



An exploratory investigation of Black Friday consumption rituals

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present study is to explore the collective consumption rituals associated with Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, and one of the largest shopping days in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design for this study followed the approach of psychological phenomenological interviewing. Over a two-year period, the authors, along with trained research assistants, conducted interviews with experienced female Black Friday shoppers.

Findings – Qualitative data from 38 interviews indicated that Black Friday shopping activities constitute a collective consumption ritual that is practiced and shared by multiple generations of female family members and close friends. Four themes emerged from the data: familial bonding, strategic planning, the great race, and mission accomplished. The themes coalesced around a military metaphor.

Practical implications – The findings of this study indicate that Black Friday shoppers plan for the ritual by examining advertisements and strategically mapping out their plans for the day. Recommendations for retailers are presented.

Originality/value – This exploratory investigation of Black Friday as a consumption ritual offers new insight into the planning and shopping associated with this well-known American pseudo-holiday. Findings also extend theory and research on collective consumption rituals.

Keywords Collective consumption rituals, Shopping, Holiday, Black Friday, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The term Black Friday is known to shoppers and retailers in the USA as both the day after the Thanksgiving holiday and as one of the busiest shopping days of the year. (In America, Thanksgiving takes place each year on the third Thursday in November.) Although the exact origin of the term Black Friday is unclear, urban myth indicates that the term was first used in 1965 by traffic police in downtown Philadelphia who referred to the mass of shoppers and the traffic that ensued as “Black Friday” (Apfelbaum, 1966). By the 1980s, retailers had co-opted the term and used it to refer to accounting practices in which losses were recorded in red ink and profits were recorded in black ink (Morrison, 2008). Thus, Black Friday refers to the day of the year when retailers hope to go from being in the “red” (i.e. losing money) to being in the “black” (i.e. making money).

Regardless of how the term originated, there is no misunderstanding the impact of this single day of shopping on retail sales. Black Friday sales in 2008 were at record highs, with \$10.6 billion spent by consumers on this one day alone (Sharma, 2008). In recent years, retailers have begun opening their doors as early as midnight on Black Friday in an effort to attract shoppers. This trend has resulted in the use of sales strategies that reward early shoppers. Some of these strategies include: early bird specials that reward shoppers with additional discounts during early hours of operation;



the use of loss leaders to attract shoppers; and deep discounts on a few items that are offered in limited supply and are available on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Sales tactics, combined with the consumers' desires to save money and perhaps start (or even finish) their Christmas shopping, has resulted in Black Friday becoming a celebrated consumption ritual almost as important as Thanksgiving Day. Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) used the term "consumption ritual" to describe Thanksgiving Day as a "collective ritual that celebrates material abundance through feasting" (p. 13). In fact, these authors found evidence of women planning for shopping the next day (i.e. Black Friday) as part of the rituals that take place on Thanksgiving Day.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the collective consumption rituals associated with Black Friday. The contribution of this paper is twofold. On one hand, Black Friday could be viewed as a holiday in and of itself (i.e. an extension of Thanksgiving Day). Although Black Friday is not a formally recognized holiday, many consumers do not work on Black Friday and plan the day for leisure shopping at retail stores. On the other hand, while the nature of Black Friday makes it similar to a holiday, it is also different from such days in that it is a celebration of shopping rituals (i.e. not a celebration of religious rituals or rituals celebrating the country or history; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). In addition, retailers formally recognize Black Friday as a significant shopping event for consumers through extensive planning, signage, advertising, and promotions, among other marketing activities (Wee, 2002). Thus, the present study examines Black Friday as a pseudo-holiday in which consumers celebrate the consumption rituals of shopping. Two research questions were used to guide this study:

RQ1. What is the meaning of Black Friday rituals to consumers in the marketplace?

RQ2. How are Black Friday consumption rituals similar to (and unique from) every-day shopping rituals and traditional holiday rituals?

Following is a discussion of the theoretical background and exploratory research methods used to investigate the consumption rituals of Black Friday shoppers. A discussion of key findings and implications for retailers is also presented.

Theoretical foundation: rituals

Rook (1985) published the seminal work on rituals within the field of marketing. He defines ritual as "a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (p. 252). Ritual theory has been utilized in the study of a variety of marketing contexts, including consumption, the media, weddings, divorce, holidays, gift-giving, and even shopping. For example, in Otnes and Lowrey's (2004) text on *Contemporary Consumption Rituals*, Wolburg and Treise (2004) study the drinking rituals of college students, while Nelson and Deshpande (2004) and Sandikci and Iljan (2004) investigate wedding rituals.

There is a large, growing literature on rituals with respect to holidays and consumption. In fact, there have been numerous published studies on the consumption rituals that span a wide array of holidays, such as Halloween (Belk, 1990), Kwanzaa (Pleck, 2004), Mardi Gras (Shrum, 2004), May Day (Haddad, 1999; McGrath, 2004), Thanksgiving Day (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991) and Valentine's Day (Close and Zinkhan, 2009). However, the holiday that has been examined the most in the literature is Christmas. Christmas is possibly the most studied holiday ritual because "it has become

the occasion for acknowledging important social bonds” (Lowrey and Otnes, 2004, p. 99). For today’s families that are spatially dispersed and time starved, it may be the only time of year in which serves as recognition of significant kinship ties (Lowrey and Otnes, 2004). Because of its significance, consumers often try to create a more meaningful Christmas celebration with each passing year. Lowrey and Otnes (2004) found that their female informants utilize Christmas rituals to reinforce the ideas of family stability and harmony. These authors argue that the female head of the family will “fight valiantly in the creation of their desired Christmases” (p. 118), overcoming villains and obstacles to achieve their vision. This may be unique to women, as previous research indicates that Christmas planning and shopping in general is mostly construed as “women’s work” (Fischer and Arnold, 1990).

In the literature, other researchers have similarly focused on how family is an important component of holiday rituals (Clarke, 2007; Fischer and Arnold, 1990; Mortelmans and Damen, 2001; Otnes *et al.*, 2008). For example, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) stress the importance of family and a wider interpretation of social “inclusion” (i.e. including boyfriends, pets, and friends who have “nowhere else to go”), among the college students who collected their Thanksgiving data. Similarly, Lacher *et al.* (1995) identified six dimensions of Christmas ritual with family making the list. These researchers identify Christmas spirit, religion, Santa Claus, family, gifts and decorations as the dimensions that come together to represent the ritual of Christmas. Past research by Belk (1987) also emphasizes the symbolic role of Santa Claus in the Christmas holiday ritual.

There is also a large, growing literature on rituals and gift-giving. The growth in this literature makes sense as gift-giving is often tied to holiday rituals (e.g. see Lacher *et al.*, 1995). Like holidays, gift-giving rituals are highly symbolic, imbued with emotions, and often entail a greater expenditure of time and money than for a similar product to be consumed by the buyer him/herself (Caplow, 1982). For example, Caplow (1982) argues that there are “elaborate unwritten rules” regarding Christmas gift-giving and that overtime these rules have evolved into ritual consumption practices (p. 383). Goodwin *et al.* (1990) found that the motives underlying gift-giving are based on “reciprocity and ritual” (p. 691).

Furthermore, several researchers have examined the ritual gift giving practices related to children’s requests of parents prior to the Christmas holiday (Clarke, 2008; Pollay, 1987). Such requests and increasing commercial pressures associated with the rituals of gift giving and Christmas are potentially driving an earlier start to the shopping season (Mortelmans and Damen, 2001). In fact, Harrison *et al.* (2010) found that for their informants shopping on Black Friday was important to Christmas gift giving. They showed that Black Friday was a cultural spectacle that contained elements of organizational rituals, such as roles, rules, and shopping strategies. Harrison *et al.*’s (2010) findings show that Black Friday signals the beginning of the Christmas shopping season to American consumers.

Findings on rituals and gift giving have been corroborated by research on Valentine’s Day, in which young males stated that they give gifts out of obligation, self-interest and altruism (Rugimbana *et al.*, 2002). While most studies examine the ritualistic motives of gift-givers, Wooten and Wood (2004) also found that gift receivers also follow a ritual script upon receipt of the gift. Gift recipients utilize rituals, including “elicitation, revelation, reaction, and consumption” to manage interpersonal impressions and protect the identities of the exchange partners (Wooten and Wood, 2004, p. 232).

Although there are few studies that examine shopping rituals in and of themselves, there are several studies of shopping and consumption that highlight rituals' importance. Some researchers have argued that shopping has developed into an important comforting ritual that drives much of modern life (Baker, 2006; McCracken, 1988; Miller *et al.*, 1998; Woodruffe-Burton *et al.*, 2001). In fact, shopping rituals are used by both male and female consumers in constructing their identities and sense of self (Gainer and Fischer, 1991; Otnes and McGrath, 2001). Baker (2006) finds that, "a person's view of him/herself may depend upon and be created by shopping rituals" (p. 39). Thus, shopping assists with an individual sense of self (Baker, 2006). However, "shopping rituals are also embedded in social relations" (Williams *et al.*, 2001, p. 203) and thus can also contribute to the construction of a person's social or collective sense of self as well (Baker, 2006; Epp and Price, 2008). In fact, Epp and Price (2008) find that a family's identity is constructed through rituals. Rituals (shopping included) serve to create the family identity, delineate boundaries of family membership, and build continuity of family identity over time (Epp and Price, 2008, p. 54).

Marketers are cognizant of the importance of shopping rituals to consumers, as they utilize ritual in both advertising (Otnes and Scott, 1996) and promotions (Tsang, 2003) to appeal to consumers. Clearly, rituals are important to consumers' holiday celebrations and shopping behaviours as they utilize consumption rituals to construct individual, social, and collective identities on a daily basis. Because few studies to date have examined consumer shopping rituals, and only one study to date has examined consumer behaviour with respect to Black Friday (Harrison *et al.*, 2010), the purpose of this study is to investigate the shopping rituals of consumers as they celebrate consumption on the pseudo-holiday of Black Friday.

Method

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to "describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). By nature Black Friday shopping represents an experiential consumption activity in which individual consumers voluntarily participate each year. Thus, the research design for this study followed the approach of psychological phenomenological interviewing (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005; Thompson *et al.*, 1989). This research design was chosen to gain a better understanding of how the study participants "experience, live, and display the phenomenon" and imbue the activity with "meaning" (Creswell, 1998, p. 31).

Over a two year period, the authors, along with trained research assistants, conducted 38 interviews with Black Friday shoppers. The authors utilized a "criterion" sampling procedure, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The informants had to meet the criterion of being at least eighteen years of age and had to have shopped on Black Friday more than one year in a row in order to participate in the study. To recruit the informants, the authors asked students enrolled in a consumer behaviour course to invite their friends and family meeting the above criterion to participate in a university research project on Black Friday shopping. Contact information was then obtained and transmitted to the researchers who called the prospective informants and asked them if they would be willing to participate in a phone interview for the study.

In total, 38 women completed the interviews. The ages of the informants ranged from 20 to 70 with an average age of 37.6. It should be noted that the female bias in the data set

is consistent with previous research and theory on gender roles and shopping. Several researchers have noted that shopping is generally viewed as women's work (Gainer and Fischer, 1991; Lowrey and Otnes, 2004; Otnes and McGrath, 2001).

The below list provides a list of the questions that were used to guide the interviews. The twelve questions were developed from the review of literature, informal discussions with Black Friday shoppers, and participant observations of previous Black Friday shopping activities. It should be noted that the interviews were semi-structured in that the list of questions served as a guide for the interviewer. The interviews were akin to conversations (or emergent dialogue) that unfolded around the answers of the informant. Furthermore, each informant was probed for additional information when appropriate. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. This style of semi-structured, conversational interviewing is consistent with previous research on shopping rituals as described by Baker (2006).

Semi-structured interview questions:

- How many years have you been shopping on Black Friday?
- Do you shop alone or do you shop with others?
- Describe how you plan your day of shopping for Black Friday?
- Do you take a list of what you want to buy? Do you have a list of who you want to buy for?
- How early do you usually begin shopping?
- Do you ever get to the store early and wait in line for the store to open?
- How many hours do you usually spend shopping on Black Friday?
- Do you budget for this shopping day?
- Do you find shopping on Black Friday fun, exciting or adventurous?
- Do you ever feel that Black Friday shopping is competitive? How or why might that be the case for some people?
- Tell me about the last time you got a bargain on Black Friday. What was the item and how did you find it?
- What characterizes a successful shopping trip on Black Friday? How do you know if you have accomplished your goals at the end of the day?

Table I provides demographic and summary information-related to each informant's participation in the shopping ritual of Black Friday. To ensure confidentiality, all the names reported in this article are pseudonyms.

Each interview was audio taped and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed and interpreted according to the protocol for phenomenology suggested by Moustakas (1994). First, the authors bracketed their biases and prejudgments. Next, turning to the interview data, the authors moved back and forth between the transcripts and the complete set of data to identify significant meaning statements. Using various perspectives and constantly questioning the analysis, these meaning statements were combined into larger "meaning units" (i.e. themes; Creswell, 1998, p. 150) that represent factors driving the experience. Third, the authors developed a thick description and identified specific quotes to elaborate identified themes. Finally, the authors developed an interpretive description

Pseudonym	Age	Years participated	Time begin shopping	Average hours spent
Anna	32	5	12 am	6
Jenna	21	5	4:30 am	6
Kelly	27	3	5 am	4
Jean	52	10	12 am	4
Lisa	40	12	8 am	3
Tracy	40	18	12 am	16
Sue	62	35	9 am	4
Karen	38	5	12 am	4
Kenzie	47	20	4 am	5
Darla	56	8	3 am	6
Callie	53	30	5 am	6
Sarah	60	5	5 am	5
Courtney	24	8	4 am	5
Allison	35	15	5 am	4
Kara	27	2	5 am	6
Kathy	50	25	12 am	5
Meghan	47	24	3 am	6
Brenda	56	10	4 am	4
Margaret	40	25	4 am	5
Katie	20	2	8 am	4
Sarah	45	11	5 am	4
Amy	20	4	5 am	4
Kierra	22	11	5 am	7
Ashley	21	4	5:30 am	12
Cassie	25	5	6 am	5
Maggie	22	5	2 am	8
Jill	60	35	2 am	6
Denise	50	10	8:30 am	10
Jessica	22	3	5 am	5
Laura	30	6	5 am	8
Candice	50	15	12 am	8
Tanya	28	16	4:30 am	3
Jane	70	22	5 am	3
Jade	25	7	3 am	8
Mallory	50	10	4 am	5
Debbie	30	6	4 am	6
Julie	21	6	7 am	10
Jeanie	49	30	5 am	11

Table I.
Participation in the
Black Friday
consumption ritual

of each theme in light of previous research, attempting to capture insight into informant's participation in Black Friday shopping as it relates to theory on rituals.

Findings

Similar to previous research (Harrison *et al.*, 2010), the data revealed that consumers did view Black Friday as a consumption ritual. Rook's (1985) three events that frame a ritual experience were, in fact, present in the data: an episodic string of events, a sequence of events, and repetition over time. With respect to repetition, the number of years that informants reported participation in a Black Friday consumption ritual ranged from two to 35 years with an average of 12.1 years. For example,

in her interview Callie (age 53) stated that Black Friday shopping was a “regular tradition for me and my family” and reported participating in this event for 30 years.

The episodic string of fixed events for this day of shopping began with informants searching advertisements contained in the newspaper for the best deals and continued with planning for the best shopping route. For example, Jenna (age 21) reported a well-established, fixed-sequence of events in planning her day of shopping with her Mother:

We look through newspapers and pay attention to television ads. We sit down and decide which stores are going to have the best and rarest deals. And then we plan to visit those stores first.

The data also illustrated a variety of purchasing behaviours on Black Friday. Purchases spanned from inexpensive, low involvement items (such as Christmas candy and ornaments) to expensive high-involvement goods (such as jewellery and computers). For the total amount spent shopping on Black Friday, informants reported amounts ranging from \$10 to over \$1,000.

The analysis also revealed that the meaning associated with Black Friday consumption rituals was more multi-layered and complex and Rook’s three dimensions did not fully account for the data. The data show that Black Friday consumption rituals blend traditional shopping rituals with elements of traditional holiday rituals. And yet, Black Friday consumption rituals are unique when directly compared to every-day shopping rituals and traditional holiday rituals. Black Friday consumption rituals are meaningful to consumers because of the collective, adventurous, and competitive nature of the event. As discussed below, four themes emerged from the data: familial bonds, strategic planning, the great race, and mission accomplished.

Familial bonds

Like holiday rituals, such as Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), the sharing of the Black Friday consumption rituals with family members and close friends emerged as a central theme in the data. In other words, Black Friday appears to be a collective consumption ritual. Several shoppers explained that it is a “family” event in which multiple generations of women partake in the activity each year. Traci (age 40) explains:

I’ve been doing these eighteen years. It is a family tradition that began with my husband’s family. When I met him, I fell into that tradition. The whole family goes – me, my mother-in-law, her twin sisters, and her daughter. We used to start at 5:00 but now the stores open at midnight on Thanksgiving, so we’re usually there at midnight. The last two or three years we started at the outlet mall first. I forget the numbers, but something like the first 50 people in line get a \$50 free gift. There’s usually a huge line of people that start swarming so they can get their free gift. [. . .] It’s a tradition. It’s something we’ve always done. We enjoy it. While we’re waiting in line we usually tell funny stories or help each other get our thoughts together. So it doesn’t really feel like you’re waiting in line forever because you’re not by yourself. [. . .] It’s about being together. We all survive and make it through the day together.

Traci’s description of Black Friday is laden with references to her family by marriage. She describes how the family participates in all the Black Friday shopping activities together and supports one another in the process. For example, they stand in line and tell stories or talk over their problems to pass the time. Traci also uses the word

“we” when talking about her activities on Black Friday and she references how the group “survives” the shopping event together. The use of these metaphors suggests that Traci views the Black Friday consumption ritual as something that the family bands together to overcome as if an individual or the group’s survival are threatened.

Darla (age 56) similarly viewed Black Friday as a collective consumption event. Darla also alludes to the “adventure” of the activity, another word that suggests potential peril and the need for the family to band together to survive:

It’s a fabulous adventure and I’ve gotten to the point where I have gotten my whole family involved in it. [. . .] It’s been a family adventure for the past four years. I used to go solo. [Darla indicated that she had been doing it for eight years.] But then my sisters started going along with me and I started bringing my family in. My husband gets dragged in reluctantly but my children also come along for the adventure.

Like Traci and Darla, all of the informants in this study reported that they were the primary purchaser of Christmas gifts for the family. Within the family, rituals serve to instruct younger family members in acceptable behaviour (Caplow, 1982). Black Friday is no exception. As suggested in both of the conversations above, the data show that the informants were taking part in a multi-generational, family consumption ritual in which older women, younger women, and even children were involved. These activities served as a mechanism for spending time together, communicating and reinforcing familial relationships. The use of the metaphors “survive” and “adventure” even suggest that this ritual is potentially seen as crucial to protecting the family.

Using Black Friday rituals to mark familial relationships is consistent with previous research. Daun (1983), for example, found that the buying and consuming rituals of families influenced family relationships. Furthermore, sharing the shopping ritual with family members and indoctrinating children helps to ensure that the ritual is continued in the next generation (Epp and Price, 2008). Kenzie (age 47) also explained the continuation and sharing of the Black Friday shopping ritual with family members over time:

It [Black Friday] was a tradition with my Mom and me. But, as the stores have started opening earlier, it is hard for my Mom to do such a long day. So, it is switching over to a tradition between my daughter and me. I like the idea of being able to teach my daughter how to find bargains and great deals.

It should be noted that almost all of the informants for the study were females and the majority of informants shopped with female family members or close friends. Moreover, if men were referenced in the data, as in Darla’s quote above, they were described as reluctant to participate in the ritual. This finding is consistent with previous research on gender roles in gift giving. For example, Fischer and Arnold (1990) found that women are socialized to take the tasks associated with Christmas shopping and gift giving more seriously than men. Caplow (1982) found that women do most of the shopping and decorating for Christmas and are usually the chief performers of these Christmas rituals. In essence, women are socialized to be more involved in gift-giving and shopping for Christmas (Fischer and Arnold, 1990). As suggested by Kenzie in the quote above, Black Friday consumption rituals may be one means by which women are socialized to be the leaders on family gift buying and gift giving.

Strategic planning

Each of the informants provided an in-depth description of the pre-purchase activities enacted each year prior to the Black Friday shopping experience. For the majority of the informants, planning for the event was extensive and usually consisted of examining all of the advertisements contained in the newspaper. In some cases, the informant also searched the Internet. Furthermore, planning often took place with family and friends who would be participating in the ritual. Each informant discussed how she began such planning on Thanksgiving Day, before and/or after the meal, along with family and friends who were present. Thus, the collective consumption ritual of Thanksgiving holiday appears to bleed into the shopping rituals of Black Friday, which is consistent with Wallendorf and Arnould's (1991) observations of Thanksgiving Day.

Planning appeared to be very strategic in nature. Extensive research of advertisements was the first step in the planning process, and then the informants determined the most efficient route for the various stores to visit on Black Friday. Jenna (age 21) provides an example:

We [Jenna and her mother] look through newspapers and read through all the ads. We also turn on the television to see if there are any ads for Black Friday. This year, we also checked the Internet to see what stores were going to be the great deals that day. We decide on which stores we think are gonna have the best and rarest deals. Then we plan to visit those stores first.

Like Jenna, several of the younger informants commented that they had also used the Internet in recent years as part of their pre-purchase information search. However, most noted that researching via the Internet was a relatively new component to their Black Friday activities, unlike research via the newspaper, which they have done for a number of years. Laura (age 30), for example, relied heavily on newspaper ads for her planning of the ritual:

I look through *all* [emphasis added by informant] the sales ads to see what every store has on sale. I do this even if I know that I am shopping for only one item that year. I want to know everything possible about what is on sale and where. If at this point I want something from multiple stores, then I converse with my friends the day before Black Friday. We talk over what stores we want to go to. We try to make a list of stores that everyone in the group wants to go to. Then we usually make plans to go to the store that opens first in our selected group.

Even with the recent entry of the Internet as a tool for researching sales, traditional newspaper advertising was the most utilized media for purposes of research and planning for the informant. Virtually all the informants mentioned consulting the "newspaper ads" and "sales flyers" as part of their planning for the Black Friday shopping ritual. Furthermore, all but one of the informants (i.e. 38) discussed how, after reading the newspaper ads, they planned their shopping route. The informants developed their shopping routes based on efficiency. The informants reported using one of three criteria in optimizing the efficiency of their shopping route: which store opens first, which store has the best deals, and which store is geographically closest to their home.

Extensive planning is consistent with traditional holiday rituals. For example, researchers have found extensive planning goes into the Thanksgiving Day meal (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991) and the Christmas gift giving ritual (Caplow, 1982). Thus, the extensive planning for Black Friday is somewhat consistent with traditional holiday rituals. However, such extensive planning is rare for a shopping ritual.

For example, shoppers do not often report consulting multiple sources for information on sales and “reading all newspaper ads” before a typical shopping event.

The great race

In describing their behaviour during shopping on Black Friday, the informants alluded to the competitive nature of the event in the data. Several described the shopping event like a “race” or “mad dash” to get the sale items before everyone else who is there can buy them. The descriptions of the event provided by the informants sounded something like a reality television show (i.e. *The Amazing Race*) where friends and family members are challenged to race through their shopping adventure as if they are in competition with other groups. Tanya (age 28) epitomizes this idea in her interview:

Its fun to try to get as many bargains as I possibly can in a limited amount of time. It’s like a game show. It’s competitive in the sense that everybody is trying to be near the head of the line and get the sale item before everyone else. Walmart, for example, has specific lines to buy certain products so it’s a competition to be at the head of the line so you get the product before it runs out. It’s competitive when they actually announce the time you can actually take the item and put it in your cart and that is one less for someone else.

Tanya continues on the same theme later in her interview:

I mean its [Black Friday] fun because you kinda trade stories about our interactions in different parts of the stores because we’re not necessarily all together, at the same time, in the same moment, you know. My Mom may be in electronics; I may be in clothing; and my sister may be in CD’s. And its fun when we all get out of the mad dash and have purchased our items. We then get back in the car and swap war stories.

Tanya’s description of Black Friday consumption rituals illustrates the idea of the event being akin to a competitive racing environment. Tanya describes how shoppers are trying to beat other consumers to the sale items, behaviour which comes across as aggressive and competitive in intent. Unlike traditional shopping rituals (Baker, 2006), Black Friday shopping rituals are more time constrained in that the sale takes place primarily on one day and/or until the deeply discounted product is gone from the store shelf. Thus, consumers feel an urgent need to complete their purchasing as quickly as possible.

Tanya also uses the metaphor “war stories” to describe how she talks about her individual shopping along with her other family members after they leave the store. The “war stories” metaphor points to the competitive nature of the event and alludes to the idea that that survival was potentially threatened. Telling “war stories” that illustrate the competitive nature of the event was common to several of the informants. Most of these stories illustrate competition and the aggressive nature of other shoppers in stores on Black Friday. Traci (age 40), for example, told such a story in her interview:

A couple of years back – oh gosh, it’s been probably 7 or 8 years back. We actually saw women fighting in Walmart. They were yelling at each other, pointing in each others’ faces, and each trying to get the one item into their carts. I mean it can be very competitive and you know people want to get there and get there size or item before it all gets gone.

The aggressive, competitive nature of the Black Friday consumption ritual may be what caused the informants to describe the event using terms such as “survival” and “war stories.” It is also likely that these competitive, survival-like feelings related to Black

Friday make the ritual feel exciting and adventurous to shoppers. These feelings may also heighten awareness of a challenge at hand, a mission to be accomplished so to speak, which emerged as the final theme in the data.

Mission accomplished

The informants viewed success of the Black Friday consumption ritual when, at the end of the day, they had accumulated several deeply discounted items and spent little in total. One informant (Anna, age 32) called Black Friday a “mission” that should be done without small children in tow for maximum success. Another informant (Lisa, age 40) used the words, “the ultimate shopping expedition” to describe Black Friday. For all of the informants, success of the mission is defined as having purchased numerous items at bargain prices. Kara (age 27) summarizes this idea in the following quote:

I've been doing this [Black Friday] for two years now and I LOVE [emphasis added by informant] it. I got so many good deals at Kohl's last year that it amazes me. I think I captured most of my shopping list – getting gifts for the whole family – in one day. It is great because I can get lots of things and feel like I did it all on a limited budget.

Deep discounts and sales by retailers are what motivate Black Friday shoppers. Finding those discounted items feels like an adventure, akin to a scavenger hunt. The shopper makes a plan for what she wants to buy, where she wants to buy it, and in what order, and then pursues this plan with vigour. Success is measured by whether she has accomplished the plan and thus bought several of her targeted items at deep discounts. Sarah (age 60) describes the “adventurous” nature of Black Friday:

It's adventurous finding the bargains that they advertise. They advertise them, but you still have to go find them in the store. A lot of them are not readily in sight. They're kind of tucked away sometimes. You have to go past lots of merchandise before you find that super sale item.

Later in the interview, Sarah defines what a successful Black is Friday shopping ritual:

What makes it a good day? That I get several items that are good bargains – you know, items at good prices. When I compare what the original price was, and what I got it for and I feel like I was able to save some money, that's success. Let's see, last November for example, I got men's slacks for \$15 and I got a blouse for myself for that was \$5. The blouse was originally \$40. Now that's a good bargain!

Finding bargains and deeply discounted items is an ideal goal for every shopping trip. Thus, defining a successful Black Friday shopping expedition as one of buying several deeply discounted items is somewhat consistent with traditional shopping rituals (Otnes and Scott, 1996; Tsang, 2003). However, the bargain hunting on Black Friday appears to be more extreme when compared to traditional shopping rituals. Furthermore, as described in the other three themes, the communal nature, the detailed planning, and the competitive racing aspects of the Black Friday shopping, make the event different from traditional shopping rituals.

The communal nature of the event, the detailed planning that takes place in advance, and the time bounded nature of the activity appear to be aspects of the ritual that have been borrowed in some form from traditional holiday rituals, like Halloween or Thanksgiving Day (Belk, 1990; Close and Zinkhan, 2009; Lowrey and Otnes, 2004; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). And yet, these borrowed elements of holiday rituals elements are transformed to have their own meaning for Black Friday. Thus, Black

Friday is a unique consumption ritual that blends aspects of traditional shopping rituals with elements of traditional holiday rituals in its social construction.

Discussion

This study’s exploratory investigation of Black Friday has offered new insights into the planning and shopping behaviours associated with this well-known American consumption ritual. Holistically, the data suggest that Black Friday is viewed by shoppers as something akin to a military mission. The shopper first recruits a group of bonded people (i.e. her family) to participate alongside him/her in the event (i.e. familial bonding). The group then creates a detailed plan of attack based on the most efficient route to purchase the best items on sale (i.e. strategic planning). Third, the group goes into battle, getting in and out as quickly as possible. In other words, they rise at dawn and race into the stores to grab up the deeply discounted items (i.e. the great race). Finally, the group emerges successfully, purchasing those deeply discounted items at the expense of all the other shoppers who are trying to do the same thing (i.e. mission accomplished). Interestingly, the macroscopic picture of the data emerges like a military mission, while on a microscopic level; the informants use language like “adventure, survival, mission, expedition, and war stories,” contributing to the construction of this metaphor.

Theoretically, the findings of this study show that Black Friday is a unique consumption ritual that blends elements of traditional shopping with holiday rituals. Table II presents a comparison of the elements of the Black Friday consumption ritual with traditional holiday and shopping rituals. The table shows that in certain ways Black Friday is similar to holiday rituals, such as Thanksgiving or Halloween, but in other ways, Black Friday is akin to traditional shopping rituals. It should be noted, however, that Black Friday is unique from both of these consumption rituals in that it also has elements of adventure, competition and urgency that are not present in both holiday and shopping rituals.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study indicate that Black Friday shoppers plan for the ritual by examining advertisements and strategically mapping out their plans for the day.

Black Friday ritual	Traditional holidays	Traditional shopping
Familial bonds (share ritual with family & friends)	Heavy emphasis on familial bonds	Moderate emphasis on familial bonds in that some of shopping is done alone
Strategic planning (map out detailed plan of action in advance)	Heavy emphasis on detailed planning for the ritual	Little emphasis on detailed planning for the ritual (possibly a list for the grocery store)
The great race (urgent need to purchase because of time bounded nature of event)	Moderate emphasis in that holiday rituals are often time bound	Little emphasis in that the store will be open the next day and/or the sale will be extended for a longer period of time
Mission Accomplished (success is defined as purchasing several items at discount)	Little Emphasis in that purchasing for holiday rituals (like Halloween) is less tied to discounts	Moderate emphasis in that all shoppers would like to find great deals on every shopping trip

Table II. Comparison of the different types of consumption rituals

Issues such as which stores to visit first and which store has the best deal for a sought after product are explored and a plan of action is created. When planning their shopping, all of the informants reported using newspaper advertisements or circulars as a key source for pre-purchase information. The data also suggested that the Internet is beginning to be utilized by shoppers as a method of pre-ritual research, but it appeared less important than the newspaper. This means that, although retailers are experimenting with other forms of communication as newspaper readership is on the decline, the traditional newspaper remains the primary source of information for Black Friday shoppers. Retailers should not discontinue newspaper advertising for their Black Friday sales, and may want to consider supplementing this medium with additional Internet advertising.

The findings also indicate that Black Friday shopping is a ritual shared between multiple generations of female family members, ranging from grandmothers, and mothers, to daughters. In some cases, close female family friends also participated in the ritual. Gainer and Fischer (1991) found that women who regularly participated in home shopping parties were performing both economic and social rituals. Based on their observations, they concluded that home shopping parties thrive because they represent for women a ritual that fosters friendship and a moral economy. Black Friday may be important to women because it also represents an opportunity for them to strengthen their emotional bonds with other women while participating in the task of Christmas shopping.

The familial nature of Black Friday also appeared to be a means to reinforce relationship bonds among female family members. As explained by Epp and Price (2008), a family's identity is constructed through rituals. This study's data clearly show that the family bonds together in the face of perceived adversity (i.e. survival in the competitive shopping environment) during Black Friday consumption rituals. Thus, Black Friday appears to be one means for multiple generations of females to bond together, reinforce relationships, and indoctrinate younger generations. Retailers could highlight this bonding among female shoppers by offering family shopping discounts or having buy-one-get-one free promotions for family members who are shopping together on Black Friday.

With respect to the planning aspect of Black Friday shopping, the data also show that opportunities exist for retailers and malls to develop strategies to attract shoppers and encourage them to stay longer at their store. In addition to deep discounts, prizes and other types of promotional items could be used as additional shopping incentives. Recall that the planned route for shopping was often based on which store had the best promotions. In addition to deep discounts, promotional gifts are also important to Black Friday shoppers' deals (as in the case of the outlet mall giving out \$50 gift cards). Promotional gifts and deep discounts could be offered throughout the day, instead of just during the early hours of operation, to keep Black Friday shoppers in one store for a longer period of time.

With respect to the great race component of Black Friday shopping, creating additional areas for shoppers to rest and wait on other family members who are still shopping could also be offered. Providing refreshments to family members who are waiting in line would also be beneficial for retailers. Because of the feeling of the "great race" to purchase items as quickly as possible, some shoppers forgo eating and drinking throughout the day. Free snacks and water would build goodwill for the retailer

in this circumstance, and the shopper is likely to talk about these customer service efforts via the “war stories” she will tell after the fact.

In conclusion, one of the limitations of this study is that it is culturally and contextually bound. While this research is based on a shopping tradition experienced exclusively by Americans, there may be similar types of shopping rituals observed in other countries that are worth examining. Holidays and shopping rituals from other countries might provide broadly comparable contexts to study in future research. For example, studies examining the commercialization of Ramadan in Arabic countries, Germany’s commercialization of Christmas, and January sales in the UK, would provide insights into the connection between holidays and shopping rituals. Clearly, future researchers should examine and possibly compare holiday shopping rituals from various countries.

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Further reading

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