

# Experiential marketing and the changing nature of extraordinary experiences in post-postmodern consumer culture

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## Abstract

Prior experiential marketing research suggests that extraordinary consumption experiences take place within antistructural frames, i.e. outside the realms of everyday life. This paper challenges that notion, through an ethnographic study of consumers attending the Primavera Sound music festival in Barcelona, Spain. We demonstrate that festival attendees perceive their experiences to be extraordinary, despite these occurring within 'everyday' structural frames. Consumers' extraordinary experiences unfold through their negotiation of a series of structural and antistructural marketplace tensions, including commercialism/authenticity, ordinary/escapist, and immersion/communing. We outline the theoretical implications of our research for the changing nature of extraordinary consumption experiences, in light of post-postmodern consumer culture. We conclude with managerial implications and provide suggested avenues for future research.

## Keywords:

Experiential marketing, consumer culture theory, extraordinary experiences, music festivals, post-postmodernism

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# **Experiential marketing and the changing nature of extraordinary experiences in post-postmodern consumer culture**

## **1. Introduction**

The rise of postmodern consumer culture has been associated with the proliferation of experiential marketing approaches (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Consumer behavior research no longer positions consumers as purely rational information processing agents, but also as emotional and irrational human beings who are influenced by symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The study of *extraordinary experiences* - those that stand outside the structures of everyday life as memorable and/or magical - has come to be one of the core postmodern theorizations of experiential marketing research (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002).

However, the ability of postmodern discourses to explain contemporary market and consumption phenomena has started to be questioned; some researchers highlight the need for novel theoretical approaches to explore the rise of a post-postmodern era (Cova et al., 2013; Cronin et al., 2014; Skandalis et al., 2016a). Recent studies incorporate understandings of contexts where both structural and antistructural characteristics come into play, giving rise to negotiable marketplace tensions and eventually leading to extraordinary consumption experiences (e.g. Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Such tensions include nurturing joint versus limited interactions, pursuing common versus singular goals, searching for communal integration versus individual immersion, and living sacred and authentic versus profane and commercial experiences (Husemann et al., 2016).

These studies signal the need for renewed understandings of extraordinary experiences which move beyond a focus on the deconstructive ethos of postmodernism (Cova et al., 2013; Skandalis et al., 2016a), towards a post-postmodern framing; thereby allowing for a meaningful status that maintains the structures of everyday life. Our paper fills this gap by directly exploring the nature of such consumption experiences. Through an ethnographic study at the Primavera Sound music festival (hereafter ‘Primavera’), we illustrate how attendees’ extraordinary festival experiences unfold through the embracement of marketplace tensions, which exhibit both structural and antistructural characteristics. Understanding such experiences as located within the everyday allows us to present an alternative understanding of extraordinary experiences, one that can explain the changing nature of consumption experiences in the wake of post-postmodernism. We unpack the extraordinary festival experience, developing our findings around various marketplace tensions and attendees’ experiences within everyday structures. Finally, we present the key challenges that post-postmodern consumer culture brings to existing understandings of extraordinary consumption experiences and provide a set of practical implications.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1 Postmodern consumer culture and experiential marketing*

Postmodernism has provided a fruitful theoretical lens for the study of consumer behavior and consumption-related phenomena (Brown, 1993; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In line with the core theoretical foundations of the postmodern discourse (cf. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), experiential marketing research has focused on studying consumers as emotional and narcissistic human beings who utilize

consumption as a way to construct meaningful experiences (LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Pine and Gilmore, 2011). In fact, the rise of experiential marketing approaches (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) can be considered as one of the main tenets of postmodern consumer culture. This stream of research has been strongly associated with the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition within the marketing field (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and includes explorations of the multi-sensory, experiential and emotive dimensions of consumption behavior (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Prior CCT studies have predominantly explored extraordinary experiences (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Kozinets, 2002; Schouten et al., 2007) by drawing on Victor Turner (1969; 1974) and Roger Abrahams' (1986) conceptualizations of structure/antistructure and ordinary/extraordinary experiences respectively. Structure refers to the overall organization and frame of society. Structural characteristics, such as everyday rules, practices, and norms correspond to social roles and statuses, and are associated with ordinary experiences. Antistructure stands in opposition to everyday life and transcends social structures, thus leading to extraordinary experiences (Caru & Cova, 2003; Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Ordinary and extraordinary experiences have been most commonly theorized as standing within and outside the realm of everyday life respectively (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2013). Extraordinary experiences possess a set of antistructural characteristics (Turner, 1969; 1974) such as positive and collaborative interactions among participants, attenuated boundaries, similar and shared goals, a sacred nature which escapes the logics of the market, and a diminished sense of individuality in favor of communal ideals (Schouten et al., 2007; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). These experiences have been previously defined as special types of hedonic

consumption activities that are emotionally intense, unique, memorable and transformative (Arnould & Price, 1993; Husemann et al., 2016; LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Tumbat & Belk 2011). Any intentions and expectations are vague due to the emotional intensity, spontaneity and transformative nature of the resulting experience (Arnould & Price, 1993).

One of the main reasons for participation in extraordinary experiences has been ‘consumers’ overt (and often critical) engagement and transcendence of the structures in which they exist’ (Lanier & Rader, 2015, 494). Postmodern consumers are said to be in constant search of liberatory experiences which help them to escape the limits and constraints of everyday life and reinvent their sense of self (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Turner, 1969). Any ascribed meanings and/or values are related to personal transformation and renewal of self (Arnould & Price, 1993). Kozinets (2002) illustrates how the Burning Man festival is experienced as a spatio-temporally bounded utopian community enabling festival attendees to escape the market; Arnould and Price (1993) highlight the transformative potential of extraordinary experiences via consumers’ participation in high-risk leisure activities; and Belk and Costa (1998) theorize the modern mountain men community in the Rocky Mountain American West as a fantastic consumption space, co-created by its participants who achieve a sense of self-transformation.

These studies offer an idealistic and communal approach to the study of extraordinary experiences, which largely result from their antistructural ethos. They rely upon the antistructural dimensions of the experience in order to ‘break the monotony of the everyday, surpris[e] the consumer and stimulat[e] the emotions’ (Caru & Cova, 2003, 279), positioning them on the antistructural side of the antistructure/structure continuum (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). However, an emerging

stream of CCT research has started to build an alternative understanding of experiential consumption, which is grounded within a series of marketplace tensions that are negotiated by consumers, and lead to—different types of extraordinary experiences. Such studies signal the potential beginning of the end for postmodern discourses and the emergence of a post-postmodern era, which calls for alternative theoretical discourses for understanding consumption experiences.

## *2.2 Marketplace tensions in the post-postmodern era*

Recent studies suggest that the marketplace tensions experienced by consumers (e.g. community versus the market, authentic versus commercial, nature versus culture) emerge through structural and antistructural characteristics (e.g. Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). These include ‘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’ (Husemann et al., 2016, 2). This work moves away from traditional conceptualizations of extraordinary experiences, instead illustrating how extraordinary experiences occur once consumers successfully negotiate a series of marketplace tensions that play along the structure/antistructure continuum. Tumbat and Belk (2011) investigate those tensions that arise between clients and guides in mountain climbing and describe how extraordinary experiences result from the forced cooperation between clients and guides; a situation that backgrounds antistructural dimensions, such as communal ideals, and foregrounds structural ones, such as a heightened sense of individuality. In their study of religious pilgrimages, Husemann

et al. (2016) identify anastructure as a transient state that is positioned in-between the poles of structure and antistructure and within which consumers experience and resolve four types of marketplace tensions, whilst creating the contours of their extraordinary experiences. They illustrate how pilgrim consumers navigate between structural, anastructural, and antistructural positions, ‘reframing and reinterpreting structure’ (Husemann et al., 2016, 3368). This exercise allows them to eventually reach a balanced experiential state towards the antistructural end of the continuum.

The above studies emphasize the interplay between the structural (ordinary) and antistructural (extraordinary) dimensions of consumption experiences, but the antistructural ethos is generally foregrounded in line with dominant postmodern experiential marketing discourses (Caru & Cova, 2003). Even when structural dimensions of such experiences are foregrounded by consumers, this is from an individualistic point of view and aligns with the deconstructive ethos of postmodern consumer culture (Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). We acknowledge that some consumers desire extraordinary experiences, such as climbing Mount Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), engaging in river rafting activities (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993), or experiencing spirituality (Husemann et al., 2016), precisely for their antistructural ethos. However, there is more limited understanding of instances where extraordinary experiences develop meaningfulness while remaining *within* the structures of everyday life.

Renewed theorizations associated with the rise of post-postmodern discourses are marked by a reconstructive spirit, entailing sincerity, enthusiasm, and engagement (Cova et al., 2013; Cronin et al., 2014; Skandalis et al., 2016a). Cronin et al. (2014) illustrate how women reconstruct their everyday food experiences through the unification of paradoxical tensions, which arise from maintaining heteronormative

feminities. This recent research stream indicates the increasing importance of consumption experiences which are grounded into structural frames in light of post-postmodern consumer culture.

Our specific interest in this paper is to further investigate extraordinary experiences that achieve a meaningful status for consumers whilst maintaining the structures of everyday life, namely those positioned towards the structural end of the structure/antistructure continuum. Focusing on Primavera, a festival setting marked by its strong urban character (within the Barcelona metropolis), we progress understanding of how post-postmodernism can shed light on extraordinary experiences. We position the festival as an extraordinary experience that emerges through the embracement of a series of marketplace tensions, which stand in-between structure and antistructure, but remains located within everyday and structural frames. Our aim is to unpack the nature of the extraordinary festival experience and explain how it differs from traditional conceptualizations of extraordinary experiences in experiential marketing research.

### **3. Research context and methods**

Extraordinary experiences in musical spaces have received considerable attention in the literature, with music generally theorized as offering an escape from everyday life and its associated constraints (Goulding & Saren, 2016; Goulding et al., 2009; Ulusoy, 2016). Data are drawn from an ethnographic study at Primavera, with the first-named author attending the annual festival three times. The festival's urban location, Parc del Forum, differentiates it from other international popular music festivals (such as Coachella in the US, and Glastonbury in the UK), which are



predominantly held in countryside settings. The line-up features artists and bands from the indie music field (Hesmondhalgh, 1999).

Our data collection followed an interpretive approach and consisted of ethnographic data, including hundreds of informal interactions, written fieldnotes, artifact material, photographs and video recordings. The first-named author also conducted on-site interviews with 25 informants. These on-site interviews were sometimes conducted individually and at other times in ‘friendship groups’ of two or three music fans. Typically these interviews were short - around 10 minutes long - but others lasted up to 45 minutes. We also conducted off-site semi-structured interviews with 15 music fans who had visited Primavera on at least one occasion during the three-year period of the study, with most having attended twice or more. These were generally longer than the in-situ ethnographic interviews, with the majority lasting 60-90 minutes.

Researcher fieldnotes, informal interactions and artifact material (e.g. festival program, entrance wristband, festival online content) helped us to develop an understanding of the cultural context of Primavera. Through this we built an emic interpretation of the festival experience (O’Guinn & Belk, 1989) and the interviews enabled us to further develop our understanding. For the on-site interviews, the focus was driven by the immediate context, engaging with informants’ lived experiences. Off-site interviews began with a grand tour question (McCracken, 1988) focused on individuals’ Primavera experiences and their general interest in music. Further questions allowed us to follow up particular theoretical lines of enquiry as well as the cultural understanding which emerged from the on-site data collection.

Interview informants were recruited using convenience sampling within the field (i.e. approaching music fans) and a combination of purposeful and snowballing

sampling techniques off-site (i.e. ensuring participants had attended Primavera, and seeking referrals). All interviews were transcribed and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. On-site interviews were conducted with a diverse range of nationalities - including US, British, Greek, Italian, Russian, and Spanish informants - reflecting the international make-up of the festival audience; the age of informants ranged from 21-36 years old. All these interviews were conducted in English, except for three that were conducted in Greek (and subsequently translated into English), given this was both the informants' and researcher's native language.

We followed standard grounded theory analytic procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a prevalent approach to analysis in interpretive consumer research (Spiggle, 1994). On a practical level this entailed the authors coding material separately, writing notes and memos (O'Guinn & Belk, 1989) and working back and forth between emergent data and extant literature (Spiggle, 1994; Kozinets, 2002). We then compared each other's analysis to develop a shared agreed interpretation. As we developed emergent themes (e.g. early versions of marketplace tensions) we treated them as pieces of the overall puzzle of our analysis of the festival experience (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Using multiple sources of data collection helped us to ensure the integrity and plausibility of our findings. In particular, we sought to include examples of different data sources in order to illustrate that 'there is some degree of well argued "fit" between the information (or data), and the explanation offered' (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008, 133). In prioritizing our ethnographic narrative, our findings predominantly include extracts from the off-site interviews, where informants presented more developed discussion of the key themes; we supplement these extracts with our fieldnotes, on-site interviews and visual data.

#### 4. Findings

*“I really like being in the city, if it wasn’t in Barcelona I probably wouldn’t be interested in going, if it was in the middle of nowhere [...] the festival doesn’t start until 5pm, so you have the whole day to be in the city. It’s one of the reasons why we went there, because it was in Barcelona so we could see the town, and do the touristy stuff.”* (Mary, OfSI<sup>1</sup>)

For Mary, an important aspect of her Primavera experience is her ability to combine the music with more everyday tourist experiences in Barcelona. This allows her to compartmentalize her time in an organized manner (e.g. evenings dedicated to the festival itself). Engaging with structure whilst embracing marketplace tensions provides a key means for informants to derive value from their festival experiences.

We identify three interconnected marketplace ‘tensions’, namely commercial/authentic, ordinary/escapist and immersion/communing. These tensions play along the structure/antistructure continuum of the festival experience (Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011), while the experience itself remains located in everyday structural frames. While previous work has positioned such tensions as problematic and contradictory, we propose that their co-existence contributes to the (meaningfulness of the) experience itself. In fact, it is the very navigation of these tensions and the ultimate positioning of the experience within structural frames which lead to the creation of extraordinary festival experiences.

In the Primavera context, festival attendees do not go back and forth between structure and antistructure seeking to resolve marketplace tensions (Husemann et al., 2016); indeed this is not their intention and doing so would negatively impact the meaningfulness of the experience. Rather, attendees live out the structural and

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<sup>1</sup> OfSI: off-site interview.

antistructural characteristics (Skandalis et al., 2016a), positioning their festival experiences within everyday life; hence our informants experience marketplace tensions in-between structure and antistructure.

We note that the analytic categorization of these marketplace tensions is not necessarily mutually exclusive, but followed for the sake of the ethnographic narrative (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). As such, the marketplace tensions should be understood as being interconnected, thus viewed ‘as an interactive gestalt,’ which explains the contours of the festival experience (Arnould & Price, 1993, 41). We organize our findings around the three marketplace tensions and followed this with a discussion of the structural aspects of the Primavera experience, differentiating the post-postmodern extraordinary experience from prior conceptualizations of extraordinary experiences.

#### *4.1 Embracing marketplace tensions*

##### *4.1.1 Commercial/authentic*

Our ethnography revealed that the festival experience plays along a set of structural and antistructural dimensions which align with the paradoxical aesthetics of the indie music field; namely the commercial nature of the festival versus the (largely) authentic character of its musical line-up. Our participants described their festival experience as grounded in both commercial and authentic frames, referring to both interchangeably. This alludes to the ‘boundary work’ (Cummings, 2008) which festival organizers perform when they decide which bands to invite and which sponsors to approach. Attendees struggle to articulate their initial surprise - and sometimes discontent - at what amounts to a lack of a festival-vibe at Primavera. While most other music festivals also engage with the market, this commercial frame

manifests itself more clearly in this city-based site and at points threatens to distract from the authenticity that attendees seek (or are accustomed to):

*“If you ever want to go to a festival, you want to go for the atmosphere, the party more than the music, that’s the epitome of it [...] it’s pretty nuts, you feel like you’re on [a] completely different planet, whereas at Primavera I was very aware that I’m on planet Earth, I was reminded by corporate sponsorships, reminded by fashions.”*

(Brad, OfSI)

Brad distinguishes Primavera from the romantic and communal ideals of prevalent conceptualizations of extraordinary festival experiences (Kozinets, 2002). He cites the overt commercialization of the festival - ‘corporate sponsorships’ with multi-national companies such as Heineken and Ray-Ban (Figure 1) - as well as the dress codes of the attendees, which align not only with the aesthetic principles of the wider indie field (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), but also with the urban setting in which the festival takes place. These concerns link the festival with the everyday, rendering Brad ‘aware that I’m on planet Earth’ and hinting at a more ordinary festival experience. Dennis elaborates further:

*“It’s just like a bit impersonal, there’s no festival feel, the booze is too expensive so you have to smuggle in whisky; things annoy me about it even though the line-up is obviously one of the best of the festivals of the year.”* (Dennis, OfSI)

Dennis emphasizes the lack of a ‘festival feel’, which would enable him to create the sacred and authentic experience necessary to transport him outside everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kozinets, 2002). However, our participants’ responses suggest that this non-extraordinary nature is counter-balanced by the quality and eclectic nature of the festival’s line-up:

*“Primavera is a collection of interesting bands that just happen to be in one place. That’s how it feels, it feels curated but it doesn’t feel like they’re trying to please anyone, it doesn’t feel like they’re trying to draw a festival crowd, it just feels like whoever is putting the list together is genuinely enjoying that music, so they want to bring them, and I think I identify with that really strongly.”* (Michael, OfSI)

Michael differentiates the Primavera ‘festival crowd’, both emphasizing its non-extraordinary nature and strong musical character. For him, the festival’s eclectic music character denotes a sense of authenticity (e.g. curated yet without a commercial ethos), a key dimension of the indie music field. As per the paradoxical aesthetics of the indie music field (Skandalis et al., 2016b), the commercial/authentic tension experienced by festival participants plays a major role in defining the contours of the festival experience; further positioning Primavera as an extraordinary experience within everyday life.

-----Insert Figure 1 here-----

#### *4.1.2 Ordinary/escapist*

Prior research has dealt extensively with the escapist and/or transformative qualities of consumers’ romantic experiences with nature (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi et al., 1993). In Primavera, a marketplace tension operates between attendees’ experience of music festivals as escapes from the everyday, and the co-existence of ordinariness. For Brad (mentioned earlier) this provides a ‘jolt’ to his expectations of an escapist festival experience. Many participants reflected on the

predominantly natural and rural settings of other music festivals, which contrast with Primavera's urban location:

*"It's a bit strange because everything is just concrete. If you are at a festival in England, it's in the middle of a countryside, it's green everywhere, fields and grass, and you can sit anywhere and chill out, and at Primavera that was a bit of hard work because there was nowhere to sit, there are those tiny little patches of grass and it feels quite intense."* (Beth, OfSI)

As Beth illustrates, the industrial character of Primavera's setting makes it difficult to relax (Figure 2); this prevents the development of customary in-festival routines and overtly links Primavera with the outside world, in contrast to other major music festivals which are often located in rural settings. Rural-based festivals typically also offer a range of diverse activities, entertainment and performances (e.g. drama, comedy, poetry). In-festival practices (including camping, relaxing, sun-bathing) set the festival boundaries and distinguish it from everyday life, thereby giving rise to the creation of in-festival routines that spatio-temporally transcend structural norms (Turner, 1969; Kozinets, 2002) with the festival taking on a character over and above its musical elements.

Participants referred to feeling 'closer to nature' at other festivals and these experiences of a primitive nature become associated with feelings of escapism from modern everyday life (Canniford & Shankar, 2013). By referring to the industrial architecture of this festival, participants highlight the ordinary nature of the setting, yet experience escape through their immersion in the music. Here Tony reflects on Primavera's use of indoor venues:

*"I guess maybe a lot of people wouldn't expect to be indoors for a festival, maybe the best thing I've seen all year was the indoor section at Primavera, there's like an*

*indoor 1000 or 2000-capacity venue, I saw Julia Holter in there and it was so good [...] just blew my mind. I ended up really enjoying being inside [...] I suppose you have a more intense way of enjoying music [...] When you're outside, you kind of have this feeling that there are other things going on around you, whereas when you're indoors, especially being at venues that are seated, you feel like you have to concentrate on the music, I think you lose the feeling that there's an outside world going on.”* (Tony, OfSI)

While Tony is accustomed to attending indoor gigs, the unexpected nature of an indoor festival venue adds to his experience. Its ordinary nature is confused by the escape he experiences when listening to the music; the existence of this tension and Tony's acceptance of it contributes to his unique experience. Many participants also discussed the Primavera festival routines and how these were similar, or different, to those of other music festivals and their everyday lives:

*“When I come back from other festivals, I try to spend a few days being in the quiet, recovering, because I've not had any sleep. Going to a festival [Primavera] and then going away [to a hotel located in the city center] it's quite nice, you have time to rest, but it felt different, it was less extraordinary.”* (Lea, OfSI)

For Lea, this ordinary/escapist tension also reveals a focus on individuality (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), ‘going away and getting some sleep’, and not on the communality favored at other events where attendees spend their days within the festival site (Kozinets, 2002). Yet this focus on individuality is at the expense of the extraordinary nature of the festival, and further positions the festival experience within the urban life of the city and the everyday (Figure 2).

The urban character of Primavera therefore creates loose boundaries between the festival and the city, which lead to the creation of a different type of festival



experience (e.g. ‘we got to go out and see the city’ [Brad, OfSI]) which is eventually grounded within everyday urban practices (De Certeau, 1984). Participants’ experiences highlight the tension between ordinary (urban) and escapist elements, which are less obviously present than in other music festivals. Yet while positioned outside the boundaries of the usual festival site, Barcelona’s urban character magnifies the festival experience. In line with Tumbat and Belk (2011), any antistructural dimensions of the Primavera experience are not foregrounded via attendees’ immersion into *communitas* (Arnould & Price, 1993) but through their immersion into the nature of live music experiences, as we will illustrate in the next theme.

-----Insert Figure 2 here-----

#### *4.1.3 Immersion/communing*

One of the key dimensions of extraordinary experiences is the idea of intense socializing or communing (Holt, 1995). This implies the nurturing and flourishing of positive and collaborative social interactions between participants, leading to communal integration (Arnould & Price, 1993; Chaney & Goulding, 2016; Schouten et al., 2007). However, prior research has also shown that limited social interactions might emerge within the sphere of extraordinary experiences and require constant negotiation by participants (Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Rick discusses his more limited social interactions at Primavera:

*“Usually at festivals I end up making a lot of new friends [...] but that didn't happen at Primavera, because we were concentrating so much on getting to see the bands, we didn't spend a lot of time socializing [...] the line-up is so good, and there's so many*

*bands that we wanted to see, I think that was probably the main thing in everybody's minds, rather than partying, seeing the music.” (Rick, OfSI)*

The tension between individualism and tribalism, one of the hallmarks of postmodern consumer culture (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Tumbat & Belk, 2011), is important to our understanding of the Primavera experience. This tension emerges through attendees' immersion into the live music experiences, 'seeing the music', as opposed to prioritizing socializing. Dennis elaborates his reasons for more limited socializing:

*“Now at Primavera Sound I don't often meet people who I didn't know, and hardly ever talk to anybody else. I think that might be the aspect because you're not staying there, you come for the music and it makes people more instrumental, kind of going from stage to stage.” (Dennis, OfSI)*

Dennis reveals the tension between the functional ('instrumental') dimensions of consumption experiences, and the romantic ones predominantly identified in prior theorizations of extraordinary experiences and associated with the creation of communitas (Arnould & Price, 1993; Turner, 1969). These functional dimensions emerge through attendees' goals and expectations for purely music-oriented festival experiences. Given that Primavera is spread across a couple of days in which hundreds of artists and bands perform on different stages, attendees' primary goal is to see as many live music performances as possible, potentially diminishing the development of a communal spirit (Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Ulusoy, 2016). This also emerged from our fieldnote extracts:

*“...Hundreds of people moving around from stage to stage, rushing to see the next big performance, totally immersed and engaged into the musical spirit of the Primavera Sound festival.” (Fieldnotes, 29/05/2014)*

The routines of Primavera, which revolve around the live music performances, foreground personally-oriented modes of satisfaction. In line with Tumbat and Belk (2011), we found little evidence of attendees working towards a common goal; a standard practice in most empirical accounts of extraordinary consumption experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Celsi et al., 1993; Kozinets, 2002). Within the festival setting, satisfaction seems to largely occur through attendees' individual immersion in live music experiences:

*“The crowd is very orientated in music. As a musical experience, typically they have really good bands, they have a wide range of very good indie, and there's not a big culture, that I am aware of at least, of people getting very drunk or taking loads of drugs, so it doesn't have those things which I'd usually associate with other festivals.”* (Nick, OnSI<sup>2</sup>)

Nick explains how satisfactory consumption experiences at the festival are inherently linked with immersion in various in-festival live music experiences. Extraordinary experiences have typically been associated with the overconsumption of alcohol and/or drugs (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Goulding et al., 2009), which nurture the creation of hedonic feelings and support collaborative social interactions. In other festivals, these interactions are supported by the customs of camping whereby attendees' non-spectating 'downtime' is spent in close proximity to others. Within Primavera, such feelings and interactions are overshadowed by individual immersion within live music experiences, further positioning the festival within the structures of everyday life.

In sum, our discussion of the three marketplace tensions indicates that the Primavera experience emerges through consumers' embracement of those tensions

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<sup>2</sup> OnSI: on-site interview

within structure, as opposed to the active negotiation and resolution of tensions within antistructure (Husemann et al., 2016).

#### *4.2 Extraordinary experiences and everyday structures*

Our analysis illustrates that there are two key pathways through which the Primavera experience becomes meaningful while being located within everyday structures. This is realized through (1) the embracement of structure and antistructure (e.g. the parallel existence of marketplace tensions) and (2) the dominance of structure itself (e.g. the urban character of the festival and its connection with Barcelona).

Focusing on the first of these pathways, in contrast to prior research (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011), our analysis illustrates that meaningful festival experiences unfold via the embracement of marketplace tensions. While in other extraordinary experiential contexts consumers often ‘ruin’ their extraordinary experiences through the sustenance of paradoxical tensions (Canniford & Shankar, 2013), the opposite is true of our informants’ festival experiences.

*“With Primavera, it does seem kind of you’ve got to drink this beer, there’s no choice, this is what you’re having and you’ve got to pay x amount for it, which is fine, I don’t mind doing that because it’s not what I’m there for, I’m there for the music.”* (Rick, OfSI)

For Rick, the ascribed value of the festival experience is positioned within the structural logics of everyday life, which helps him to avoid employing resolution strategies to solve occurring marketplace tensions.

In relation to the second pathway, for most of our informants, extraordinary festival experiences lie on the structural side of the structure/antistructure continuum:

*'In general, I find this festival very easy because except for the weather we have this time, it's very easy to come to because it's in the city center, so you don't have to camp in a field, it's very well-organised, it's well laid out, doesn't have any grass or mud [...] It's a different festival and makes it relatively easy, you don't have to drive anywhere, it's very well organized for a wider experience than just the festival'* (Terry, OnSI).

Terry's focus on the urban location of Primavera foregrounds its 'everyday' value and backgrounds the associated negative tensions that emerge. Although prior studies argue that extraordinary experiences enable 'a temporary suspension of the rules and means of everyday life' (Goulding et al., 2009, 760), it is exactly the strong association of Primavera with everyday life, and attendees' prior expectations of these associations, which lead to the creation of extraordinary festival experiences. In other words, the embracement of marketplace tensions further enables the Primavera experience to lie at the structural end of the structure/antistructure continuum and this is also supported by our informants' intentions and expectations relating to their festival experiences.

Prior studies suggest that extraordinary experiences are largely defined by consumers' vague expectations and loose intentions, which are mainly due to the emotional intensity and unique nature of the experience (Abrahams, 1986; Arnould & Price, 1993). Our Primavera informants tend to form specific intentions before embarking upon the experiential festival journey in relation to music:

*"I would think it attracts people that would consider themselves kind of serious music fans, I think at British festivals you might get people who are even not bothered about the music, and they go for so many other factors, whereas if you're going to*

*Primavera you'd really have to like a lot of people on the bill because you know that's what you're going for.*" (Sarah, OfSI)

For Sarah, the festival's strong musical character and its rich and diverse lineup are decisive factors in encouraging attendance. She illustrates the importance of the music and in-festival performances to the festival experience. In addition to the aforementioned pathways, the festival experience can also become meaningful through the maintenance of antistructure. For instance, Sarah backgrounds the festival's commercial ethos allowing her to focus more fully on its musical character.

Such clearly defined intentions regarding the musical side of the festival were less obvious in other aspects, including its commercial orientation, the creation of communal feelings and the actual space in which the festival takes place. Lea elaborates further upon the nature of the festival space:

*"I was quite surprised, because it is such a vast concrete area, the stages seemed really cool, but I was kind of surprised there was less stuff around it, so lots of the festival experience, like when you're arriving it's quite overwhelming and exciting, because it's a big kind of lead-up, often quite a lot of visual stuff, whereas Primavera is the opposite, it's kind of a car park, just kind of expansive concrete, unidentifiable part of the city, so it was strange that there was less of this visual stuff."* (Lea, OfSI)

For Lea Primavera deviates from expectations - the concrete landscape and industrial aesthetics contrast with her prior festival experiences - and many others expressed similar surprise. Whereas in traditional theorizations of extraordinary experiences, there is a weak link between expectations and satisfaction (Arnould & Price, 1993), satisfaction at Primavera is strongly linked with the (dis)confirmation of expectations; through the musical character of the festival or through the nature and location of the festival space.

In general, traditional extraordinary experiences are positioned outside the structures of everyday life and linked with vague expectations (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kozinets, 2002), because consumers do not have a clear understanding of, and experience with, what will happen. Here, festival experiences are positioned within the everyday and are linked with variously defined expectations. For instance, our informants focus on the musical line-up to gain value from their festival experiences. Although the concrete aesthetics of the festival might be unexpected, these are backgrounded as either irritating, but less important, or as sharpening the focus on the festival's musical character. As such, our informants' expectations diminish the effect of previous experiences with Primavera, in contrast with prior traditional theorizations of extraordinary experiences, where the accumulation of previous experiences can lead to the development of clearer expectations (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993).

## **5. Discussion**

This study explores an alternative post-postmodern understanding of extraordinary consumption experiences, which despite exhibiting both structural and antistructural characteristics, ultimately remain located within the everyday. We respond to Belk and Sobh's recent (2019) call to generate new theory in interpretive consumer research. Through our ethnographic investigation of Primavera, we illustrate how informants' extraordinary experiences unfold through the embracement of marketplace tensions. Our informants subjectively live out the extraordinary nature of their Primavera experiences, experiencing the festival within the structures of everyday life. The embracement of marketplace tensions, along with the powerful connection to structure, renders the experience meaningful to our informants. We also

describe two key pathways which highlight how the Primavera experience becomes meaningful for our informants while being located within everyday structures. As such, we provide insights into the changing nature of extraordinary experiences, demonstrating how festival attendees sustain an extraordinary festival experience, in line with the reconstructive ethos of post-postmodernism (Skandalis et al., 2016a). In Table 1 we note the main points of differentiation between the Primavera experience and prior theorizations of extraordinary experiences, and we will now elaborate upon these, focusing our contributions around the distinct nature of the experience and the experiencing of marketplace tensions.

-----Insert Table 1 here-----

First, although prior extraordinary experiences play along the structure/antistructure continuum (Turner, 1969), in the Primavera experience, structure ultimately dominates. This is in contrast to most prior studies of extraordinary experiences (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016; Ulusoy, 2016) and reflects its post-postmodern ethos. Recent studies of extraordinary experiences recognize the existence of a series of marketplace tensions and suggest consumer resolution strategies. This implies that consumers are eventually looking for the ‘extraordinary’; be it a climb of Mount Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2011) or a romantic surfing experience (Canniford & Shankar, 2013). Yet our Primavera music fans are not looking for an escape from everyday life through their participation, instead they embrace these tensions and accept the everyday nature of this festival experience. This lack of escape paradoxically allows them to maintain focus on the actual music experience itself. There is a communal feeling in the Primavera



experience yet this is not regulated by liminal aesthetics, but rather by the festival's everyday aesthetics.

Second, although prior studies suggest that sustaining marketplace tensions can lead to the destruction of consumers' extraordinary experiences (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Tumbat & Belk, 2011), we argue that it is exactly the sustainable existence of these tensions that leads to the creation of meaningful festival experiences. In this sense, our informants embrace their festival experiences and the co-existing marketplace tensions as a whole - a situation which can have a positive effect on the consumption experience. As such, while the existence of marketplace tensions in the transient state of extraordinary experiences requires active negotiation and resolution (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016), the equivalent tensions in the realm of the Primavera experience require sustainability and adoption, in line with the reconstructive spirit of post-postmodern consumer culture (Cova et al., 2013; Cronin et al., 2014; Skandalis et al., 2016a).

Our study also contributes to prior experiential marketing research by contrasting consumers' expectations and outcomes. In contrast to postmodern extraordinary experiences where unpredictability accounts for a key aspect of the experience (Arnould & Price, 1993), post-postmodern extraordinary experiences involve variously defined expectations. Other music experiences may also be relevant here: attendees at the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Day concert or a Bruce Springsteen performance on Broadway may deem these experiences to be extraordinary, despite their everyday nature. In the extraordinary festival experience, consumer satisfaction is linked with meeting variously defined expectations. For instance, festival attendees are there for the music, they do not wish to escape from everyday life and as a result they have clearly defined expectations from the festival

organizers and artists in terms of the quality of the line-up, but there are also loosely defined expectations in terms of the nature of the music performance or the festival aesthetics.

In terms of managerial implications, our findings illustrate that marketers can aim to successfully create consumption experiences that are emotionally intense, unique, memorable and transformative (Arnould & Price, 1993; LaSalle & Britton, 2003), yet can be linked with everyday life. In contrast to recent experiential marketing research (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Husemann et al., 2016; Tumbat & Belk, 2011) and related strategies within the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), we argue that any occurring marketplace tensions and/or contradictions do not necessarily need to be *actively* resolved to construct meaningful and/or satisfactory consumption experiences. As we have shown here, the *existence* of such tensions might actually further contribute to the creation of the overall experience.

We propose that festival marketplaces can act as facilitating environments in which consumers manage a series of marketplace tensions, allowing them to co-exist (Skandalis et al., 2016a). We also suggest that it is the ‘non-extraordinary’ nature of Primavera that contributes to its uniqueness; and marketers could aim to design further facilitating environments, which nurture the creation of such experiences. In contrast to the total escape and unknown feelings apparent in prior conceptualizations of extraordinary experiences, our informants seem to appreciate the ‘everyday’ nature of the Primavera festival experience. Such a renewed approach to experiential marketing strategies might indicate ‘transition’ into a post-postmodern consumer culture (Skandalis et al., 2016a). Festival organizers can facilitate the emergence of tensions through the careful planning and experiential design (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) of spaces such as Primavera.

## **6. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to explore the nature of extraordinary experiences, which whilst possessing a set of structural and antistructural characteristics, are not positioned into antistructural frames. Our findings illustrate that extraordinary festival experiences unfold through consumers embracing a series of marketplace tensions within Primavera, with their experiences remaining located within the everyday. Future research might aim to investigate such extraordinary experiences in other experiential contexts and delve deeper into the characteristics of such consumption experiences. Future inquiries could also fruitfully employ this renewed understanding of the extraordinary experience concept to understand how consumers experience the mundane aspects of their everyday lives through consumption. Finally, we call for the development of experiential marketing strategies that address the everyday and structural dimensions of consumption behavior in light of post-postmodern consumer culture.

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Figure 1. The sponsor-oriented names of festival stages



Figure 2. The urban and industrial aesthetics of Primavera


	Postmodern extraordinary experiences		Post-postmodern extraordinary experiences
	<i>Traditional theorizations</i>  (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993: Guided river rafting, Celsi et al., 1993: Skydiving subculture)	<i>Theoretical extensions</i>  (e.g. Tumbat & Belk, 2011: Mount Everest climbing expeditions, Husemann et al., 2016: Religious pilgrimages)	<i>Renewed conceptualization</i>  <i>The Primavera Sound festival experience</i>
<i>Nature of experience</i>	- Standing outside everyday life - Possessing a set of antistructural characteristics	- Standing outside everyday life - Possessing a set of structural and antistructural characteristics	- Standing within the limits of everyday life - Possessing a set of structural and antistructural characteristics
<i>Marketplace tensions</i>	None	Active negotiation and resolution of tensions	Embracement of tensions
<i>Expectations</i>	Vague and spontaneous	Clearly defined and goal-driven	Variouly defined
<i>Outcomes</i>	- Escape from everyday life - Separation from the mundane	- Escape from everyday life - Separation from the mundane	- Experience is located in everyday life - Engagement with structure

Table 1. Comparing postmodern and post-postmodern extraordinary experiences