Rituals and Nuptials: The Emotional and Relational Consequences of Relationship Rituals

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ABSTRACT Four studies reveal the benefits of relationship rituals: couples with relationship rituals report more positive emotions and greater relationship satisfaction and commitment than those without them. We show that rituals are crucial for understanding consumption practices in romantic relationships. Using a sample of romantic dyads, we identify a novel moderating role of mutual agreement, such that both members of a couple must agree that they have a ritual: different couples can see the same consumption behavior (e.g., paying for a weekly date night) as either a ritual or a routine, and the benefits accrue only to those couples who jointly view it as a symbolically meaningful ritual. We contribute to the literature on rituals by empirically documenting the relationships between rituals, specific emotions, and relationship satisfaction, and by demonstrating that the same sequence of actions can have different psychological effects due to the role of mutual agreement. Finally, we contribute to research on consumers' shared experiences by suggesting a novel mechanism for committing to such experiences: relationship rituals.

n the episode "I Call Marriage" of the television show *This Is Us*, when his friend Jack asks why his marriage ended, the character Miguel explains that for as long as he could remember, he woke up every morning to make his wife coffee—until one day, he just didn't want to make it for her. The worst part, he says, is that his wife did not even notice. To Miguel, the ritual signified their commitment to one another; the death of the ritual signaled an inevitable breakup.

Miguel's story demonstrates the close connection between emotions and rituals in romantic relationships: when they become relationship rituals, even actions as mundane as making coffee can be imbued with emotional meaning and serve as clear signals of the relationship's health. Of course, rituals are pervasive in a myriad of social relationships, from religious gatherings to business meetings, and are central to social connection (Goffman 1967). In sports, fans engage in pregame rituals to send "good vibes" to their teams. In business, group members may develop ritualistic activities, such as Walmart's morning chants or IDEO's weekly tea time, to empower themselves before a long day at work. Families also engage in rituals, whether wishing happiness to newlyweds, celebrating birthdays, or paying their respects to those they have lost. In this work, we assess the potential benefits of rituals in another social context critical to well-being, romantic relationships, and show that they are crucial for understanding consumption practices within couples.

Four studies document the emotional and relational consequences of relationship rituals, from spending money on date nights to spending time making coffee for partners. We argue that commitment to relationship rituals is associated with emotional benefits and greater romantic relationship satisfaction. Building on foundational qualitative research on interpersonal rituals, we empirically assess the mediating mechanisms underlying the link between rituals and relationship outcomes. Moreover, we explore two novel facets of rituals. First, we assess the role of mutual agreement of rituals (agreement between partners about their ritual): must both members of a couple agree, either explicitly or tacitly, on their ritual for the benefits of rituals to emerge? Second, we assess the psychological distinctness of relationship rituals and relationship routines, exploring whether the same actions—from date nights to coffee—can be be seen

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by some couples as mere routines but by others as meaningful rituals, and whether such differences have consequences for the emotional impact of those actions. We suggest that couples who adhere to relationship rituals experience more positive emotions and are more satisfied with and committed to their relationships. Finally, we contribute to research on consumers' shared experiences by showing that the majority of the rituals that couples perform involve some form of joint consumption of goods or services, extending previous research on the notion that consumption brings people together (Woolley and Fishbach 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rituals are central to social life and consumption experience in many domains. For example, families can share, prepare, and eat together, turning even ordinary meals into meaningful family rituals (Rook 1985). Similarly, members of collective groups engage in rituals that take a wide variety of forms, such as religious gatherings (Atran and Henrich 2010), sports events (Dunleavy and Miracle 1979), and organizational meetings (Islam and Zyphur 2009). This shared consumption of time serves a social function, by indicating membership, delineating boundaries (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), and enhancing social cohesion (Rossano 2012; Watson-Jones and Legare 2016). Joint consumption of time through interpersonal rituals strengthens group members' affiliation (Hobson et al. 2017), and shared consumption of a good or service can lead even otherwise arbitrary behaviors to become ritualistic and meaningful (Vohs et al. 2013)

Because rituals are a fundamental aspect of life, many disciplines—including marketing (Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Belk 2009)—have explored them. Most definitions have highlighted two key aspects of rituals: continuity over time and shared symbolic meaning. Rituals provide continuity by involving "patterned, ordered" (Tambiah 1979) and "repeated" behavior (Bossard and Boll 1950; Boyer and Liénard 2006; Rossano 2012); through repetition over time, rituals come to signal a group's subjective sense of continuity. Rituals also foster shared meaning for those who perform them because, in contrast to other repeated actions such as routines, at their core is symbolic meaning rather than instrumental purpose. That is, routines convey information about what needs to be done (Fiese et al. 2002), while rituals communicate meaning, identity, and transcendental significance (Kapitány and Nielsen 2015). Building on these conceptualizations, we define a relationship ritual as an activity that is enacted jointly by a couple, is repeated

over time, and has symbolic meaning for the couple. Across our studies, we examine the role of such rituals in romantic relationships. Since shared symbolic meaning is a critical element of a ritual, we also investigate whether mutual agreement of the relationship ritual influences relationship outcomes.

Why would rituals influence emotional and relationship outcomes? Much like rituals, emotions serve both intra- and interpersonal functions (Ekman 1992; Shariff and Tracy 2011); moreover, several research streams have suggested that engaging in rituals offers a wide array of emotional benefits for both individuals and groups. For example, rituals help people cope with grief (Norton and Gino 2014), regulate emotions (Boyer and Liénard 2008), reduce anxiety before performance (Brooks et al. 2016), and amplify holiday enjoyment (Sezer et al. 2016). Building on these findings highlighting the link between positive emotional outcomes and rituals for both individuals and groups, we posit that enacting rituals in the domain of romantic relationships is also associated with emotional benefits for couples:

H1: Engaging in relationship rituals is associated with greater positive emotions.

Consumer culture theory suggests that romantic love is "an idealistic conception that stands in stark contrast to the realist conceptions of the exchange paradigm" (Singer 1984) and thus is a particularly salient setting for symbolic behavior. Symbolic exchanges manifest in every romantic relationship, through gift-giving, rituals, co-constucted stories, or idiomatic expressions, each of which offer paradigms for fostering and maintaining social relationships (Sherry 1983; Belk and Coon 1993). Among these practices, symbolic relationship rituals have been posited to be critical for relationship maintenance, because they keep the relationship at a particular state and offer couples a shared sense of the relationship (Bruess and Pearson 2002). We therefore suggest that couples who report relationship rituals will report higher relationship quality.

To our knowledge, limited empirical work has examined the specific link between rituals and relationship quality in the context of romantic relationships. Bruess and Pearson (1997, 2002) conducted in-depth interviews to examine the categorical structures and functions of rituals in marriage and adult friendships, while Berg-Cross, Daniels, and Carr (1993) showed that divorced couples are less likely to report rituals than married couples. Extending this research on the functions of rituals in close relationships and re-

search documenting the effects of shared experiences more broadly (Ramanathan and McGill 2007; Boothby, Clark, and Bargh 2014), we posit the following:

> **H2A:** Engaging in relationship rituals is associated with greater relationship satisfaction.

We also examine the role of commitment to the relationship (Rusbult 1980; Rusbult and Buunk 1993). Just as group and family rituals foster cohesion, reinforce identity, and communicate "who we are" (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Watson-Jones and Legare 2016), we suggest that commitment to relationship rituals signals commitment to the relationship; indeed, commitment is a construct linked to relationship longevity via better communication and coordination (Robinson and Blanton 1993; Adams and Jones 1997). Because our conceptualization of rituals also incorporates the notion of longevity (repetition over time)—if nothing else, continuing to show up week after week for a relationship ritual offers evidence of continued commitment—previous research and theorizing leads us to predict that commitment plays a mediating role in the link between rituals and satisfaction:

> **H2B:** The relationship between relationship rituals and relationship satisfaction is mediated by commitment to the relationship.

In addition, we explore a previously unexamined factor that we suggest predicts the effectiveness of rituals: mutual agreement. Although rituals can increase in-group bonding, they can also highlight differences between groups and increase outgroup bias (Hobson et al. 2017). Similarly, given the human need to experience shared reality with others (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009), we suggest that couples that do not agree that they enact rituals, either explicitly or tacitly, will show lower relationship satisfaction:

> **H3:** Mutual agreement between partners on having a relationship ritual—either explicitly or tacitly—moderates the link between rituals and relationship satisfaction.

Finally, we explore why relationship rituals in particular enhance relationship satisfaction. We suggest that they hold greater psychological sway than more mundane and practical relationship routines. Although both activities are repeated over time, individuals feel that they want to engage

in relationship rituals, whereas they feel they have to engage in a relationship routine. More formally, we suggest:

> **H4:** Compared to relationship routines, relationship rituals exert a greater influence on relationship satisfaction, even when those routines and rituals are composed of similar actions.

In sum, we argue that compared to relationship routines or no rituals, relationship rituals—shared activities with symbolic meaning for couples—enhance relationship satisfaction. We suggest that couples with relationship rituals experience more positive emotions and feel more committed to their relationship, and these constructs mediate the link between rituals and relationship satisfaction. Finally, we posit that mutual agreement is important for these benefits to emerge (fig. 1).

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We test these predictions in four studies that examine the emotional and relational consequences of engaging in relationship rituals. We assess the content of relationship rituals embodying a wide range of consumption activities (studies 1, 2, and 3) and show that couples that report relationship rituals experience more positive emotions and report greater relationship satisfaction; positive emotions and increased commitment to the relationship both drive the positive association between rituals and satisfaction (study 1). We also identify an important moderating role of mutual agreement: couples who agree on having a ritual, either explicitly or tacitly, are more satisfied with their relationships than those who do not (study 2). We then show that relationship rituals are psychologically distinct from relationship routines (study 3). Finally, we show that framing activities as rituals with symbolic meaning—as opposed to routines—changes consumers' perceptions of the relationship satisfaction and positive emotions experienced by couples (study 4). For all studies, we prespecified our sample sizes, data were not analyzed until data collection was completed, and no observations were excluded. We report all manipulations and measures in the appendix (available online).

STUDY 1: RELATIONSHIP RITUALS, EMOTIONS, AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

In this first study, we assess whether engaging in relationship rituals is associated with greater positive emotions and relationship quality. Moreover, we examine the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between ritu-
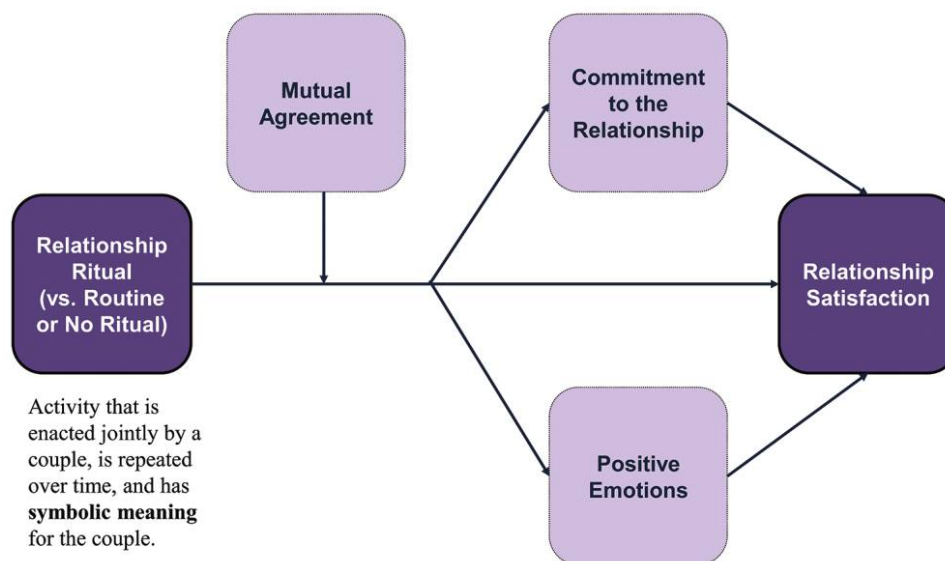
Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

als and satisfaction, testing whether participants who engaged in a relationship ritual experienced greater commitment to the relationship and more positive emotions, in turn leading to greater relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants. Two hundred participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk completed an online study in exchange for monetary compensation (M_{age} = 36.57 years, SD = 10.75; 45% male).

Design and Procedure. At the beginning of the study, participants indicated whether they were currently in a romantic relationship. If they answered "yes," they wrote the first initial of their current partner and thought about this relationship when completing the study (n = 171); if they answered "no," they wrote the first initial of their most recent partner and thought about this past relationship when completing the study (n = 29).

Participants first read our definition of a relationship ritual, based on previous conceptualizations of rituals (e.g., Tambiah 1979; Legare and Souza 2012): "an activity that you make sure to do together every so often, is repeated over time, and is something that you do because it has symbolic meaning for you." Participants indicated whether they engaged in a relationship ritual with their current/most recent partner. If they said yes, participants described a ritual they had, why they performed that ritual, how often they performed the ritual, how long they had been performing that

ritual, whether the ritual was public or private, and how many different rituals they had as a couple. If they said no, participants moved on to the next section of the study.

Right after reflecting about whether they had a relationship ritual, participants were asked to "rate the intensity of all the emotions in the list below with respect to what you feel right now, at the present moment." The list included 20 emotions from the Geneva emotion wheel (Scherer 2005): 10 positive emotions (α = .91) and 10 negative emotions (α = .93), all on a 6-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled "none" and "extremely." On the next page, participants answered the investment model scale (Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew 1998), which included four constructs: satisfaction (α = .96; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"), quality of alternatives (α = .87; e.g., "The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved with are very appealing"), investment (α = .84; e.g., "I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end"), and commitment (α = .93; e.g., "I want our relationship to last a very long time"). This questionnaire included 22 items, which were presented on the same page, in random order, and were answered on a 9-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled "completely disagree" and "completely agree"; quality of alternatives scores in this and subsequent studies were reverse coded for ease of interpretation such that higher means for these four constructs represent higher relationship quality. Finally, participants answered four relationship questions (marital status, cohabitating situation, exclusivity, and relationship length) and

demographic questions (gender and age for themselves and their partner, and income).

Results

Frequency of Relationship Rituals. Seventy percent of participants reported engaging in relationship rituals ($n = 139$). Participants who recalled their current relationship were more likely to have a ritual (77%) than those recalling their most recent relationship (24%, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 32.93$, $p < .001$; see the appendix for characteristics of rituals described).

Types of Relationship Rituals. To analyze the content of the open-ended responses, the researchers initially read those texts and created five categories of rituals consistent with previous categories identified by Bruess and Pearson (1997): (1) date/leisure activity, (2) affection/intimacy, (3) household chore, (4) thoughtful gesture, and (5) religious/spiritual. Two coders blind to the hypotheses used this list to categorize each response in this and subsequent studies (intercoder agreement = 81%; disagreements in all studies were resolved by the researchers). The most common category was date/leisure activity (63%), followed by affection/intimacy (16%), thoughtful gesture (11%), household chore (6%), religious/spiritual (2%), and other/unclear (2%) (see table 1).

Consumption in Rituals. Additionally, coders identified the following: (1) whether the activity involved consumption of a good, service, or neither; (2) whether the activity was utilitarian or hedonic; (3) whether the activity was a "should" or "want" behavior; and (4) how pleasurable the activity was (on a 7-point scale). Intercoder agreement was 77%, 96%, and 96% for the first three questions; for the last question, we computed the mean score between the two coders. This analysis revealed that 19% of the rituals involved consumption of a good (e.g., "We have a coffee ritual every morning"), 45% of the rituals involved consumption of a service (e.g., "We go out to eat and then usually go to a movie or see a band at a bar"), and 34% of the rituals did not involve consumption of a good or service (e.g., "Me and my wife pray together every night"); 2% of the rituals were coded as unclear (e.g., "date night"). Additionally, 94% of the rituals were hedonic, 98% constituted "want" behaviors, and rituals were rated as pleasurable ($M = 5.98, SD = 0.74$). In sum, relationship rituals are pleasurable shared experiences that usually involved consumption.

Positive Emotions. Participants who reported engaging in a relationship ritual reported more positive emotions overall than those without a ritual ($b = 0.76$, SE = 0.18, $t(198) = 4.32$, $p < .001$); the effect holds when excluding participants who recalled their most recent relationship ($b = 0.48$, SE = 0.20, $t(169) = 2.44$, $p = .016$). In addition, rituals significantly affected every positive emotion except relief (all $p < .10$).

Negative Emotions. Participants who reported engaging in a relationship ritual did not report fewer negative emotions overall than those without a ritual ($b = -0.01$, SE = 0.13, $t(198) = -0.05$, $p = .961$); the effect is unchanged when excluding participants who recalled their most recent relationship ($b = 0.06$, SE = 0.15, $t(169) = 0.38$, $p = .703$).

Table 1. Categorization and Examples of Relationship Rituals

Category	Example
Date/leisure	"Every Friday night we make popcorn and watch a movie together."
	"We drink wine and have Chinese food every Friday night when the kids go to bed."
Affection/intimacy	"We snuggle together in bed, watch films together, then we make love."
	"When we kiss, we do it in threes. Not sure why this started, but after 22 years, it feels really weird if it is not in threes."
Household chore	"We do housecleaning chores together and always at the same time."
	"We make sure we go to the grocery store together, every Sunday at 9am."
Thoughtful gesture	"I bring my spouse coffee in bed every morning."
	"Every morning I text her *good morning beautiful*."
Religious/spiritual	"We pray before I leave for work every day."
	"We go to church at least every other week."

Relationship Quality. Participants with relationship rituals reported greater relationship satisfaction than those without a ritual ($b = 2.02$, SE = 0.31, $t(198) = 6.58$, $p < .001$; see table 2). Similarly, participants with relationship rituals also reported having fewer alternatives to their relationship ($b = 0.97$, SE = 0.32, $t(198) = 3.01$, $p = .003$), feeling more invested in their relationship ($b = 1.61$, SE = 0.27, $t(198) = 6.04$, $p < .001$), and feeling more committed to the relationship ($b = 1.70$, SE = 0.30, $t(198) = 5.76$, $p < .001$) than those without rituals. The effects of rituals on satisfaction, investment, and commitment remained significant when controlling for marital status and relationship length and when conducting the analyses including only participants currently in a relationship (all $p < .05$). The effect of rituals on quality of alternatives is no longer significant when we exclude participants who recalled their most recent relationship ($b = 0.49$, SE = 0.38, $t(169) = 1.30$, $p = .197$).

Mediation. To assess mediation, we used the four-step process proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) in this and subsequent studies; analyses using SPSS PROCESS MACRO (Hayes 2013), 5,000 bootstrapped samples, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals yield the same results. When entering commitment in the model of relationship rituals predicting satisfaction, we found evidence for partial mediation: the effect of having a relationship ritual was reduced to $b = 0.65$, SE = 0.21, $t(197) = 3.09$, $p = .002$, and commitment was a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction ($b = 0.81$, SE = 0.05, $t(197) = 17.41$, $p < .001$; total indirect effect: $ab = 1.38$). A similar model replacing commitment for positive emotions revealed a smaller but significant indirect effect of rituals on satisfaction through posi-

tive emotions: the effect of having a relationship ritual was reduced to $b = 1.43$, SE = 0.29, $t(197) = 4.95$, $p < .001$, and positive emotions were a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction ($b = 0.78$, SE = 0.11, $t(197) = 7.06$, $p < .001$; total indirect effect: $ab = 0.60$). Finally, a model with commitment and emotions as simultaneous mediators also revealed mediation: the direct effect of rituals on satisfaction was reduced ($b = 0.50$, SE = 0.20, $t(196) = 2.46$, $p = .015$), and the indirect effect through commitment was larger ($ab = 1.25$) than the one through positive emotions ($ab = 0.27$).

Discussion

Taken together, these results show that rituals are associated with greater positive emotions and greater relationship satisfaction. We identify positive emotions as a mediator between relationship ritual and increased satisfaction; indeed, given the manner in which emotion was measured (through measures of current affective state rather than emotions experienced over time in the relationship), our results may underestimate the effect of emotions. Relatedly, commitment was identified as a second mediator of the link between enacting a relationship ritual and increased satisfaction (we replicate these results in another study reported in the appendix, where we counterbalanced the order of the rituals and relationship quality sections and show that the effect of reflecting on rituals in the moment does not fully account for the association between rituals and relationship satisfaction). In addition, our qualitative analysis of the type of rituals described suggests that the majority of ritual activities involve joint consumption of goods or services.

STUDY 2: MUTUAL AGREEMENT OF RITUALS

In study 2, we further assess the relationship between rituals and relationship satisfaction by surveying romantic dyads, which allows us to examine whether mutual agreement about having a ritual further affects relationship satisfaction.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Emotions and Relationship Quality Measures in Study 1

Construct	No ritual ($n = 61$)	Ritual ($n = 139$)
Positive emotions	1.80 (1.22)	2.57 (1.11)
Negative emotions	.47 (.71)	.46 (.91)
Satisfaction	5.28 (2.38)	7.30 (1.81)
Quality of alternatives	5.32 (2.15)	6.29 (2.09)
Investment	5.31 (2.18)	6.92 (1.50)
Commitment	6.01 (2.53)	7.71 (1.59)

Note.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Method

Participants. One hundred and eight romantic dyads completed an online study in exchange for monetary compensation ($M_{age} = 56.48$ years; SD = 13.13; 48% male). We recruited these participants through a Qualtrics research panel. Romantic dyads in our sample had been together for 28 years on average (SD = 14 years; range: 2–62 years), all were married and reported living together, and 93% were heterosexual relationships.

Design and Procedure. Qualtrics panel sent an email inviting respondents in their pool who had been flagged as being in a romantic relationship to take a survey. After the first member of the dyad completed the survey, they provided their partner's name and email address. Qualtrics administered recruitment and data collection targeting a sample size of 100 dyads; we obtained a data set that included only de-identifiable information and random IDs to match responses within dyads. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 100 romantic dyads and predetermined that we would only use responses if both members of the dyad completed our survey, so we ended up with a sample of 108 romantic dyads ($N = 216$).

After completing screening questions that Qualtrics set up to administer recruitment quotas, participants completed two surveys for unrelated projects. The third survey asked participants to report whether they engaged in relationship rituals with their current partner; if "yes," participants described a ritual they had and indicated why they performed this ritual (open-ended questions), how often they performed the ritual, and how many rituals they had as a couple. If "no," participants moved to the next section of the study, which included the investment model scale (same measures used in study 1 to assess satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, and commitment) along with three secondary relationship quality instruments (gratitude, closeness, and perceived partner responsiveness; see the appendix). Finally, participants answered questions about their current relationship (marital status, relationship length, exclusivity, and information about children) and demographics (gender, age, income, and overall happiness).

Results
Types of Rituals. Sixty-two percent of participants reported engaging in relationship rituals ($n = 134$; see table 3 for descriptive statistics). As in study 1, participants described

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Quality Measures in Study 2

Construct	No ritual ($n = 82$)	Ritual ($n = 134$)
Satisfaction	7.27 (2.00)	7.89 (1.40)
Quality of alternatives	6.82 (1.61)	6.86 (1.85)
Investment	7.25 (1.44)	7.75 (1.23)
Commitment	8.02 (1.28)	8.45 (.83)

Note.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

scribed a relationship ritual, and two coders reviewed them (intercoder agreement = 86%). The most common category was date/leisure activity (67%), followed by affection/intimacy (13%), household chore (10%), thoughtful gesture (2%), religious/spiritual (1%), and other/unclear (7%).

Consumption in Rituals. Intercoder agreement was at 71% (for consumption), 84% (for utilitarian/hedonic), and 84% (for should/want); we computed the mean score between the two coders in terms of how pleasurable they rated the activity. Closely mirroring results from the first study, 25% of the rituals involved consumption of a good, 34% involved consumption of a service, 31% did not involve consumption, and 10% were coded as unclear. Similarly, 82% of the rituals described were hedonic, 90% were viewed as "want" behaviors, and, on average, rituals were rated as pleasurable activities ($M = 5.62$, SD = 0.92).

Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. Because these data violate statistical assumptions of independence, we investigated the effect of rituals on relationship satisfaction using actor-partner interdependence models (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006). These analyses separately estimate actor and partner effects within a multilevel modeling framework controlling for each other's influence and allowing for nonindependence by correlating the errors of the two members (Pinheiro and Bates 2000). Because we had eight homosexual couples in our sample (which lead to having no systematic way to order actor-partner responses), we treated dyads as indistinguishable. Hence, to administer these models, we used a pairwise data set in which every row was one participant with two different set of columns: actor variables (i.e., their own responses to the survey) and partner variables (i.e., their partner's responses to the survey).

Replicating the results of study 1, participants who reported having relationship rituals experienced somewhat greater relationship satisfaction (actor effect: $b = 0.36$, SE = 0.22, $t(213) = 1.66$, $p = .098$) and also had partners who experienced marginally greater relationship satisfaction (partner effect: $b = 0.42$, SE = 0.22, $t(213) = 1.94$, $p = .054$); these effects are weakened when controlling for relationship length as a dyad-level covariate (actor effect: $b = 0.36$, SE = 0.22, $t(212) = 1.65$, $p = .100$; partner effect: $b = 0.42$, SE = 0.22, $t(212) = 1.93$, $p = .056$). Consistently, participants who engaged in rituals also felt marginally more invested in the relationship (actor effect: $b = 0.36$, SE = 0.19, $t(213) = 1.87$, $p = .063$; partner effect: $b = 0.23$, SE = 0.19, $t(213) = 1.20$, $p = .232$), and

committed to their relationship (actor effect: $b = 0.44$, SE $= 0.15$, $t(213) = 2.99$, $p = .003$; partner effect: $b = 0.00$, SE $= 0.15$, $t(213) = -0.02$, $p = .987$). There were no significant actor or partner effects for quality of alternatives; all effects hold when controlling for relationship length as a dyad-level covariate (see the appendix).

Mediation. To assess mediation, we build an APIM model including the actor and partner variables for rituals as predictors, commitment as mediators, and satisfaction as the dependent measure. This resulted in four possible indirect effects: actor-actor, partner-partner, actor-partner, and partner-actor; we obtained bootstrapped confidence intervals using the Monte Carlo method with the mmc R function from Selig and Preacher (2008). We find that people who report enacting rituals feel more committed to their relationship and in turn feel more satisfied (actor-actor indirect effect: $ab = 0.38$, $p < .001$). We also find that people who report enacting rituals feel more committed to their relationship; in turn, their partners also feels more satisfied (actor-partner indirect effect: $ab = 0.15$; $p < .001$; the partner-partner and partner-actor indirect effects were not statistically different from zero; see all effects in the appendix).

Mutual Agreement. Within couples, we examined the binary responses to the question of whether they engaged in relationship rituals and created three categories capturing couples' agreement: both members of the dyad reporting having a ritual ($n = 57$), both members of the dyad reporting not having a ritual ($n = 31$), and members of the dyad disagreeing on whether they have a ritual ($n = 20$). Agreement within the dyad had a significant effect on the dyad's average relationship satisfaction ($F(2, 105) = 3.82$, $p = .025$): couples who agreed on having a ritual ($n = 57$) reported being significantly more satisfied ($M = 8.03$, SD $= 1.25$) than couples who did not have a ritual or who disagreed on having a ritual ($n = 51$, $M = 7.23$, SD $= 1.77$). These results offer initial evidence that the benefits of relationship rituals emerge only when both members of the couple perceive they have a ritual.

Discussion

Replicating our findings from study 1 in a dyadic context, study 2 demonstrates that couples benefit from engaging in rituals: having a relationship ritual is associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Consistent with our third hypothesis, mutual agreement of rituals is important for the benefits of relationship rituals to emerge. Finally, rela-

tionship rituals that couples described involve some form of consumption suggesting that rituals are important tools to promote joint consumption practices within romantic dyads.

STUDY 3: RELATIONSHIP RITUALS AND RELATIONSHIP ROUTINES

Although studies 1 and 2 show that relationship rituals are associated with relationship satisfaction, it is possible that the pattern of results might have been similar when partners engage in any repeated activity, such as routines. In study 3, we investigate differences between relationship rituals and routines and show that rituals are conceptually distinct and lead to psychologically different outcomes. Specifically, we show that due to differences between the constructs of relationship rituals and relationship routines, they have different psychological effects: rituals are more strongly associated with relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants. Four hundred and four participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk completed an online study in exchange for monetary compensation ($M_{age} = 37.40$ years, SD $= 11.36$; 47% male).

Design and Procedure. This study employed the same procedure as previous studies, except that we asked participants to recall and describe one ritual and one routine. We first provided all participants with the definitions of relationship rituals and relationships routines based on prior theorizing (Dickstein 2002; Fiese et al. 2002; Denham 2003): "A relationship ritual is an activity that you make sure to do together every so often, is repeated over time, and is something that you do because it has symbolic meaning for you. A relationship routine is an activity that you do together every so often, is repeated over time, and is something that you do because it is a habit or a task that needs to be completed."

Next, participants answered questions about relationship rituals and relationship routines; the order of these two sections was counterbalanced between-subjects: first, participants reported whether they engaged in a relationship ritual/routine. If participants said "yes," they described a ritual/routine and indicated why they engaged in it. For both rituals and routines, participants reported how often they enact them, whether these rituals/routines were public or private, and how many different rituals/routines they had. The majority of individuals recalled rituals and routines in their current relationship ($n = 340$); individuals who

were single recalled rituals and routines from their most recent relationship ($n = 64$).

Next, participants answered the investment model scale questions used in studies 1–2 and the three secondary scales from study 2 (gratitude, closeness, and perceived partner responsiveness). Finally, participants answered relationship characteristics (marital status, cohabitating situation, exclusivity, and relationship length) and demographics (gender and age for themselves and their partner, and income).

Results

Frequency of Relationship Rituals and Relationship Routines. In this study, 74% of participants reported having a ritual ($n = 297$), and 81% reported having a relationship routine ($n = 327$). Participants recalling their current relationship were more likely to have a ritual (77%) than those recalling their most recent relationship (53%, $\chi^2(1, N = 404) = 16.24$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants recalling their current relationship were more likely to have a routine (84%) than those recalling their most recent relationship (64%, $\chi^2(1, N = 404) = 14.04$, $p < .001$).

Typology of Rituals versus Routines. Again, two coders analyzed the content of rituals and routines described (intercoder agreement = 72%–98%). As shown in table 4, rituals are different from routines in the type of activity; they involve more consumption of goods or services, are more hedonic, want behaviors, and are more pleasurable.

Effect of Rituals on Relationship Quality. Again, participants with relationship rituals were more satisfied than those without rituals ($b = 1.24$, SE = 0.22, $t(402) = 5.76$, $p < .001$; see table 5). Participants who engaged in rituals also reported having fewer alternatives ($b = 0.51$, SE = 0.21, $t(402) = 2.41$, $p = .017$), feeling more invested ($b = 1.02$, SE = 0.18, $t(402) = 5.60$, $p < .001$), and being more committed to their relationship than those who did not have a ritual ($b = 0.96$, SE = 0.20, $t(402) = 4.84$, $p < .001$).

Effect of Routines on Relationship Quality. In contrast, when entering relationship routines as a predictor of relationship quality measures, we observed generally weaker effects on satisfaction ($b = 0.41$, SE = 0.25, $t(402) = 1.66$, $p = .099$), alternatives ($b = 0.37$, SE = 0.24, $t(402) = 1.53$, $p = .126$), investment ($b = 0.91$, SE = 0.21, $t(402) = 4.39$, $p < .001$), and commitment ($b = 0.51$, SE = 0.23, $t(402) = 2.22$, $p = .027$). And when entering both rituals and routines as simultaneous predictors of a specific relationship quality measure, all models revealed a larger effect of rituals than routines: the effect of rituals remained significant at all $p < .05$, while the effect of routines was not significant, except for the model including investment as the outcome measure (see the appendix). All results hold when conducting the analysis controlling for marital status and relationship length, and when we limit the analyses to participants in a current relationship.

Mediation. Replicating results from previous studies, commitment mediated the relationship between rituals and satisfaction. When entering commitment in a model with rituals predicting satisfaction, the effect of rituals on satisfaction is significantly reduced (to $b = 0.42$, SE = 0.14,

Table 4. Typology of Rituals versus Routines in Study 3

Dimension	Rituals	Routines
Categories of activities:		
Date/leisure	78%	38%
Affection/intimacy	9%	4%
Household chore	1%	52%
Religious/spiritual	3%	0%
Thoughtful gesture	9%	5%
Other/unclear	0%	1%
Activities that involve consumption of a good or service	66%	50%
Activities that are hedonic	96%	44%
Activities that are want behaviors	99%	54%
Pleasure of the activity	$M = 5.79$	$M = 4.66$
	(SD = .74)	(SD = 1.30)

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Quality Measures in Study 3

Construct	No ritual or routine ($n = 36$)		Routine only ($n = 71$)		Ritual only ($n = 41$)		Ritual and routine ($n = 256$)	
Satisfaction	6.07	(2.12)	5.80	(2.41)	6.81	(1.60)	7.18	(1.75)
Quality of alternatives	6.02	(1.92)	5.82	(2.05)	5.92	(1.94)	6.48	(1.83)
Investment	5.60	(1.74)	6.01	(1.88)	6.14	(1.43)	7.01	(1.50)
Commitment	6.92	(2.20)	6.77	(2.22)	7.29	(1.44)	7.86	(1.58)

Note.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

$t(401) = 3.07, p = .002$) and commitment significantly predicted satisfaction ($b = 0.86$, SE = 0.03, $t(401) = 25.87$, $p < .001$; total indirect effect: $ab = 0.82$). In contrast, when entering routines and commitment as predictors of satisfaction, we found a smaller indirect effect of routines through commitment: the effect of routines is reduced to zero ($b = -0.03$, SE = 0.15, $t(401) = -0.21$, $p = .833$), and commitment is a significant predictor ($b = 0.88$, SE = 0.03, $t(401) = 26.89$, $p < .001$; total indirect effect: $ab = 0.45$).

We also examined results using a composite measure of positive emotions (average of gratitude and relationship closeness items; $a = 0.87$). Consistent with study 1, participants who reported having a ritual experienced more positive emotions ($M = 5.46$, SD = 1.22) than those who did not ($M = 4.63$, SD = 1.42; $b = 0.83$, SE = 0.14, $t(402) = 5.79$, $p < .001$), and this composite measure of positive emotions mediated the effect of rituals on satisfaction ($ab = 0.92$).

Discussion
In study 3, we demonstrate that rituals are psychologically distinct from routines. Although both activities involve spending time together and committing to doing an activity regularly, they have different effects on relationship quality: given their symbolic meaning, rituals more strongly predict satisfaction through commitment. Finally, we argue that the effect of rituals on relationship satisfaction is not driven by the type of activity, per se, but by how the couple conceptualizes the activity: as a ritual that has symbolic meaning or as a task that needs to be completed.

STUDY 4: FRAMING ACTIVITIES AS RITUALS OR ROUTINES
Study 4 examines whether framing activities as rituals or routines impacts beliefs about how these actions can shape relationship satisfaction and positive emotions. Because re-

lationship rituals have symbolic meaning for couples, we expected they would be more strongly linked to relational and emotional benefits, compared to routines.

Method
Participants. Four hundred and two participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk completed a short study in exchange for monetary compensation ($M_{age} = 39.11$ years, SD = 12.47; 48% male).

Design and Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine a couple, Mary and Joe, who engaged in either a relationship ritual or a relationship routine, and then read the corresponding definition: A relationship [*ritual/routine*] is an activity that they make sure to do together every so often, is repeated over time, [*and has/but does not have*] a particular symbolic meaning for them.

Participants were then asked to describe the activity that they thought comprised Mary and Joe's relationship ritual/routine. On the next page, participants completed three measures (on 7-point scales with endpoints labeled "not at all" and "very much"): "To what extent do you think that they are satisfied with their romantic relationship?"; "To what extent do you think they experience positive emotions in the context of their romantic relationship?"; and "To what extent do you think they experience positive emotions in their lives in general?" Finally, participants reported their gender, age, and relationship status.

Results
Participants indicated that the couple with a ritual was more satisfied with their relationship ($M = 5.97$, SD = 0.95) than the couple with a routine ($M = 5.60$, SD = 1.04, $b = 0.37$, SE = 0.10, $t(400) = 3.78$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants thought the couple with a ritual experienced more positive emotions in the context of their relationship ($M = 6.03$, SD = 0.87) than the couple with

a routine ($M = 5.65$, SD $= 1.06$, $b = 0.38$, SE $= 0.10$, $t(400) = 3.94$, $p < .001$). Most importantly, the effect of rituals on relationship satisfaction was mediated by positive emotions experienced in the relationship ($ab = 0.29$).

Finally, ratings of the couple's positive emotions in life did not differ between the couple with a ritual ($M = 5.82$, SD $= 0.93$) and the couple without one ($M = 5.67$, SD $= 0.98$, $b = 0.15$, SE $= 0.10$, $t(400) = 1.59$, $p = .112$).

Discussion

These results demonstrate that framing activities as rituals with symbolic meaning—versus routines that lack symbolic meaning—shapes consumers' perceptions of these activities and the couples who enact them. We replicated these results in an additional study in which participants imagined two couples: one couple with a ritual and the other one with a routine. Between-subjects, we manipulated the weekly activity linked to each: half of participants read that the ritual was cooking dinner together and the routine was working on the garden together, while the other half read that the ritual was working on the garden together and the routine was cooking together (see the appendix).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four studies show that relationship rituals are associated with greater positive emotions and greater relationship satisfaction. Despite the many differences in specific rituals that couples perform, our results demonstrate that common psychological mechanisms, namely, increased commitment and positive emotions, underlie the effectiveness of rituals in enhancing relationship satisfaction (studies 1–3); additionally, mutual agreement between partners is important for these benefits to emerge (study 2). We then show that, although both activities often involve spending time together as a couple, relationship rituals are distinct from routines: in contrast to relationship rituals, relationship routines are not as strongly associated with relationship satisfaction (study 3). Finally, we show that framing activities as rituals with symbolic meaning (as opposed to routines) changes individuals' perceptions about relationship satisfaction and emotions experienced as a result (study 4). Taken together, our results suggest that couples that engage in relationship rituals are more satisfied because they experience more positive emotions and are more committed to their partners.

This research informs our understanding of consumer behavior in several ways. We first show that rituals are crucial for understanding consumption practices in romantic relationships. Our findings show that the majority of the rituals that couples perform involve consumption of either goods or services, extending previous research that shows that consumption brings people together (Woolley and Fishbach 2017). Our results also suggest that enacting a ritual—that is, joint consumption of time itself—is more important and consequential for the couple than the specific form that the ritual takes. Our research also advances understanding of the importance of symbolic consumption in couples' emotional well-being. One reason that the details of the specific ritual in which a couple engages does not seem critical is that it is the shared meaning that the ritual induces that is crucial for relationship satisfaction. Although rituals are repeated activities—sometimes over the course of years and decades—they do not contribute to the problem of "long-term relationship boredom" (Tsapelas, Aron, and Orbuch 2009), instead linking relationship commitment and satisfaction. And our work suggests that when partners find meaning in their relationship, they enjoy hedonic benefits through repeated activities rather than feeling trapped in a pattern of satiation. Therefore, rituals may be a tool for maintaining long-term relationships in particular.

We also shed light on the central role of positive emotions in relationships, while offering a novel means to instantiate such emotions—via rituals. Prior research has shown that positive emotions offer a variety of benefits for individuals (Fredrickson 2001). In this research, we show that positive emotions induced by rituals play a consequential role in romantic relationships, and are intertwined with couple's likelihood of commitment and satisfaction. In addition to the role of emotions, we identify an additional psychological mechanism underlying the association between relationship rituals and relationship satisfaction, by documenting the importance of greater commitment in relationships. Being committed to a relationship is a critical factor that determines long-term relationship satisfaction (Rusbult 1980; Rusbult et al. 1998). Our findings suggest that relationship rituals are effective because they signal partners' commitment to their relationships.

Finally, our work also makes several contributions to research on the social and interpersonal functions of rituals. First, this research expands our understanding of consumers' shared experiences in relationships by suggesting a novel mechanism for committing to engaging in such experiences: relationship rituals. We contribute to prior research by demonstrating that shared experiences improve enjoyment (Boothby et al. 2014), enhance social relationships (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015), and drive coherent

and positive retrospection of experiences (Ramanathan and McGill 2007). Our findings indicate that relationship rituals are associated with more positive emotions and greater relationship satisfaction, especially when partners agree on their ritual, suggesting that sharing an experience is particularly important in making interpersonal rituals an effective social cohesion tool.

In addition to these contributions, our studies point to several future directions. First, research could further explore how and when couples initiate their rituals; for example, couples may enact rituals because one partner insists or because both contribute. The fact that rituals benefit couples only when there is mutual agreement suggests the importance of understanding whether one or both partners initiated the ritual. Because couples' interdependence may promote or inhibit the other partner (Rusbult, Finkel, and Kumashiro 2009), understanding how origination turns into adoption that turns into regular practice—and how this influences the emotional impact of relationship rituals—warrants further investigation. Second, relationship rituals may have other effects that enhance relationship satisfaction. For example, rituals may improve partners' self-control, an important aspect of close relationships (Finkel and Campbell 2001) or may lead to positive illusions in romantic relationships, causing individuals to embellish their partners with idealized qualities, which then lead to a variety of self-fulfilling effects (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996). It is also possible that couples who have established relationship rituals may already be satisfied and committed in their relationship; experimental interventions are needed for further investigation of the causal link between relationship rituals and satisfaction.

Third, future research should examine the manner in which rituals' influence on specific emotions—not assessed in our studies—affects relationship satisfaction. For instance, excitement is a particularly important emotion for relationship quality (Aron et al. 2000), while other emotions such as hope and disappointment might also determine success of long-term relationships. Future studies should focus on how relationship rituals affect these emotions, which in turn have important consequences for relationship quality. Finally, relationship rituals may also provide couples with strategies to cope with uncertainty and change, for example, when experiencing important life changes such as becoming parents or sending their children to college. Relatedly, rituals in response to negative events—such as rituals surrounding the loss of loved ones and the end of relationships—might also play a helpful role in mit-igating the negative emotional consequences of relationships that have ended (see Norton and Gino 2014). Because rituals provide emotional benefits, they may be especially helpful at times when members of couples must cope with new circumstances.

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