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The dynamic interplay between structure, anastructure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Through an interpretive investigation of a religious pilgrimage, we explore the dynamic processes at play when consumers navigate the continuum between structure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences. We do so by identifying anastructure, which is a conflict-laden transient category that lies between the poles of antistructure and structure. Within anastructure, consumers can experience four types of tensions, which we unpack, and we also introduce four resolution strategies that consumers deploy to resolve those tensions. We additionally show that structure can lead to, and foster, benefits that are traditionally associated with an antistructure experience. This allows us to develop implications for our overall understanding of consumption within extraordinary experiences in general and pilgrimages specifically.

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1. Introduction

This study advances a current academic discourse in consumer research about the prevalence and interplay of antistructure versus structural tenets in extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; O'Guinn & Belk, 1989; Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012). An extraordinary experience refers to a special class of hedonic consumption experience that entails high levels of emotional intensity, that is meaningful and unique, and that has the power to foster participants' self-transformations (Arnould & Price, 1993; Carù & Cova, 2003; Ulusoy, 2016b).

When consumer researchers started to study extraordinary experiences, they found it useful to draw upon Turner's (1969, 1973) notion of antistructure. Antistructure is the dissolution of the institutionalized social structure that consists of an arrangement of hierarchical positions between individuals (Turner, 1969, 1973; Van Gennep, 1960). As an alternative social structure, antistructure derives from or participates in a certain strain of romanticism and creates communitas (Turner, 1969, 1973). Through the theoretical lens of antistructure, consumer researchers conceptualized extraordinary experiences as fostering positive and collaborative interactions between consumers, who share

common goals, enjoy the attenuation of differences and status between them, immerse in communitas, and experience sacred, detached moments that transcend commerciality (see Tumbat & Belk, 2011 for a full review). Thus, consumer researchers have stressed a communitarian, collaborative and harmonic view of extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kozinets, 2002; Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Ulusoy, 2016b).

Recent consumer research has shown, however, that an antistructure perspective can fall short in understanding extraordinary consumer experience in today's marketplace (Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). In their study of the extraordinary experience of climbing Mount Everest, for example, Tumbat and Belk (2011) portray a consumer experience that manifests in conflict, competition and individualistic mind-sets. Rather than experiencing idealistic and communal benefits, as suggested by Turner's (1969) antistructure, Mount Everest climbers engage in individual, singular, competitive and restrictive behaviors and interactions that are better described through Turner's (1969) notion of structure. Although being emotionally intense, meaningful, unique and self-transformative (Arnould & Price, 1993; Carù & Cova, 2003), this consumer experience is dominated by structural elements. It is marked by limited interactions between consumers, who pursue different goals, accentuate differences and status between them, focus on the self, and experience secular moments fraught with commerciality (Tumbat & Belk, 2011).

These studies suggest that consumers draw from structural and antistructure elements in their construction of extraordinary experiences, which may produce tensions (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). What we

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do not know from past research, however, is how structure and antistructure relate to each other in extraordinary consumer experiences. That is, we do not have a systematic understanding of the nature of the tensions consumers experience or the strategies used to overcome these tensions. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the dynamic process of negotiating these tensions. First, we seek to conceptualize the tensions, and second, to investigate if and how consumers negotiate and cope with these tensions. We chose the religious pilgrimage in/to Medjugorje as the research context because a pilgrimage is a pre-modern extraordinary experience that is prototypically antistructural (Turner, 1973), and it provides consumers with the opportunity for transcendence, immersion and transformation—key characteristics of extraordinary experiences (Ulusoy, 2016b). At the same time, the increasing market-mediation of contemporary pilgrimages makes structural characteristics likely to emerge (Kedzior, 2013). Pilgrimages can also help us to understand other contexts where consumers seek immersion, transcendence and transformation, such as responsible volunteering (Ulusoy, 2016a) or music consumption (Ulusoy, 2016b).

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, we identify anastructure, which is a conflict-laden transient category that lies between the poles of antistructure and structure and allows us to unpack a set of four tensions and four resolution strategies that consumers deploy. Second, we show that structure can lead to, and foster, benefits that are traditionally associated with an antistructural experience. Understanding the underlying processes involved in extraordinary experiences provides valuable insights for marketers operating in today's experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), in terms of how to design compelling and rich experience packages for consumers (Megehee, Ko, & Belk, 2016).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Structure and antistructure

The theoretical perspectives of “antistructure” and “structure” emerge from Victor Turner's analysis of rituals (1969) and rites of passage in the context of (mainly Christian) pilgrimages (Turner, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1978). A pilgrimage is a special experience of religious life where people leave habitual and recurring situations to intensify their understanding of faith (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). In contrast to highly structured, everyday social life, a pilgrimage is a prototypical example of what Turner (1969) refers to as antistructure (Turner & Turner, 1978).

Antistructure is inherently sacred and liberates individuals from daily constraints and profane social structures (Turner, 1969). Antistructure is marked by liminality and *communitas*. Liminality refers to a phase of transition (*rites de passage*) (Van Gennep, 1960), and *communitas* refers to a sense of community that develops when individuals from various backgrounds convene, share ritual experience and create special social bonds (Turner, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1978). Structure exists in ordinary, everyday experiences and events that occur on a regular basis such as going to work or going to school. Structure thus is marked by profaneness rather than sacredness (Eliade, 1959). Structural everyday life acknowledges conformity to social roles and adherence to social status (Turner, 1969).

Consumer culture researchers have traditionally framed and analyzed extraordinary consumption experiences as an escape from mundane structural life (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Kozinets, 2002; Ulusoy, 2016b). In this view, extraordinary experiences are powerful events in which “*communitas* emerges as a characteristic of a social antistructure that frees consumers from their normal roles and statuses through shared ritual experiences and common goals” (Tumbat & Belk, 2011, 45; Turner, 1969) and where consumers feel secured by subcultural “*camaraderie*, trust [and] respect” (Ulusoy, 2016b, 250).

Recently, however, consumer research on extraordinary experiences witnessed a shift in perspective. Tumbat and Belk (2011) demonstrate that extraordinary consumption experiences are not always escapes from structure. They find that the extraordinary consumer experience fosters conflict, competition and individualistic mind-sets rather than communal and romantic ideals, which maintains the commerciality of the extraordinary experience. Canniford and Shankar (2013) support this view, arguing that not all consumers desire romantic, liminal or communal experiences of nature. Instead, while some consumers describe their experience of nature as “magical” (1055) and “guided by a desire for escape from everyday life” (1056), others focus more on structural characteristics, such as the erection and accentuation of boundaries for intruders (1062) and a competitive performance ideology (1060).

In sum, existing research tells us that extraordinary experiences can be structural or antistructural: fostering collaborative versus limited interactions; pursuing shared versus different goals, attenuating versus emphasizing differences, immersing in *communitas* versus focusing on self, and experiencing sacred, detached moments that transcend commerciality versus experiencing secular, profane moments that maintain commerciality. Yet, we do not know the tenor of how antistructure and structure relate to each other in extraordinary experiences.

2.2. Coexistence of structure and antistructure, and the resulting tensions

Turner (1973, 1974) acknowledges the coexistence and interrelatedness of both structure and antistructure. He argues that both “can coexist and modify one another continuously over time” (Turner, 1974, 279); and that processes arise that relate the two, “whereby antistructure is periodically transformed into structure and structure into antistructure” (Turner, 1974, 284). Prior consumer research has suggested the potential coexistence of, and consumers' desire to resolve, (opposing) structural and antistructural characteristics in extraordinary consumer experiences (Kozinets, 2002; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). For example, Kozinets (2002) investigation of the Burning Man festival demonstrates that the prevalence of a caring, sharing community fosters an antistructural consumer experience, while the prevalence of commercialism in the form of entry fees enforces structure within the experience. Similarly, Weinberger and Wallendorf's (2012) exploration of intracommunity gifting within the antistructural Mardi Gras festival community reveals that although participants experience a sense of a *communitas*, they also feel that commercial influences and sponsorships are turning their moral economy into a market economy. Both studies exemplify the coexistence of antistructural and structural elements, but suggest they are in opposition to each other. Thus, there has not been an investigation of Turner's notion that structure and antistructure can transform into each other, and how that would come about.

2.3. Pilgrimage as extraordinary experience

A pilgrimage is a quest for spiritual experience that involves a geographic journey (Scott & Maclaran, 2013). This collective movement in the company of like-minded pilgrims creates a sense of separation from the mundane world and allows the pilgrim to return home “cleansed and renewed” (Scott & Maclaran, 2013; Turner & Turner, 1978, 30). Since the 1970s though, pilgrimages have changed their nature. Pilgrimages have developed into a significant segment within the tourism industry that is continuously growing and that faces increasing marketization. What remains unchanged, though, is that individuals still view pilgrimages as extraordinary experiences, involving a series of meaningful contacts—human, physical, geographic and emotional (Frey, 2004). Pilgrims still desire to break from the everyday (Della Dora, 2012) and achieve a sense of spiritual fulfillment (Digance, 2003).

Yet analyses of pilgrimages reveal contradictions and destabilize boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the sublime and the

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