

### ***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.

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### **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.

In addition, the dramaturgical literature supplies a wealth of new information, theories, and models that can also be adapted to consumer research. An all-inclusive, all-exhaustive explanation of dramaturgical constructs is beyond the scope of this manuscript. However, several avenues will be explored from this literature in order to supply a number of new tantalizing areas for consumers and consumer researchers.

First, impression management theory will be meticulously discussed in order to fully understand the major assumptions and presuppositions of this theory. Then, a dramaturgical framework for consumer behavior will be introduced. It is argued here that this framework is

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a potential jumping-off point for many other future research projects. Each concept in this new framework will then be discussed separately. As one will see, the dramaturgical terms have been translated into consumer research terms while still maintaining the theatric framework. By supplying consumer researchers with this framework, they can more clearly see how to apply dramaturgy in their analysis of consumer behavior. Then, a discussion of how lay consumers can utilize this new framework for their everyday lives will be discussed. This theatric metaphor is a novel lens that they too can use to study their own behaviors, and the behaviors of others around them. Next, two case studies will be presented in order to supply an example of consumer research via a dramaturgical analysis. Finally, the implications of this conceptual framework for scholars, practitioners, and consumers will be discussed.

### 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. Impression management theory describes the process of creating and temporarily stabilizing one's identity. This process is continuous and everyone engages in it when they enter the social atmosphere.

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) explication and 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.

It is important to point out that the audience represents the *social other* in social interactions. It is assumed that the audience has never seen the actor portray this role before, and the actor does not know anyone in the audience. Therefore, the types of social interactions being studied through this lens are first impressions. The initial point of contact between the actor and the audience is a rich resource for the understanding of role portrayal and role acceptance. The burden is on the actor to get the audience on board with the role he or she is attempting to portray. The audience's burden is to connect the dots between all of the dramaturgical elements placed before them (actor, costume, setting, etc.) in order to comprehend and grasp a coherent story.

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.

Another dramaturgical example is Sarbin's and Allen's (1968) role theory. This theory is a framework for social psychology researchers and was developed in order to aid in their analysis of the individual actor's "role enactment" (p. 489). Major constructs within this theory include: role expectations, "the rights and privileges, the duties and obligations, of any occupant of a social position in relation to persons occupying other positions" (p. 497); role location, "Since roles are enacted in interactional settings, the position of others must be taken into account if he is to locate himself accurately" (p. 506); role demands, "demands for a specific role enactment" (p. 510); role skills, "How well the person performs the task depends on the relevant skills at his disposal" (p. 514); and self-role congruence, "the self must be taken into account as a factor in determining the quality of role enactment" (p. 522). Sarbin and Allen also mentioned the importance of studying the audience, role learning, multiple roles, and role conflict. As one can see, role theory is much more focused on a single actor, however Sarbin and Allen were able to flesh out this construct and have sketched out several sub-components. Other dramaturgical elements are explained further in the discussion section.

### Dramaturgical Framework for Consumer Research

Goffman's (1959) impression management theory mentioned several theatric concepts such as the actor, the audience, the setting, other actors, front-stage and backstage dynamics, and props. Hare and Blumberg's (1988) dramaturgical framework and visual diagram (p. 7) supply an organizing structure for researchers interested in studying social interaction through impression management. 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.

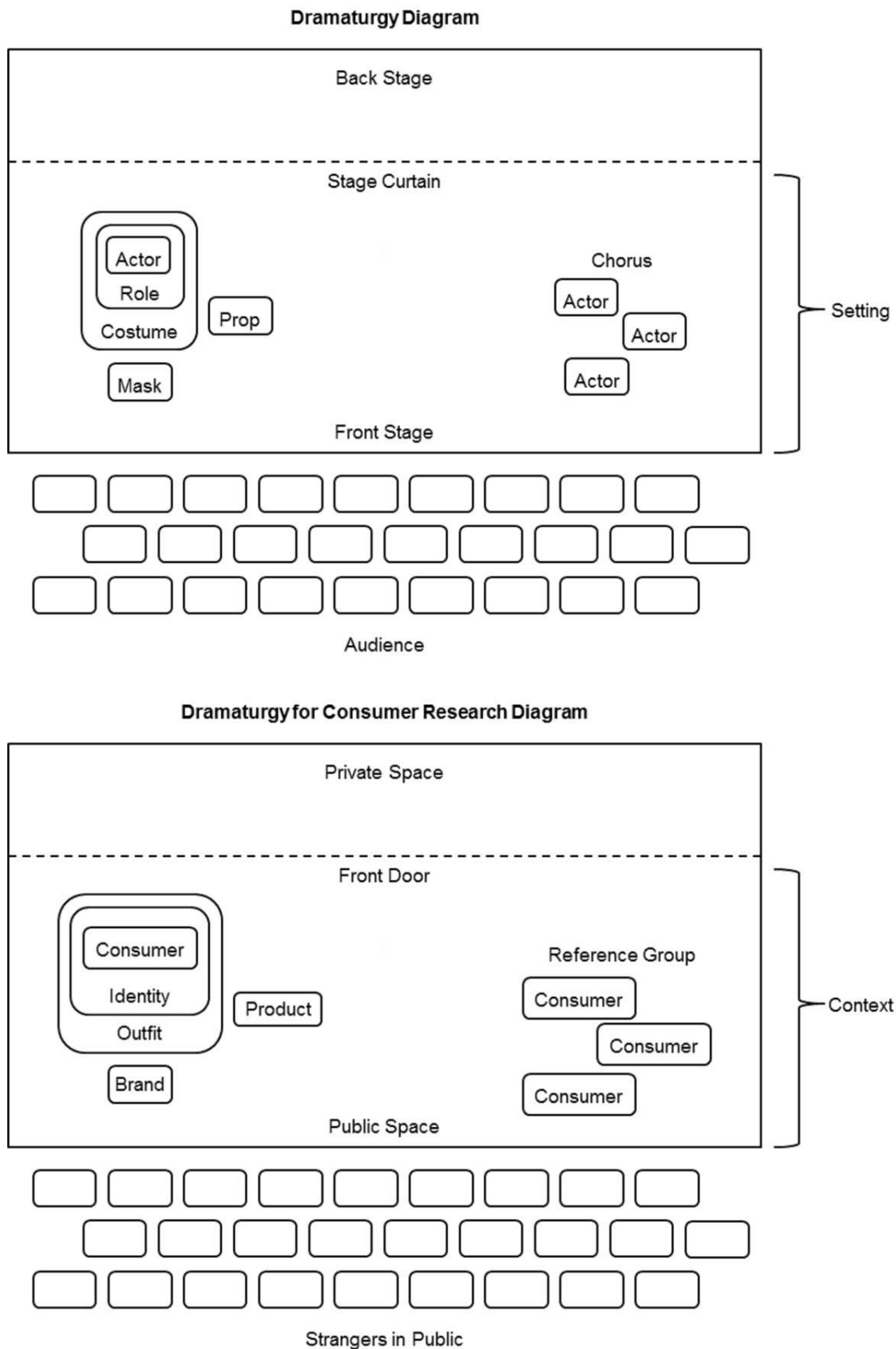
#### *Back Stage: Private Spaces*

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.

Now, two case studies will be presented in order to further the understanding of how to apply the dramaturgical framework introduced in this paper. These case studies are based on data collected for a larger study, however even the preliminary interpretations one can make from these two research participants can set an example for future dramaturgical analysis in consumer research. The goal of the initial research project was to explore how consumers use brands as a ways to express their identities. Twenty research participants were asked to create five outfits for various social settings: 1) their favorite outfit that they can wear anywhere, 2) an outfit for a typical workday, 3) an outfit for going out with friends, 4) an outfit for an evening meal with one’s family, and 5) an outfit for date night with one’s significant other. In the larger research project, the interviewer asked the research participants about the outfits they created and about the brands they utilized in each outfit. The analysis of this larger dataset is still in progress. However, by just looking at how a few of the research

participants are discussing a few of their outfits and brands, a preliminary dramaturgical analysis is feasible. In addition, case studies allow for a “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 214) in naturalistic research because they present a full and more detailed picture of the individual who is connected with some social phenomenon.

### Case Studies in Dramaturgical Consumer Research

#### Case study #1: Ryan.

Ryan is 26 years old and is driven towards film, photography, graphic design, and media production. Currently, he works for an advertising agency in the art production department. His father was a paramedic and a fireman for 25 years, and is now retired. His mother is a housewife. Ryan spent his childhood years in New Mexico, but his middle school and high school years in Colorado. In his free time, he likes to read. He is currently reading a lot of David Sedaris: *The Santaland Diaries*, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, etc. Some of his favorite TV shows are *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, *House Hunters*, *Selling New York*, *Modern Family*, *30 Rock*, and *American Idol*. Some of Ryan’s favorite movies are *Star Wars*, *Singing in the Rain*, *Moulin Rouge*, and *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. He enjoys listening to music by Brandi Carlile, Corinne Bailey Rae, Passion Pit, and Lady Gaga.

One item that was in every outfit created by Ryan was a pair of Diesel blue jeans. When asked why he preferred this brand he had this to say:

“Diesel to me, I believe first and foremost the color is really good on all of their jeans. The cut is really flattering. I think that they are really comfortable. I think Diesels are classic and so that is why I was attracted to them, because the look is more low-key but they weren’t cheap. To me, Diesel represents a very masculine energy, a very masculine brand. Everything about Diesel’s advertising and line is very masculine. This alternative...I always envision this like 25-year-old man in L.A. with messed-up hair and a ripped t-shirt with these really nice Diesel jeans.”

Utilizing more dramaturgical terms, the actor Ryan utilizes his prop Diesel jeans recurrently in his costumes so that he can channel the masculine role he seeks to portray in his everyday life. When Ryan is on the front stage, he would like the audience to view him as a low-key yet very masculine guy. One could even argue that Ryan choose the Diesel brand in particular because of the masculine meanings attached to this brand, which allows him to more clearly send out these masculine signals to his audience. In a way, Diesel is a mask Ryan can wear to clearly portray a masculine role.

During the end of the interview, while Ryan was being debriefed by the interviewer, he made an interesting comment:

“Wow, that is very interesting. So basically what you are saying is that you are arguing we are acting like we are in a play, portraying a certain emotion, a character. So we buy, wear things because of it. I have met people that have said that if they didn’t know me or didn’t get to talking to me that I appeared that I have more of a wall

up. That I am not a very social person based on what I wear. Which I found interesting because I don't believe that I consciously wear stuff that is harder to approach. I think my personality is a lot more warm and inviting than the clothes I wear. Part of it could be color. I love dark, I just like dark clothing. I feel that it is suited better for me, like my face, my hair. I feel that I have a...like if I am in a yellow shirt I feel that I don't look good."

The dark costumes that this actor puts on may sometimes communicate to other actors that he is not a sociable, approachable person. However, those actors who have associated with Ryan when he is behind the stage curtain and not performing publicly know of his extroverted, gregarious nature. But while on stage, the audience may be getting mixed cues from this actor.

Finally, Ryan made another interesting comment when he thought of himself as an audience member studying other actors on stage:

"It is interesting, the brand part, because I never really think of the brand when I put together an outfit. I think more of how it goes together and how it works together. I think it is interesting how we judge people based on what they wear. When I am in a social situation, I am generally attracted to men that don't look like they are put together, and I am generally attracted to women who do look like they are put together. I am trying to decide, potentially, is that a self-absorption thing? Or when someone cares so much about the way they look, about being together...maybe it is because I have been to L.A. so much and it has that mentality. But I would be more likely to go up and talk to a guy who was not put together than someone that was."

Masks and props may only be elements in an actor's costume, however the costume as a whole is often taken into consideration by other actors and by the audience. Here Ryan expresses a contrasting preference depending on whether he is interacting with other male actors versus female actors. He also begins to touch on the importance of setting as an influence for this preference. When his setting is Los Angeles, his preference for these different types of actors may be stronger versus when he is in another setting. Plus, the actor can often cross over into being a more passive audience member depending on the social interaction that is taking place.

#### *Case study #2: Leah.*

Leah moved around a lot growing up. Her father was a Naval officer, and she has spent parts of her life living in Virginia, California, and Iowa. She is 28 years old, and just started her own consulting business focused on social media strategizing. In her free time, Leah and her husband attend rock 'n' roll, jam band, and bluegrass concerts. One of her favorite musical groups is The Radiators. One of her favorite TV shows is *True Blood*, and one of her favorite movies is *True Grit*.

When asked about the outfit she created for a night out with her family, she made an interesting comment:

Leah: Like, a button-down shirt. I feel that it is reserved, but also you want to impress your parents. You want them to think that you are doing well, and that they should be proud of you.”

Interviewer: Kind of like a “button-down Leah.”

Leah: Yeah. (laughs)

When Leah wears her button-down shirts in front of her parents, she is using it as a prop in order to communicate to these other actors that she is successful in her role as a reserved woman. This actor-to-actor dynamic plays out over the course of an evening meal, and with her button-down shirt, Leah feels more prepared to portray this role. The actor Leah knows that success and reservation are already a part of her identity. She carries this knowledge around with her whether she is front stage or back stage. However, in the presence of certain others, Leah may don a button-down shirt in order to portray this role more clearly to others.

In addition, an Ann Taylor sweater in her favorite outfit also supplies some information about how Leah connects her outfits with her sense of self. When asked about Ann Taylor, she had this to say:

“I think it is very elegant, the brand line. I don’t like everything they have, but when I go in there I can find some things that I love. They might skew a litter older, but you know, I am getting older. I am starting to fall more into that age bracket. It is for if I am getting a dress or a suit or something really nice.”

As Leah transitions into the roles associated with her identity she is also shifting the props she incorporates into her costumes. When she puts on this Ann Taylor sweater, she is also putting on the elegance associated with this line of clothing. She admits that not everything associated with Ann Taylor clothes are a perfect fit for her, but that certain props allow her to more successfully portray this role.

### **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. Often, the Ancient Greek and Roman plays are cited as the beginning of formal public theater (Tennyson 1967). 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. According to Aubignac (1684/1968), these two genres describe the anticipated actors and their anticipated plotlines. For example, in Aubignac's time, tragedies consisted of the nobility and heroes who were, "full of disquiets, suspicions, troubles, rebellions, wars, murders, and all sorts of violent passions, and mighty adventures" (p. 140), and comedies consisted of the young and poor (often including slaves and courtesans) engaging in "debaucheries," "tricks," and "jests" (p. 140) as the characters went on some joyous adventure. However, a third type of play was beginning to be recognized during Aubignac's time. Called, "pastoral" (p. 140), "satyr" (p. 141), or "tragicomedy" (p. 139), this type of play was a combination of tragedy and comedy. Its plot was both solemn and cheerful. Characters in pastorals typically consisted of what one could argue was the middle class in those days: shepherds, gardeners, and other "country people" (p. 142).

Play genres have been refined and reconfigured over the years as new and different play scripts were crafted. For example, 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).

Other traditional play genres include historical, "a play about a historical figure" (Cohen 2011, p. 26); documentary, "a play that makes use of actual documents – court records, for example" (p. 26); and musical, "the most commercially successful genre in the American theatre today" (p. 26). More recent and non-traditional play genres which have been introduced into the dramaturgical literature include "anti-play," "grim comedy," and "tragic farce" (p. 26).

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.

Finally, the impression management literature in social psychology has had a rich history since Goffman's (1959) initial work. Topics such as actor-role portrayal (Rudman 1998; Collett 2005; Hewitt et al. 2003; Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, and Taylor 2005; Dunn et al. 2007; Lalwani and Shavitt 2009); actor-audience dynamics (Wright and Brehm 1982; Malle, Knobe, and Nelson 2007); team dynamics (Cialdini and De Nicholas 1989; Schlenker and Britt 1999; Griskevicius et al. 2006; Amanatullah and Morris 2010; Bergsieker, Shelton, and Richeson 2010; Romero-Canyas et al. 2010); and multiple role management (Leary and Allen 2011) are still current areas of interest for social science researchers.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The implications for future research in consumer behavior are endless. As one sees the multitude of theatrical and dramaturgical elements that can be translated into consumer research topics, one begins to see the possibilities of other frameworks and other constructs that can be introduced, discussed, and researched. Consumer behavior in its nature is



interdisciplinary. For years, concepts and theories from the field of psychology, sociology, biology, economics (among others) have been adapted to consumer research. This is primarily because consumers are still individuals who exist in a society. Therefore, the application of these concepts to consumer research and just supplying an element of context: the consumption experience.

More research on the actor-role-costume construct in the organizing framework introduced here could be fleshed out through the identity narrative literature in consumer research. Research has already being implemented on how brands (Swaminathan et al. 2007; Park and John 2010; Paharia et al. 2011) and products (Belk 1988; Baumgartner 2002; Ahuvia 2005) help shape and build an individual's identity. Using a theatric metaphor may generate a new level of understanding how consumers use brands and product for their identity creation and communication during their everyday lives.

One topic in consumer research that is very popular to research right now is reference groups. Research has already being done on how the individual's desire to belong to (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Briley and Wyer 2002; Epp and Price 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Tanner et al. 2008) or distance themselves from (Berger and Heath 2007; White and Dahl 2007; Argo and Main 2008; Berger and Ward 2010) certain reference groups impacts their consumption choices. By supplying consumer researchers with an additional level of analysis through dramaturgy, new insights can be gained, and new revelations discussed.

Finally, consumer culture has become a burgeoning interest for consumer researchers over the last 20 years (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Research on consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998); consumption metaphors (Holt 1995) cosmopolitan identity narratives (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) have helped consumer researchers gain important insight into the cultural complexities and idiosyncrasies associated with consumption. By using the actor-audience lens for a starting point of discussion, more insight can be gained on how the individual is socialized to take on certain roles, how that individual adapts to the social pressures around him or her to perform in certain settings, and how the individual makes sense of his or her staged environment through the interpretation of the role portrayal of other actors.

### **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 theatric 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 theatric 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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