

2 The Psychology of Ritual Consumption

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Introduction

As professional baseball player Nomar Garciaparra steps up to the plate, he performs his infamous at-bat routine. He gestures as if tightening his gloves, touches his hips, chest, and forehead, then taps his feet back and forth, digging his cleats in the dirt while taking a few practice swings. After nearly every pitch, he repeats this behavioral sequence. Meanwhile, watching the game at home, a fan grabs a Corona beer from the fridge, places a slice of lime into the neck of the bottle, plugs the opening with her thumb, and turns the beer upside down to sink the lime wedge to the bottom.

Both of these sets of behaviors are modern instances of ritualistic practice. Although the two rituals are quite different on many dimensions, they share some common features: they involve repetitive actions, they are always performed (whenever possible) in the same situation, they are performed the same way every time, and what effect the ritual sequence has on any outcome is unclear. Indeed, these characteristics describe most ritual practices that come to mind: religious ceremonies, holiday dinners, gift exchanges—they all entail ritual performances that stress order and organizational rigidity, although the order and the behavior likely have no tangible effect on the outcome (Kapitány and Nielsen 2017; Xygalatas 2022).

Why do humans persist in such seemingly senseless, often expensive, and sometimes dangerous acts? Rituals are a hallmark of human society, observed over thousands of years of human history, and considered one of the few truly universal human behaviors (Bell 1992; Brown 1991; Xygalatas 2022). Given their universality and the fact that they are believed to be evolutionarily adaptive, it seems likely rituals must serve *some* function. Indeed, anthropologists and sociologists have studied rituals for over a century, primarily through ethnographic research on ritual practices *in situ*, and documented their importance and centrality in people's lives and social functions (Durkheim 1915; Geertz 1973). Research on consumer rituals also has a long history, with scholars documenting and theorizing about the social functions of ritualized consumption practices (Otnes and Lowrey 2004; Pieraccini and Taylor 2023).

More recently, rituals have captured the attention of scholars interested in understanding the psychological functions of such behaviors, including consumer rituals (Hobson et al. 2018; Norton 2024; Xygalatas 2022). This research complements the extensive anthropological and sociological literature by applying different methods (primarily deductive and experimental) to provide convergent findings and controlled tests of the theories regarding the functions of rituals.

The objective of this chapter is to review research on the psychological functions of rituals and how these functions influence ritual consumption. We begin with a discussion of the definitions of rituals and their indicators. We then discuss the psychological research on rituals organized around two broad functions that emerge from the research: rituals as a means of personal control and rituals as a facilitator of social cohesion. In reviewing the instantiating evidence for these two functions of rituals, we include both experimental and ethnographic research that addresses the relevant psychological constructs.

Psychology of Rituals

Definitional Markers of Rituals

In psychological research, precise definitions of constructs are necessary for valid operationalizations (e.g., manipulations and measures). Unfortunately, the definition of ritual differs substantially across the social sciences, depending on the research focus and types of rituals, resulting in the labeling of very disparate situations as rituals (e.g., pilgrimages, repetitive behaviors during performances, holiday dinners, among many others; Boyer and Liénard 2020; for an integrative review, see Hobson et al. 2018). Even among psychologists now studying rituals and acknowledging the importance of a precise definition, clear consensus is still elusive (cf. Hobson et al. 2018; Kapitány and Nielsen 2015; Norton 2024; Xygalatas 2022).

Instead, what appears to emerge is an agreement on what we call *markers* of rituals: unique characteristics of ritualistic behavior that comprise the ritual. Here, a reasonable consensus exists. Rituals involve a series of behaviors with at least three markers: repetition, rigidity, and symbolic meaning (cf. Hobson et al. 2018; Rappaport 1999; Rook 1985; Xygalatas 2022). The *repetition* marker refers to both repeated gestures internal to the ritual (such as knocking on a surface three times) and to repetition over time (performing the same structured ritual whenever the ritual situation occurs). *Rigidity* describes how the components of the ritual are expected to be performed in a certain way, and only that way, every time. *Symbolic meaning* entails how meaningfulness is embedded in the ritual practice, and is the ritual marker that creates the emotional component of the practice and separates ritual from mere habit or tradition. The various objects and actions that comprise

a ritual serve as a “paralanguage” (Levi-Strauss 1983, p. 81) that symbolically represents hopes and wishes (Evans 2000). Indeed, extraordinary beliefs (those outside the realm of science and logic) often motivate and facilitate ritualistic behavior (Otnes et al. 2018). Rituals may convey shared meaning (e.g., religious rituals) or may be meaningful only to the one person who performs them (e.g., Garciaparra’s batting ritual).

In addition to the three markers discussed above, two others typify many rituals: causal opacity and goal demotion. Causal opacity refers to the fact that it is unclear to observers what possible effect the ritual might have on any outcome. Similarly, goal demotion means it is unclear why the person is engaging in those particular ritualized behaviors. These two markers are important because they also distinguish rituals from habits. For example, ritual handwashing or routinized health practices such as toothbrushing may involve rigid sequences of behaviors that are repeated over time, but the practices have obvious utility (teeth cleaning) and no symbolic meaning (Xygalatas 2024).

Although these five markers are typically present in rituals, their presence and importance may vary. For example, some rituals, such as Nomar Garciaparra’s batting ritual, may be highly repetitive and rigid, but not particularly symbolically meaningful. Others, such as family holiday meal traditions, may be highly meaningful, but less rigid (Hobson et al. 2018). In addition, some markers, such as causal opacity or goal demotion, may not be part of certain rituals at all (e.g., religious cleansing rituals such as baptism in Christianity, Wudu in Islam; Kapitany and Nelson 2017). These characteristics of rituals are integral to the functions they serve.

Functions of Rituals

Scholars across the research spectrum have identified numerous functions that rituals serve (cf. Hobson et al. 2018; Homans 1941; Malinowski 1948; Spagnola and Friese 2007; Xygalatas 2022). For heuristic purposes, we group these functions broadly into two categories: personal control and social cohesion. Personal control refers to concepts such as self-regulation, self-control, and coping, and generally concern functional processes at the individual level. Social cohesion refers to concepts operating primarily at a group or societal level; thus, they pertain to social processes such as social connection, shared social and cultural values, and social norms. However, like Hobson et al. (2018), we stress that although we differentiate the control and cohesion functions, there is often significant overlap between the two functions. Furthermore, a particular ritual may serve multiple functions at the same time. For example, social cohesion can serve as a control function at the group level (e.g., to maintain social order) and personal self-control can serve as a cohesion function (e.g., to improve interpersonal relations).

Personal Control

One function of rituals is to provide a sense of personal control and agency, which in turn provides additional psychological benefits. One such benefit is reduced anxiety. Observational research documents numerous examples in which people attempt to leverage ritual performance as a means of coping with high-anxiety situations. In one notable anthropological study of Trobriand Islander fishermen, these men often performed elaborate rituals before a voyage, but only when the conditions were highly dangerous (Malinowski 1948). More modern examples are also consistent with Malinowski's findings, with people engaging in increased ritualized behaviors as their stress and uncertainty increase (e.g., increased stakes in gambling, exam-taking, and natural disasters; Xygalatas 2024). There is evidence that in these cases, the rituals are efficacious; that is, participating in these activities does decrease anxiety. For example, frequent use of ritualized behaviors by athletes before games can improve performance (e.g., in free-throw shooting; Gayton et al. 1989; Predebon and Docker 1992).

Engaging in ritualized behavior can also wield lasting and generational effects on self-control. For example, the children of families that frequently engage in family routines (e.g., set times for play, homework, quiet time) and family rituals (e.g., religious holidays, annual celebrations) have better self-control (Brody and Flor 1997) and higher self-esteem (Fiese and Kline 1993) than those from families that lack these routines and rituals. Similarly, engaging in effortful religious rituals may increase implicit self-control over time, resulting in positive health and well-being benefits (Hobson et al. 2018; McCullough and Willoughby 2009; Wood 2017). The functional relation between rituals and control is also observed in the opposite contexts; people who chronically experience stress and anxiety often develop rituals as a coping function (Hobson et al. 2018; Jacobs 1989; Rachman and Hodgson 1980). Experimental studies in which some participants were induced to feel a lack of control (Whitson and Galinsky 2008) or increased anxiety (Lang et al. 2015) resulted in behaviors (repetitive and rigid hand movements) and beliefs (superstitious reasoning) that are markers of rituals.

Consumption Rituals

The same type of regulatory function can be seen in consumption rituals. Consumers often engage in idiosyncratic food consumption rituals, from the well-known "Twist/Lick/Dunk" ritual of eating an Oreo cookie to the "dressing" of a Corona beer (swab the bottle rim with lime/douse the rim with salt/dunk the lime). Recent research has shed some light on the psychological benefits consumption rituals may provide. Engaging in ritualized consumption behavior increases feelings of personal control and interest in food experiences, and reciprocally, negative emotions increase the desire to

engage in consumption rituals because they are perceived to increase feelings of self-control (Song et al. 2022). Similarly, ritualized consumption increases the enjoyment of food, and this effect occurs because the ritualized behaviors increase involvement in the eating experience (Vohs et al. 2013). The findings of Vohs et al. also demonstrate the importance of symbolism and ritual performance. Specifically, enjoyment of the food was diminished when the set of ritualized behaviors was stripped of its symbolism (participants perceived them as merely random behaviors), and when participants did not perform the ritual themselves but merely watched someone else enact them.

Consumption rituals can reduce uncertainty and anxiety during life transitions. For example, preparing for childbirth is an anxious time that can induce significant stress for new mothers-to-be. Engaging in normative consumption rituals centered around preparing for a new baby (e.g., gift showers) can ease the anticipated anxiety of pending motherhood by providing a sense of control and preparedness (Afferback et al. 2014). Similarly, cosmetic makeup rituals have been linked to anxiety reduction in adolescent girls by serving as a rite of passage into adulthood (Gentina et al. 2012). However, certain ritualized contexts, such as wedding planning, can both reduce and create anxiety, resulting in feelings of ambivalence: The ritual planning process may dampen anxiety because brides-to-be become engaged in a social ritual, but may increase anxiety because of worry about social norm violations (Otnes et al. 1997).

Life-altering rituals like those that ease women into motherhood are tied to specific stages in the consumer's life, but opportunities exist for transformative ritual interactions that are unconnected to a particular life stage. For example, consumers rely on tourism as a way to escape their regular lives and the grind of the workplace, immersing themselves into a new culture(s) and often seeking self-transformation. Participating in authentic rituals while traveling enhances the consumer's experience, offering a dimension of spirituality in material and cultural consumption (Moufahim and Lichrou 2019) that mitigates the commercialization of special heritage sites (Yan et al. 2024). Destination governments can carefully craft ritual experiences that allow participating visitors to have meaningful roles in the ritual, which benefits the consumer's sense of meaning in life and encourages more tourism (Lu et al. 2024). Tourists experience a slice-of-life view of other cultures by viewing and participating in their ritual practices, witnessing how cultures and societies bond together through these traditions and meaningful actions.

Another possible benefit of ritual-induced feelings of self-control is that it may foster feelings of time affluence (to the extent that feeling time-deprived feels like one is out of control). Ethnographic research suggests the performance of rituals can induce a feeling of timelessness (Malefyt 2015). Building on this possibility, Liu et al. (this volume) find that performing (versus not performing) a novel food consumption ritual increases perceptions of time affluence, which in turn increases self-brand connections and brand preference. Similarly, food consumption rituals increase mindfulness

(present awareness), which also increases self-brand connections and purchase intentions for the product (Liu et al. 2022).

A by-product of increased perceptions of personal control that rituals provide is that they help people cope with difficult situations that are marked by negative emotions. The earliest evidence of ritual behavior is mass burials that contain valuable artifacts (Xygalatas 2022), and the invocation of religious rituals (e.g., prayer) are common reactions to negative life events (Ai et al. 2005; Norton and Gino 2014). In a recent set of studies, Norton and Gino (2014) tested whether rituals might act as an emotional salve for grief after losses, by providing a perception of increased personal control. To do so, they manipulated the extent to which rituals were salient to their participants and then measured their feelings of control and feelings of grief following a loss. Participants who recalled a ritual they performed after the loss of a loved one (either through a failed relationship or death) reported greater feelings of personal control and less grief compared to those who did not recall a ritual. The coping and control functions of rituals even extended to trivial losses; compared to a control group, merely performing a novel set of ritualistic movements increased feelings of control and reduced feelings of grief from not winning a small lottery.

Consumption rituals also soothe negative emotions through their meaning-making function. One requirement of the behavioral component of rituals is that the sequence of behaviors must be considered meaningful. One possible outcome of the meaning component of rituals is that meaning may transfer to the one performing the ritual. For example, nostalgia increases ritualistic behaviors, which in turn increases perceptions of a more meaningful life (Yin et al. 2024). Consumption rituals can have the same effect. Engaging in food consumption rituals can reduce feelings of loneliness, because engaging in the ritual increases feelings of a meaningful life (Wang et al. 2021).

Social Cohesion

A second function rituals serve is that of enhancing social cohesion. Unlike the personal control function, which features rituals that are often performed alone and may be meaningful only to the person performing them, the social cohesion function operates at the group level and involves collective rituals that impart shared meaning. Collective rituals are well known and integral to human culture. Rituals, and particularly collective rituals, are thought to serve an evolutionarily adaptive function by facilitating group cooperation that enhances survival (Berghaus 1998; Sosis 2004). Durkheim (1915) posited that rituals foster group affiliation and promote collective unity. Xygalatas (2022, p. 77) refers to the social cohesion function of ritual practices in society as “glue,” a metaphorical adhesive that binds groups in a myriad of ways, promoting social order and creating and reinforcing communal bonds.

Stein et al. (2022) further delineate the social cohesion function into three core affiliative functions that collectively represent group values: promotion,

protection, and perpetuation. First, group rituals promote group values by providing a visible embodiment of group values that are considered sacred. The symbolic link to group values is tied to the causal opacity marker: because the ritualized behaviors wield no apparent causal effect on a desired outcome, the ritual procedure becomes more symbolic and less instrumental (Legare and Nielsen 2015; Rossano 2012).

Second, rituals provide a protective function by fostering stability and consistency (Watson-Jones and Legare 2016). They represent evidence of commitment to group values and are effective in differentiating between ingroup and outgroup members (Bulbulia and Sosis 2011; Stein et al. 2022). The group commitment function of rituals is based in part on costly signaling theory (Henrich 2009). Participating in group rituals can be costly; depending on the nature of the ritual, costs can vary from simple time and money (e.g., common religious rituals) to more serious effort, pain, and suffering (e.g., piercing rituals; Fischer and Xygalatas 2014). The willingness to incur these costs, particularly for behaviors that are causally opaque, signals a person's group commitment and differentiates those in the ingroup versus the outgroup (e.g., only ingroup members are willing to incur the costs). Further, there is evidence that the extremity of costs is positively associated with group cohesion. For example, in a quasi-experiment with participants and observers in the ritual Hindu festival of Thaipusam in Mauritius, both participants in and observers of a high-ordeal (higher pain) ritual donated more money and indicated greater group identity compared to those in a low-ordeal (lower pain) ritual (Xygalatas et al. 2013). Thus, apart from signals of one's group commitment to other group members, rituals also serve a self-signaling, internalization function that increases one's attachment to the group (for a review, see Stein et al. 2021).

Third, the performance of collective rituals provides a perpetuation function that facilitates the endurance of rituals over time. The ritual markers of repetition and rigidity act as memory cues that reinforce the symbolic link to core group values and facilitate the transmission of ritual practices from generation to generation (Hobson et al. 2018; Rossano 2012), which enhances group cooperation and commitment (Fischer et al. 2013; Stein et al. 2022).

Support for the social cohesion function of rituals stems mostly from anthropological and sociological research. However, recent research has provided experimental evidence of the different components of the social cohesion function of rituals. For example, Stein et al. (2022) investigated the rigidity marker of rituals and its relation to social cohesion. They situated the rigidity marker in terms of institutional norms—what individuals *must* do, as opposed to what they actually do (descriptive norms) or should do (injunctive norms). Indeed, the rigidity marker suggests that the sequential steps of a ritual must be performed in the specified way, and only that way, and that deviations are problematic (Boyer and Liénard 2020). To test the validity of this proposition, Stein et al. examined the extent to which

alterations to rituals (predefined sequences of symbolic actions) affected the moral judgments of ritual participants. They found that alterations induced moral outrage compared to judgments of participants in unaltered rituals, and this was true both for very minor alterations of an established religious ritual and for novel rituals.

We noted earlier that one of the core affiliative functions of collective rituals is to signal group identity (both other- and self-signaling) and provide and support ingroup versus outgroup differentiation. In a series of experiments, Hobson et al. (2017) tested whether engaging in ritualized behaviors leads to intergroup bias. They experimentally manipulated whether a group of participants did or did not engage in a novel ritual (a series of meaningless behaviors), and across experiments, manipulated whether the ritual participants enacted the ritual multiple times or only once. They also randomly assigned participants to one of two arbitrary groups, and then measured how much they allocated to their interaction partner in an economic game called the “trust game,” which is an indicator of social preferences (Sapientza et al. 2013). Participants in the ritual condition (but not the no-ritual condition) allocated more money to ingroup members than to outgroup members, but only for ritual participants who performed the ritual multiple times. Although the experimental designs cannot distinguish whether the differential money allocations are reflective of ingroup trust or outgroup distrust, the findings demonstrate ingroup versus outgroup differentiation, and reinforce the importance of the repetition marker of rituals.

Similar affiliative functions were observed in an experiment with young children, which also highlighted the importance of symbolic behavioral sequences that are causally opaque. Children who were randomly assigned to a group that enacted a novel ritual expressed greater ingroup affiliation compared to those randomly assigned to a group that did not enact the ritual (Wen et al. 2016).

Consumption Rituals

The social cohesion function of rituals is readily observable in many consumption rituals, and the most common of these involve family food rituals that mark sacred occasions. The Thanksgiving meal is often highly ritualized in the United States and serves to protect and perpetuate social cohesion through highly ritualized consumption practices (e.g., type of food, time of day, where to sit) that provide shared symbolic meaning (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Similarly, formal dining rituals promote and perpetuate social cohesion through rigid adherence to highly stylized sequences of behaviors. For example, in an ethnographic study of formal dining practices at Oxford University and Cambridge University, Di Domenico and Phillips (2009) documented the elaborate scripted behaviors that the dining participants religiously followed. They observed that this elaborate dining ritual promoted

social cohesion through observance of the symbolic ritual, and perpetuated social cohesion as the ritual was passed down from cohort to cohort, serving to initiate new members into an elite level of society and reaffirm the existing social hierarchies that exist in UK society. They also noted the rigidity marker in which deviations from or nonobservance of the ritual were highly disruptive and threatened social cohesion.

Shared rituals associated with rites of passage increase social cohesion. In the Gentina et al. (2012) study of adolescent girls who engaged in cosmetic makeup rituals, the ritual seemed to promote social cohesiveness and group stability. Other shared rituals, such as gift giving, have a positive effect on social value and cohesion between the giver and receiver (Lowrey et al. 2004; Otnes et al. 1993; for a review, see Givi et al. 2023). Gifts can establish a sense of group togetherness during times of adversity (Klein et al. 2015), and in economic terms, signal future investment in social relationships (Camerer 1988).

Large-scale group events may incorporate rituals to establish social cohesion and perpetuate group values. The week-long Burning Man festival described by Kozinets (2002) eschews commercialization by forbidding the sale and purchase of any goods within Black Rock City, operating instead on a ritualized gifting economy to enhance and enforce the values of decommodification, sacrifice, radical self-reliance, and civic engagement inherent to the event. Additionally, ritualistic traditions, such as the burning of the enormous wood sculpture in the shape of a man, unite the participants in the symbolic destruction of their material selves (Sherry and Kozinets 2004).

The social cohesive function of rituals is also associated with positive downstream effects. In one study, engaging in both secular and religious family holiday rituals was associated with increases in family closeness, involvement in the holiday experience, and overall enjoyment of the holidays (Sezer et al. 2016). In a longitudinal study of New Zealand parents and their children, greater participation in family rituals (e.g., dinner, holidays) was associated with greater family cohesion and higher levels of well-being for the children (Crespo et al. 2011).

Conclusion

When we first proposed this chapter well over a year ago, we were very excited. Psychologists had finally gotten the memo on the importance of studying ritual behavior! Two books had just come out that focused either primarily (Xygalatas 2022) or exclusively (Norton 2024) on psychological research on rituals, the books summarized recent experimental research on the causes and effects of rituals, and psychological research on the importance of rituals in consumption contexts was accumulating. We felt that the approach that psychologists take on research questions was an important addition to the large literature on rituals that had accumulated from an anthropological

approach to the study of rituals. As Xygalatas (2024) eloquently notes, the questions that psychologists and anthropologists address are similar, but the answers yield important differences. Whereas anthropologists focus on phenomenological description and interpretation, psychologists focus on explanation with a particular eye on causal fidelity. Thus, we were enthusiastic about reviewing and integrating this research and contributing to this volume.

Although we have to admit that our enthusiasm was considerably dampened (at least momentarily) by the retraction of two high-visibility papers in prominent behavioral journals on the psychological effects of ritual (Brooks et al. 2016; Tian et al. 2018), the research we have reviewed provides important information about whether and how rituals work and their effectiveness in consumption settings. Broadly, they address what Xygalatas (2022) refers to as the *ritual paradox*: people know that rituals are important to their lives and that they appear to foster emotional benefits, but they are unable to articulate why. In this review, we focused on two functions of rituals that address the why question: rituals increase perceptions of personal control, and shared rituals increase social cohesion.

The psychological, experimental approach also provides important information on the context and limits of the ritual performance itself. Consider the ritual markers of repetition, causal opacity, and meaning. The research we have reviewed suggests these markers are interrelated and synergistic. That is, the repetition of behaviors that offer no apparent utility seems necessary for meaning-making. This assertion can be inferred from the studies showing that the performance of the behavioral sequences has no effect (or a greatly reduced effect) if the behavioral sequences are not perceived as ritualized (Vohs et al. 2013; Wang 2021). In addition, these same studies find the effects on personal control and related constructs are observed even for novel rituals performed only once and enhance the consumer experience with the product. However, one performance of a novel ritual may not be sufficient to achieve social cohesion (Hobson et al. 2017). These findings are consistent with an evolutionary perspective that suggests rituals are automatically perceived as special and meaningful (Kapitány and Nielsen 2015). Ritualized actions are perceived differently than ordinary actions (Nielbo and Sorensen 2011), and even young children easily distinguish between ritual and ordinary actions (Xygalatas 2022).

In conclusion, relatively new psychological research on the antecedents and consequences of rituals has provided some important nuances to the well-established personal and social functions of rituals, elaborating on the effects of each of the ritual markers and how they interact. Building on these findings, consumer psychological research suggests that integrating rituals into product and service consumption situations can produce the same salutary effects, as some of the chapters in this volume demonstrate. We look forward to future research that further pushes the boundaries of understanding the paradoxical effects of rituals.

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