
Exploring Dramaturgy in Consumer Research

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ABSTRACT:

The dramaturgical organizing framework introduced here supplies consumers and consumer researchers with new avenues of exploration. The theatric metaphor found in impression management theory was reconfigured utilizing terminology more inherent to the discussion of consumer behavior. This dramaturgical metaphor allows consumer researcher to study an individual out in public as if one were studying an actor performing on stage in front of an audience. Consumers could also utilize this perspective. It is argued here that topics such as the individual consumer (actor), a reference group (chorus), products (props), and brands (masks) could all be studied through dramaturgy. Two case studies are presented showing how this new framework can be applied to consumer research.

Introduction

A dramaturgical conceptual framework has been adapted from impression management theory in order for consumers and consumer researchers to use in order to study consumer behavior. The theatric metaphor in Goffman's (1959) impression management theory allows the social scientist to study an individual behaving out in public as if one were studying an actor putting on a performance on a stage in front of an audience. This theatric metaphor was reconceptualized using phrases consistently touched upon in the consumer behavior literature. In other words, consumer researchers could use this dramaturgical framework to study consumers out in public as if they were studying actors on stage in front of an audience. Also, consumers could benefit from the application of this metaphor to their everyday lives. Reflexivity of one's behavior through impression management allows the individual to learn from past behaviors in order to make better decisions in the future. Plus, assessing and successfully interpreting the behavior of others allows the individual consumer to better understand how to skillfully interact with others in the future.

Theoretical Framework

Impression Management Theory

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) argued that individuals utilize techniques during social interactions in order to attempt to exert control over the perceptions of others about their identity:

I shall consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them (p. xi).

This presentation of self or management of one's impression is the basis for Goffman's impression management theory. The goal for the individual is to develop congruence between one's self-concept and the feedback one receives from the social groups to which one belongs. Therefore, the individual has to negotiate the contextual meanings during any given social interaction.

Goffman (1959) used an interesting metaphor to explain his theory. He described the individual as an actor in a play who puts on a show for others, "The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones" (p. xi). Throughout his discussion and analysis, Goffman utilized dramaturgical terms such as stage, actor, performance, character, audience, and team performance. In addition, the application of impression management theory attempts to analyze the actor while he or she is putting on a front while in a geographic setting. The actor's front is comprised of both the actor's appearance (how the actors looks) and manner (how the actor behaves). This front can consist of "clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" (p. 24). Goffman also made a point to discuss the inanimate objects an actor may use to communicate his or her role. These "sign-vehicles" (p. 1) can include the actor's costume, props, and masks.

Most of Goffman's (1959) application of impression management theory is the study of how a single actor portrays his or her intended role. However, when studying dyadic social interactions, Goffman described the researcher's scope as an analysis of an actor-to-actor performance. If one were to study the in-group/out-group dynamics of "teams" (p. 77), Goffman framed this type of analysis as a group of actors in front of or behind the stage curtain.

A researcher can also conduct a "formal sociological analysis" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15) by taking the dramaturgical stance of analyzing both the actor(s) on stage, as well as the live audience's reaction to what is occurring on stage. The audience, watching the actor's performance, evaluates whether or not each actor has succeeded in his or her intended role. If the individual is deemed successful by others in his or her role portrayal, then the individual may develop expectations of how he or she is to be treated by others in the future based on this role. However, if the actor is judged to be unsuccessful in his or her performance by the audience, the actor cannot expect to be treated by others in a certain way. His poor performance has been rejected by his audience.

As a final note on the theatric metaphor of impression management theory, no matter the researcher's focus on the actor, team, or audience, the setting always comes into play. Goffman (1959) described the setting as, "the scenic parts of expressive equipment" (p. 23). The setting involves, "furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which

supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within or upon it” (p. 22). The setting is always a part of the researcher’s analysis. It supplies a part of the definition of the situation.

Dramaturgy

Going further, the dramaturgical literature is a rich resource for consumers and consumer researchers to use in order to study consumer behavior. Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory utilizes several core components. However, many more exist and could be appropriated for studying individuals and social interactions associated with consumer behavior. For example, Hare and Blumberg’s (1988) dramaturgical framework includes the following components: stage, offstage, producer, director, playwright, actor, co-actor, role, self, protagonist, antagonist, auxiliary actor, others, team, chorus, action area, setting, and audience. Elements from both Goffman’s and Hare and Blumberg’s work were combined in order to create the dramaturgical organizing framework for the study of consumer behavior that is being introduced in this paper. Other dramaturgical elements are explained further in the discussion section.

Dramaturgical Framework for Consumer Research

A basic dramaturgical framework can be seen in the top half of Figure 1. The large rectangle represents the stage. It is divided into a *front stage* and a *back stage* by a *stage curtain*. On the stage is the *actor*, who is portraying a *role* by wearing a *costume* which may or may not include *props* and/or a *mask*. Also on stage are *other actors*. Here, there are several other actors grouped into a *chorus*. Offstage is the *audience*, who is judging the actor(s) behavior within a given *setting*. Much in line with impression management theory, the researcher can use this framework to study the actor alone, or how the actor interacts with another actor or groups of actors. Or, the researcher can study the audience’s reaction to the actor(s). In addition, the researcher can also study the actor’s use of costumes, props, and masks to portray his or her role.

At the bottom of Figure 1, one can see the dramaturgical framework for consumer behavior that is being introduced here. It is a visual diagram with the dramaturgical concepts translated into the vernacular that consumer behavior scholars typically utilize. Here, the large rectangle represents a community. It is divided into *public spaces* and *private spaces*, often by *front doors*. The *consumer* is attempting to assert his or her *identity* by wearing certain *outfits* consisting of various *products* and *brands*. The consumer’s identity is created and perpetuated through social interactions with *other consumers*. On this framework, several other consumers are grouped into a *reference group*. The consumer also comes across many *strangers in public* who judge the consumer’s behavior within a given *context*. From this, one can see that the consumer researcher can study the consumer alone, or how the consumer interacts with another consumer or groups of consumers. The researcher can also study the public’s reaction to the consumer. Finally, the researcher can decide to focus on studying the consumer’s behavior regarding their outfit, their products, and/or their brands. Converting the terminology back and forth between the top and bottom images in

Figure 1, consumers and consumer researchers are able to study the impression management processes related to consumer behavior. Each term will now be defined and explained further below.

Front Stage: Public Spaces

The front stage of the theatric production describes the physical area where the scene is taking place. In the realm of consumer research, this translates into the physical areas out in the public atmosphere where social interactions are taking place. The front stage is what is positioned in front of the audience, and the actor(s) are up on stage portraying their role(s) via their costume(s), prop(s), and mask(s). The front stage is also where the setting is constructed and provides a backdrop for the scene. The stage curtain marks a strong boundary between the front stage and the back stage. In consumer research, public spaces encompass individual(s) engaging in identity negotiations via their attire, products, and brands. The situational context supplies added meaning to these social interactions. Also, a key component of the front stage is the inherent inclusion of strangers.

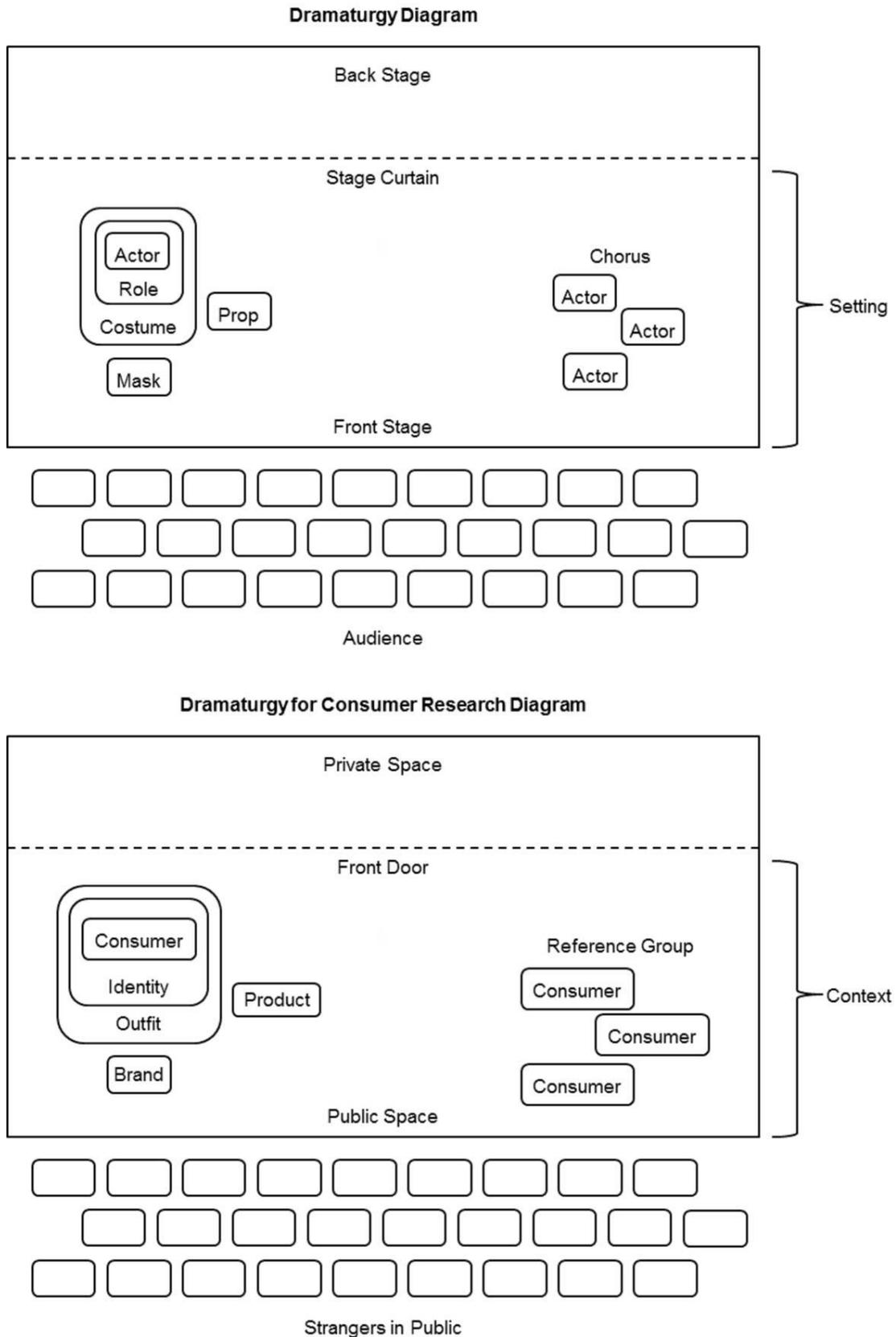
Back Stage: Private Spaces

The back stage of the theater is where the actor prepares for his or her role before he or she goes out on stage to perform, while the private spaces of consumer research is where a consumer prepares for potential social interactions that will occur once he or she steps out into public spaces. While backstage, the actor is not performing his or her role. He or she may be rehearsing, or may drop his or her act all together. Back stage the actor is allowed to be, without having to perform. A consumer exhibits similar behaviors when he or she is in private spaces. The consumer is allowed to just be, without having to perform in front of others. The consumer may rehearse new identities that he or she would like to acquire, but he or she is not required to do so.

Stage Curtain: Front Doors

The stage curtain is the permeable boundary between the back stage and the front stage. As the actor passes through the stage curtain, he or she transitions from being to performing. Once the actor has left back stage, he or she is officially acting. A consumer often transitions from private spaces to public spaces through some sort of front door. Again, this permeable boundary marks the point at which the consumer is officially performing, rather than just being.

Figure 1: Dramaturgy and Consumer Research



Actor: Consumer

The actor is the individual who is performing. He or she has a role that he or she is attempting to portray while on the front stage in front of an audience. The actor expresses his or her role through behavioral and vocal gestures as well as through costumes, props, and masks. There may or may not be other actors on the front stage with the actor. The consumer is also the individual who is performing through impression management. He or she has an identity that he or she is attempting to portray while in public spaces which often encompasses other individuals as well as strangers. The consumer expresses his or her identity through the behaviors and communication that occurs during social interactions as well as through his or her outfits, products, and brands.

Role: Identity

The role is the part or character that the actor is attempting to portray. The audience is judging the actor's attempt at role portrayal. Also, other actors, who are attempting to portray their individual roles are either helping or hindering the primary actor's performance. Likewise, a consumer attempts to portray an identity. The reaction of others (especially strangers) gives feedback to the consumer on their success of his or her presentation of self. The consumer engages in social interactions with other consumers who are also engaging in their own identity negotiations. Various roles and various identities are continuously being expressed on stage and in society.

Costume: Outfit

The actor's costume primarily consists of the clothes that he or she wears in order to portray his or her role. Clothes are embedded with social meaning and provide cues to other actors and to the audience about the actor. For the consumer, his or her outfit also primarily encompasses clothes. This attire is also embedded with social meaning and sends cues to other consumers and to strangers in public.

Prop: Product

Props describe any inanimate object that the actor manipulates and utilizes in order to further express his or her role. Props such as swords, hats, makeup, jewelry, wigs, lassos, tables, and chairs, can all be utilized by the actor. A consumer may also utilize inanimate objects such as hats, shoes, sunglasses, makeup, purses, cars, jewelry, cell phones, etc., to aid in his or her presentation of self. The individual articles of clothing in the actor's costume and the consumer's outfit could also be argued to be props because they are individual products. Vice versa, several props may be lumped together with clothing to create a single outfit.

Mask: Brand

The actor's decision to use a mask allows for a clearer signal to be sent to the audience about the role that the actor is portraying. Goffman (1959) pointed out that the actor's use of

a mask may add an element of inauthenticity to the actor, since the actor himself or herself is not able to portray the role by just using his or her facial expressions. The audience may receive a clearer signal about the role, however, they are also aware that the actor is not fully exposed. A consumer who conspicuously utilizes brands is also sending a clearer signal to others. The social meanings attached to brands may allow for more direct communication (McCracken 1986). But, just like the actor's use of a mask, the consumer's conspicuous use of a brand in his or her impression management also brings an element of inauthenticity. Other consumers (and strangers) may interpret this as the consumer's inability to portray his or her identity through traditional expressive behaviors. The consumer is in a way hiding behind the brand, like the actor hides behind a mask.

Other Actors: Other Consumers

Some theatric performances consist of a single actor. However, many others include multiple actors. Therefore, each actor has a role to perform, and each actor in the performance is scrutinized by the audience. Actor-to-actor interactions are part of the role portrayal process. Similarly, consumer researchers may study a sole consumer or consumer-to-consumer(s) social interactions. Each consumer has his or her own identity to craft and create.

Chorus: Reference Group

The chorus describes a group of actors who, together, are portraying a group role. Individual actors may or may not have variations in costumes, props, and masks. Each actor may even have an individual role as well. But, when on stage the chorus officially emerges when the audience perceives a group role being communicated. A group of consumers with a group identity is often referred to as a reference group. Like a chorus, reference groups may or may not include similarities in the individual consumers' outfits, products, and brands. Each consumer still has his or her own unique identity, but while out in public space, a reference group is perceptible to others (especially strangers) through some sense of continuity across individuals.

Audience: Strangers in Public

The audience is an often overlooked aspect of dramaturgical analysis (De Marinis and Dwyer 1987). Typically, the focus is on what is occurring on the front stage. However, the audience's reaction to the actor's performance is the acid test of whether or not a role enactment was successful. The audience is the collective body that reacts to the play. In consumer research, the notion of others or strangers in public is also an implied – but perhaps overlooked – aspect of studying consumer behavior. The aggregate societal culture that the consumer identity negotiations occur in can provide immediate, yet sometimes indirect, feedback to the consumer.

Setting: Context

The setting on the front stage describes all of the other inanimate items that are not directly manipulated by the actors on stage. The setting may be simple, intricate, straightforward, or

abstract. But, even without any actors on stage, the audience can study the setting and begin to anticipate what to expect from the performers. The situational context also supplies information to the consumer and consumer researcher about what to expect from the individual consumers as they begin to engage in social interactions and identity negotiations.

As one can see, several dramaturgical concepts from impression management theory can be directly applied to consumer research. By translating these theatric terms to the terminology more inherent to consumer research, a more precise way of analyzing, interpreting, and presenting of this data can be executed. The dramaturgical framework for consumer research that is being introduced in this manuscript supplies other consumer researchers with the tools to engage in this process.

In addition, lay consumers can also benefit from the application of this dramaturgical framework to their lives. Since all individuals engage in impression management (Goffman 1959), and all individuals are consumers, they any person can use the concepts in this framework to study their own behavior and the behavior of others around them. For example, a consumer can study his or her own daily behaviors over a period of time, and ask himself or herself, “Why did I pick that outfit for that social occasion today?,” “Why do I buy certain types of clothes, shoes, sunglasses, brands, etc.?,” “What type of role am I attempting to portray right now?,” and “Am I successful at my attempt at this role portrayal?” Also, the consumer can study the people that he or she interacts with through this theatric metaphor, and perhaps gain some revelation about why others engage in certain behaviors. For example, “Why does my boss drive a flashy BMW?,” “Why does my sister always over-dress for family get-togethers?,” “Why does my best friend sometimes copy my style of dress?,” “Why do I get strange looks from others when I wear my suit at Wal-Mart or my gym clothes at work?,” etc. Finally, the dramaturgical framework introduced here can also aid consumers in conducting an informal sociological analysis of the community that he or she lives in. By studying how strangers react to others, or by studying how context supplies actors with meaning, an individual consumer can begin to understand the holistic scope of the impression management process that occurs on a daily basis through social interactions.

Discussion

Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory was a groundbreaking and seminal theory for social psychology. His dramaturgical metaphor supplied researchers with a new perspective. However, the science of dramaturgy has been around since the beginning of theater and plays. Centauries of literature exist on this topic. Many other dramaturgical frameworks can be implemented in the future to analyze other areas and aspects of consumer behavior.

For example, a play can be further characterized by genre. These characterizations indicate to the audience ahead of time about what to expect from the actors. Over the years, the two

main types of plays were tragedy and comedy. A more modern dramaturgical outline of play types by Tennyson (1967) consists of: 1) tragedy, 2) melodrama, 3) comedy, and 4) farce:

1. In common understanding, a tragedy is simply a play that ends unhappily. But in the study of drama, it is customary to distinguish between that which is tragic and that which is merely sad...For tragic events must somehow ennoble the victim (p. 60).
2. Although the word "melodrama" means a drama with song, music has not been an essential feature of melodrama for so long that it is no longer part of the modern definition. Rather, the nonmusical characteristics of the romantic plays called melodramas have become dominant in the meaning of the word. These characteristics are sensationalism, sentimentality, and a pattern of action similar to tragedy (p. 66).
3. Comedy as a form is very old, but not so old as tragedy...The ultimate significance of great comedies is that they, too, provide an insight into the nature of the human condition and that they, too, deepen our understanding and experience of life (p. 68).
4. Low comedy, or farce, is to comedy what melodrama is to tragedy. It is a light entertainment that relies largely on visual humor, situation, and relatively uncomplicated characters (p. 74).

The situational context of a consumer's life could also be broken down into the type of social interaction or the tone of the contextual setting – whether it is serious or playful, whether it is intense or temperate. This situational context supplies a backdrop for the consumer's life and an indication to the researcher of what behaviors to expect. Advertisements could also be analyzed in this way to see which dramatic genre is being communicated.

On another note, one emerging trend in the current dramaturgical literature is the focusing on the details of traditional dramaturgical constructs. For example, Kennedy (2009) argued that more research is needed on the studying of the actor's voice:

When the voice is called upon to fulfill tasks of an extraordinary nature, such as a text in a live performance, thinking about its function, its manner, its style, or its health becomes not only significant but essential. It is not enough to train the voice; nor is it enough merely to acknowledge its existence: a theoretical understanding of voice, its nature, and its function is crucial to thinking through the challenges that accompany voice training for performance (p. 405).

How the actor communicates with others, and how that actor was trained to communicate with others is another way to apply dramaturgy to consumer behavior. How are consumers trained (i.e., socialized) to communicate with others? This type of research could be especially fruitful for studying the narrative styles associated with the in-group and out-group dynamics of the consumer in relation to a reference group.

In addition, Irelan, Fletcher, and Dubiner (2010) provided an outline for crafting a dramaturgical production book. It includes components such as a glossary of important terms and concepts, sociocultural information, playwright background, etc. This method of analysis might be of particular use for ethnographic consumer researchers as it outlines how

to assemble a deconstruction of all the large and small inter-related aspects of a play. This approach could also be especially useful for marketing and advertising practitioners, as they are the ones who assemble and *produce* the theatrical context for their brand's identity as well as for their advertising campaigns. Production note-taking could generate a wealth of new insight about how brands come to acquire social meaning.

Conclusion

Impression management theory has been used by social scientists for decades in order to better understand how individuals present their sense of self, and how others react to this presentation. The dramaturgical framework introduced by Goffman (1959) has been expanded upon by other researchers over the years. The dramaturgical framework for consumer behavior introduced here is an attempt to convert this theatriac perspective to the study of not just individuals in general, but consumers in particular. It is important to point out that this framework could also be useful to lay consumers as they go about their day-to-day behaviors. Looking at their own behavior and the behavior of others through this theatriac lens would supply consumers with a fresh perspective on the world around them. Plus, the dramaturgical literature supplies a rich resource, and therefore other concepts, theories, and models could be adapted from this literature to the study of consumer behavior. Additional research by consumer behavior scholars is needed in this area in order to fully flesh out this new perspective.

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