In fact, some consumers took advantage of this rare situation where they could demonstrate their cultural knowledge by telling the salesperson stories.

‘they like to talk with me about what they’re buying ... I like it when people like give me stories. Like they’ll buy something and they’ll give me a long story about how their mother used to fix them for ‘em when they were little. And, you know, we can talk about that.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

The stories were part of the active display and communication of specialised knowledge, experiences and skills related to foreign cultures. The context of telling stories was also opportune for practising cultural skills rarely used in everyday life, such as speaking in German or French. Indeed, during the participant observation, the researcher captured one consumer-driven interaction carried out in French. These acts of speaking in French can be conceived in terms of Goffman’s (1959) distinction between the expression one ‘gives’ and the expression one ‘gives off’. The display of specialised, rare and valorised language skills corresponds to the expression that the consumer gives, and the cultural significance of this self-display relates to the expression that is ‘given off’ — the idea that consumers shared with grocery store management an affiliation with the cultural other. The significance of consumers’ active engagement in the setting and the French utterances resides in the fact that they represent agentic acts, realised without marketers’ direction or predetermination.

Drama content: Organising the cultural meanings of performances

Drama content is a second new dimension of shopping dramaturgy. As previously stated, drama content refers to a cultural resource that provides the framework within which the drama’s meaning, plot and characters can come together. Drama content also fosters differentiated consumption experiences. The grocery-store context illustrates the organisation of drama and here drama content references cultural otherness. As cultural otherness was the overarching theme of the grocery-store servicescape, the grocery store became a site for the consumption of cultural difference (Firat, 1995). The grocery store was a place where both the comfort-seeking, post-tourist (Ritzer and Liska, 1997) and the post-Fordist, authenticity-seeking, touristic explorer met (Urry, 1990). As pointed out by the manager, elements of the scene evoked an idea of the grocery
store as a genuine ‘European’ grocery store. The part-time employee conveyed this during an interview:

‘Um, I think that a lot of places try to Americanize. Umm, any store that’s, um, not native to the United States . . . Uh, like I’ve had people who take Spanish tell me that when they go to, um, any, any like type of Mexican restaurant, that it’s toned, the food’s toned down a little for American tastes. Not quite as, I don’t know, spicy, things like that. Umm . . . so I think that if, um, we did something, anything to, umm, make the place seem Americanized, I think we’d just be kind of undermining what we were trying to do here, which is ignore [laughs] completely the fact that we’re a store in the United States.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

The quote resonates with a sense of reflexivity about the compression of space in a globalised economy (Waters, 1995). More importantly, the quote resonates with the idea that the grocery store purposefully utilised culturally-other content to facilitate consumption experiences (MacCannell, 1973) and this content was inherently ‘Americanised’, intertwined with the US cultural context of its appropriation (eg Lu and Fine, 1995). Probably what makes cultural otherness a valued organising resource of shopping experiences is that it is a fluid category with permeable boundaries, making the grocery store a site for crafting a ‘cultural mosaic’ of differentiated experiences that blend elements from multiple cultures (Firat, 1995).

The malleable, polysemic content of cultural otherness enables the marketer to service the consumers’ discrepant expectations and experiences, as suggested in the following interview excerpt.

‘Oh . . . well, you know, like I say, it depends on the customer. If it’s an American person, they’re gonna look at it and they’re gonna think, “I’ve never seen this before.” Or, “Oh wow! I haven’t seen this since I was in France ten years ago.” All of a sudden I’m remembering my wonderful vacation. Or, if it’s an, if it’s a German student, who’s been studying abroad for eight months, and they really miss Mom and Dad, and they come in and they see this Ritter sport bar, and it has German on it, it’s gonna make ’em feel homesick. So it depends on the customer really.’ (Interview, W-F-30s)

For foreigners the cultural otherness of the grocery store provided a set of signs that were ‘temporally’ or ‘corporally’ indexical (Grayson and Shulman, 2000). These signs evoked associations with persons and times in distant places and the past. These signs may also have evoked nostalgia (Schindler and Holbrook, 2003). On the other hand, for Americans, the servicescape provided a context in which cultural otherness might be incorporated into an internally differentiated social self (Cook and Crang, 1996) who experienced foreign cultural identities (James, 1996), or gazed voyeuristically at cultural diversity for its aesthetic value (Urry, 1990).

In this capacity as a repository of cultural otherness, the grocery store became the vehicle for moving the consumer ‘out of the ordinary’ (Urry, 1990) state of being.

‘I think that it’s trying to . . . help you forget just for a second. To just kind of remove you from ordinary life into something . . . It depends on who you are. For Americans it’s trying to remove you from ordinary life and to move you into something different for once. Just, just to make you forget for a second, that, of the hustle and bustle of what’s outside.’ (Interview, W-F-20s)

The grocery store facilitated a temporary disconnection from the midwestern cultural context, enabling consumers to escape the North American consumer way of life (eg Arnould and Price, 1993). In a sense, the cultural content mobilised in the grocery-store shopping experience enabled consumers, like post-tourists, to realise a ‘liminoid’ state (Turner, 1986), a temporary transcendence of everyday roles and statuses.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this paper was to extend the dramaturgical framework of the shopping experience by distinguishing between drama structure, drama interaction...
and drama content. To bridge research focused on the substantive and communicative staging of shopping experiences, the paper built on prior studies in marketing and consumer research. It used data from a particular shopping context to illustrate the analytic value of the newly differentiated drama structure, drama interaction and drama content components of the extended dramaturgical framework. The paper makes four contributions.

First, the paper demarcated drama structure from drama content. This distinction provides a better understanding of the relationship between the structural and cultural resources that operate in the organisation of shopping performances. The paper proposed that drama structure provides the theatrical components instrumental for the organisation of performances; however, drama structure alone is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of shopping as drama. In order to understand how drama creates value-adding shopping performances one must go beyond the formal components of drama. Researchers also need to pay attention to the cultural resources through which the components of the drama structure gain coherence and intelligibility.

Secondly, the paper introduced drama interaction as a dimension of drama performance. Previous studies have focused on examining consumers in the role of the audience rather than as active participants or actors. Extending the dramaturgical framework to include interaction between consumers and marketers enabled a set of behaviours to be recognised related to active participation and shaping of drama performances over the course of interactions. For example, agentic consumers enact behaviours that both give and give off certain impressions that affect performance outcomes, including those for less-active consumer audiences. Observations affirmed the role of active consumer agency in providing resources for the variation of the performance script rather than merely supporting the service providers’ delivery roles.

Thirdly, the paper introduced drama content as an integral component of the dramaturgical framework. As pointed out by Holt (2003), commercial products such as brands become more valuable when they tap into rich cultural narratives. These cultural resources provide coherence, coordination and direction for the performances. This paper introduced the concept of drama content and distinguished between cultural-self and cultural-other-focused drama performances, which helped to isolate two types of cultural resources operative in performances. The context drew on Anglo-French cultural resources in organising the shopping experience and revealed a new avenue of research into the use of specific narrative resources in the creation of shopping performances. Future research should try to extend the repertoire of drama content by examining specific types of cultural-self and cultural-other-focused dramas by borrowing theoretical concepts and frameworks from the humanities and anthropology.

Fourthly, this research highlighted the role of cultural otherness in the organisation of shopping environments and experiences, which previous research has not investigated. In line with Holt (2003), who suggested that managers should look closely into culture for specific narrative resources, this study pointed out that businesses could pay more attention to foreign cultural scripts as resources for the organisation of value-adding shopping experiences.

CONCLUSION

For researchers, this study indicates the value of bringing the consumer into the
drama as an active rather than as a passive character. Active consumer participation in the performance creates positive shopping experiences by enabling consumers to play along with the drama and to appropriate the cultural resources necessary for these experiences. From a managerial standpoint, the study points out that managers could facilitate consumers’ interactive and co-communicative roles in appropriate shopping environments. Furthermore, managers could provide consumers with the possibility of taking more dominant roles in shopping performances, roles that can shape the unfolding of the drama. In conclusion, the extended dramaturgical framework could help to elaborate and deepen research related to the orchestration of shopping experiences.

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