The Dynamic Interplay Between Structure, Anastructure and Antistructure in Extraordinary Experiences

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Through an interpretive investigation of pilgrimages, we dissolve the underlying structural-antistructural duality in conceptualizations of extraordinary consumer experiences. We introduce complementary and conflicting coexistences of structure and antistructure; we identify anastructure as a transient state that lies between the poles; and we show that structure can lead to antistructural benefits.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This study advances a current academic discourse in consumer research about the prevalence of antistructural versus structural tenets in extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; O’Guinn and Belk 1989; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Weinberger and 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 and Price 1993; Carù and Cova 2003).

When consumer researchers started to study extraordinary experiences, they found it useful to draw on Turner’s (1969; 1973) notion of antistructure (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh’s 1993). 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 and Belk 2011, p. 45; Turner 1969). Recent consumer research has shown, however, that an antistructural perspective can fall short in understanding extraordinary consumer experience in today’s marketplace (Tumbat and Belk 2011; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012; Canniford and Shankar 2013). Rather than experiencing idealistic and communal benefits, as suggested by Turner’s (1969) antistructure, Tumbat and Belk (2011) show that Mount Everest climbers engage in an individual, competitive and restrictive experience that is better described through Turner’s (1969) notion of structure, which is marked by profanity rather than sacredness (Eliade 1959).

How do structure and antistructure relate to each other in extraordinary consumer experiences? In an effort to map out how consumers resolve the tensions inherent in the coexistence of structure and antistructure, if they can indeed coexist, we pursue three goals. First, we seek to systematically explore if and how structural and antistructural tenets coexist in an extraordinary consumption experience. Second, we strive to understand potential tensions that result from coexisting structural as well as antistructural tenets in extraordinary experience. And third, we seek to investigate if and how consumers negotiate these tensions when constructing their extraordinary experience.

We investigated these issues in the context of a religious pilgrimage in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. We engaged in ethnographic fieldwork via three data collection methods. First, we draw on participant observation (cf. Arnould & Wallendorf 1994). One of the authors immersed herself as a pilgrim for four days, where she lived through the pilgrimage experience by herself, observed fellow pilgrims’ behaviours, listened to their stories, asked questions, and took field notes as well as photographs. Second, we conducted narrative semi-structured interviews with seven female and two male pilgrims. Pilgrims were asked to elaborate on the pilgrimage experience (Flick, 2009). Lastly, we draw on introspective data from two diaries of female participants and from one author diary. Both participating pilgrims as well as the author wrote down regular records of their daily activities.

Our results demonstrate structure and antistructure coexist in two different ways: complementary and conflicting. Whereas the complementary form of coexistence is unproblematic, the conflicting form of coexistence gives rise to a field of tensions. We identify this field of tensions as anastructure, which is a transient category that lies between the poles of antistructure and structure. This allows us to unpack a set of four tensions and four resolution strategies that consumers deploy to negotiate anastructure. Tensions result either from the undesired excess of structural or antistructural elements, or a lack thereof. Resolution strategies arise in the form of emphasising structure, transforming structure, reorganizing antistructure and structure, and increasing structure. Finally, we show that structure can lead to, and foster, benefits that are usually associated with an antistructural experience, both directly in complementary coexistence, and indirectly in the conflicting coexistence of antistructure and structure via the four resolution strategies.

Together, in this study, we explore the dynamic processes at play when consumers navigate the continuum between structure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences. We propose three contributions that advance our understanding of consumer experiences as well as advance theorizing about how antistructure and structure work. First, we demonstrate that structure and antistructure can coexist non-problematically within a consumer experience. Second, we systematically identify the nature of the tensions and strategies that are used to ameliorate them. Third, we demonstrate that consumers can achieve the results that Turner describes as coming from antistructure from structure as well.

REFERENCES
Flick, Uwe (2009), An Introduction to Qualitative Research, London: SAGE.

