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Triggers of Extraordinary Experiences Within a Sub-Cultural Consumption Event

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Male bikers attending Biketober Fest in Daytona Beach, Florida were used to investigate triggers of extraordinary experiences and the effect of these experiences on sub-cultural values. Pursuit of motorcycle knowledge, biker camaraderie, and sexual openness of women triggered extraordinary experiences that, in turn, had a positive influence on belief in sub-cultural values. Triggers were also interrelated. Knowledge had a positive influence on camaraderie and reciprocal relations were found between camaraderie and women's sexuality. Finally, sexuality had a positive influence on values. Implications for the formation and maintenance of consumption communities are drawn from the findings and future research areas are suggested.

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Triggers of Extraordinary Experiences Within A Sub-cultural Consumption Event

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Extraordinary experiences (EE'S) are extremely happy (Maslow 1961; 1970), highly enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1997), and fully absorbing (Quarrick 1988) mental states of being that exceed consumers' day-to-day levels of emotional intensity. There has been growing recognition (McAlexander and Schouten 1998; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) that extraordinary experiences are influential in the formation and maintenance of consumption communities (e.g., Kozinets 2001; McAlexander and Schouten 1998; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005; Oliver 1999).

Extraordinary experiences involve absorbing, flow, and peak experiences. Privette (1983) demonstrates that peak and flow experiences have overlapping characteristics—included in these characteristics is absorption, which she describes as critical to full involvement and is “perhaps equally pertinent to enjoyment and peak experiences.” (Privette 1983, p. 1363). In this study, we are not looking to differentiate between the three constructs—rather, we are looking at the common links between the three that tap into the construct of extraordinary experiences. The common characteristics between these constructs of interest to this study are happiness, enjoyment, fun, pleasure, involvement, and absorption (Privette 1983; Privette and Sherry 1986). To date, there is virtually no research on what facilitates extraordinary experiences in a consumption-related context. An understanding of what triggers extraordinary experiences would provide insight into consumption communities that goes beyond our current knowledge. The current study works to uncover triggers of extraordinary experiences.

Last year an estimated 200,000 plus bikers attended Biketober Fest (Daytona Beach Chamber of Commerce 2006) to celebrate the brotherhood of bikers. It is a male-dominated event that, as the name implies, revolves around motorcycles, specifically the Harley-Davidson brand. Many bikers return each year for the social activities which include: barbeques and pig-roasts, band concerts, wet t-shirt and bikini contests, women's mud and coleslaw wrestling, tattoo and “beer-belly” competitions, motorcycle races, and custom bike shows, among others. But more than offer hedonic activities, Biketober Fest was chosen for study because of its potential for extraordinary experiencing (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), representing one of the largest motorcycle rallies worldwide. These factors make this event an ideal context for this study.

Using a random street intercept on the most commonly-traveled thoroughfare, a representative sample of the biker population was obtained. Structural equations methodology (Joreskog and Sorbom 2003) was employed to test the hypotheses. Both exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factory analysis (CFA) were both completed with results as expected. The model's fit to the data is respectable [$\chi^2(193)=255.50, p=.002; RMSEA=.035; GFI=.92; AGFI=.90; NFI=.92; NNFI=.97; CFI=.98$].

Consistent with prior work on triggers of peak and flow occurrences (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Laski 1961; Maslow 1971), the pursuit of cutting-edge knowledge facilitates EE's. Consumption events such as Biketober Fest enable attendees to discover the latest advances in bikes and custom bike-building first hand. Pursuing motorcycle knowledge also had a positive influence on

biker camaraderie, the strongest relationship in the model. With so many bikers in attendance, the common interest that brings them together leads to social interaction where thoughts and ideas about bikes are exchanged.

Biker camaraderie had a direct positive influence on Biketober Fest participants' EE's. This finding is inline with other research (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Lanier et al. 1996; Yeagle et al. 1989) suggesting that sociable interaction with others may help to facilitate EE's. The appreciation of others both during and after an extraordinary experience may also help to explain why comradeship and a sense of brotherhood are so strong within the biker subculture. To be acquainted with someone before striking up a conversation is not necessary. The strength of the subculture gives members the ostensible right to treat every other biker as a friend or brother.

Previous work (Laski 1961; Maslow 1971; Quarrick 1989) recognizes that sex or even the possibility of sex (Lanier et al. 1996) can trigger EE's. In this study, women's sexual openness had a direct influence on the EE's of Biketober Fest participants. Additionally, women's overt sexuality had a positive effect on bikers' sub-cultural values. It is reasonable that women's sexual openness reinforces a dominant set of values including male domination and sexual freedom (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Maslow (1971) noted that individuals who experience peaks frequently perceive it as a kind of perfection, or close to it. Events like Biketober Fest may likely be perceived as approaching a kind of sub-cultural perfection that is consistent with bikers' preferred state of being (see also Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1997) where men dominate and women are subservient.

Based on the rationale that common interests spark comradeship, women's sexuality was initially thought to have a positive influence on biker camaraderie. On the alternative, reciprocal relations were evaluated in favor of a model whereby the effects of sexuality and camaraderie are symmetrical. Some flashing we observed during data collection was clearly instigated by male bikers who encouraged women to bare their breasts. Sexuality, however, did not directly impact bikers' subcultural values when tested for significance. To further clarify relations between the constructs, several researchers adopted the role of participant-observer to document flashing incidents. While on two occasions women openly displayed their breasts with little provocation, multiple observers agreed that in most instances there was interplay between the bikers and women involved.

One remarkable characteristic of EE's is the self-centering that the individual experiences. The EE's of Biketober Fest participants had a direct positive influence on their belief strength in sub-cultural values. According to Schouten and McAlexander (1995), to be members of a consumption subculture they must believe in a common set of values. The finding that bikers' EE's at the event reinforced dominant values of freedoms and machismo provides quantitative support for their ethnographic findings on the biker subculture. Although previous research suggests a positive directional relationship resulting from these triggers (Privette 1983, McAlexander Schouten and Koenig 2002, Maslow 1970), we acknowledge the possibility exists that these are consequences of extraordinary experiences as well.

From a managerial perspective, consumption events designed to facilitate EE's can enhance brand loyalty and consumption frequency (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Laski 1962; Maslow 1971). Pleasurable events designed to keep consumers apprised of advances in products/brands or provide piquant sexuality can trigger experiences that are extraordinary. Alexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) show that brandfests can enhance brand communities, lead to more positive relationships between consumer and product/brand/company/other consumers, and increase feelings of integration into the brand community. Absorbed in the activities, Biketober Fest participants enjoyed themselves and felt free to do what comes naturally. For bikers, many of these activities contain strong sexual overtones. We should note here that, although sex appeals are used to promote a variety of products/brands, but for some consumption communities (e.g., Marti Gras goers and Spring Breakers), sexuality this overt would probably be too intense.

Through events that facilitate EE's, a reciprocal set of benefits between consumers and the organization accrues over time. Alexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) show that Jeep has benefited in community-building efforts through high repurchase rates of participants. Harley-Davidson's involvement with the biker subculture provides a good example. Harley maintains a strong presence at Biketober Fest and similar biker events by staging and funding many activities and seminars. In contrast to a mundane daily existence, the emotional responses EE's generate are extremely desirable (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1997; Maslow's 1968) so consumers want to repeat them. The finding that respondents in the sample had attended the event an average of seven times lends support. In turn, the organization's product/brand is associated with the extremely positive emotions that consumers experience. More than purchase, consumers are likely to purvey their knowledge of the product/brand to close family members, friends, and other constituents.

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