

This is the accepted version of the following article: Husemann Katharina. C., Giana M. Eckhardt, Reinhard Grohs, and Raluca E. Saceanu (2016), “The Dynamic Interplay between Structure, Anastructure and Antistructure in Extraordinary Experiences”, in Journal of Business Research (forthcoming).

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

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The authors would like to thank Pauline Maclaran and Russell Belk for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

**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 antistructural experience. This allows us to develop implications for our overall understanding of consumption within extraordinary experiences in general and pilgrimages specifically.

*Keywords: extraordinary experience, consumption, pilgrimage, structure, antistructure*

## **The Dynamic Interplay between Structure, Anastructure and Antistructure in Extraordinary Experiences**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This study advances a current academic discourse in consumer research about the prevalence and interplay 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; 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 hierarchal 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 and Belk 2011 for a full review). Thus, consumer researchers have stressed a communitarian, collaborative, and harmonic view of extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Ulusoy 2016b).

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). 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 and Price 1993; Carù and 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 and Belk 2011).

These studies suggest that consumers draw from structural and antistructural elements in their construction of extraordinary experiences, which may produce tensions (Tumbat and Belk 2011). What we 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 two-fold. First, we identify anastucture, 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 and Gilmore 1998), in terms of how to design compelling and rich experience packages for consumers (Megehee, Ko, and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi, Rose, and 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 and 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 anti-structure is periodically transformed into structure and structure into anti-structure” (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 and Wallendorf 2012; Canniford and 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 anti-structure 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 and 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 and Maclaran 2013; Turner and Turner 1978, 30). Since the 1970’s 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, emotional (Frey 2004). Pilgrims still desire to break from the everyday (Della Dora 2012) and achieve a sense of spiritual fulfilment (Digance 2003).

Yet analyses of pilgrimages reveal contradictions and destabilize boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the sublime and the prosaic, tourism and pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner 2010; Della Dora 2012; Higgins and Hamilton 2016; Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016). Nilsson and Tesfahuney (2016), for example, reveal the anticipation of the extraordinary, yet one tinged with anxiety, since pilgrims are also aware that they may not experience or encounter the extraordinary during their pilgrimage. Dubisch (1995) suggests that liminality is variable, situational and fluctuating, and Higgins and Hamilton (2016) observe that Lourdes, the world-famous pilgrimage center, has clearly become a restructured consumption scape where consumers can consume both the sacred and the secular. Similarly, Santiago de Compostela is being appropriated; becoming a space with sacred overtones yet ultimately commodified (Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016).

While these studies, in line with Turner’s (1974) theorizing, suggest that structure and antistructure are not mutually exclusive, they still pit them as opposite to each other. Looked at in this way, the construction of extraordinary experiences appears as a constant negotiation – or

struggle – by consumers who are attempting to merge and separate structural and antistructural elements while oscillating between these poles. What we do not know from past research, however, is how structure and antistructure may lead to each other, as suggested by Turner, and if they, what is the process by which this would happen? What are the types of tensions consumers might experience, and what is the nature of the dynamic process utilized to negotiate the middle ground between structure and antistructure? Thus, our research goal is to understand the dynamics of the process, so that we can systematically map out what happens in between structure and antistructure, and see if one can lead to the other. We now describe how we went about doing so.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Research Context and Setting**

We explore the research question in the context of the pilgrimage in/to Medjugorje, a contemporary Christian pilgrimage location with around 5,000 inhabitants located in a mountainous region 25 km southwest of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The village turned into a well-known parish after the apparition of Virgin Mary – also addressed as “Our Lady” – on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 1981. Since then Medjugorje has attracted over 30 million pilgrims from all over the world. Contemporary pilgrims are mainly Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants from Europe, America and Asia who come in organized groups. Pilgrims either book all-inclusive package trips, or come on their own by car or bus. Pilgrims coming from nearby countries usually stay for three to four days, whereas pilgrims coming from countries further afield often spend a whole week in Medjugorje (Bradley 2010).

The Apparition Hill, the Cross Mountain and St. James Church are Medjugorje’s main religious attractions. The Apparition Hill signifies the place where the Virgin Mary appeared. The Cross Mountain rises 500 meters above Medjugorje and carries a large wooden cross. The cross

was built in remembrance of Jesus, and visitors who seek the mountain usually want to be close to Jesus in prayer. St. James Church was built in 1897 and is the main prayer center for pilgrims. The Holy Hour is an emotional and intense ceremony in adoration of Mary and Jesus to which pilgrims and priests convene in the church to pray and sing.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The research team members hold a mixture of Christian religious beliefs and no one has been on a pilgrimage before the data collection; we collected data for research purposes only. We engaged in ethnographic fieldwork comprised of three data collection methods. First, we draw on participant observation. Participant observation provides researchers with the opportunity to gather real-time interpretive insights of a cultural context and to get access to the intricate behavioral details of a particular consumption activity (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). To allow credible interpretations (Chong 2009), the fourth author immersed herself as a pilgrim into the field where she lived through the pilgrimage experience herself over a period of one week. This participant observation consisted of going to the major pilgrimage sites along with the other pilgrims, living in the hostels with them, and generally adhering to the rhythms of daily life as a pilgrim, in terms of eating and shopping for example. This allowed her to observe fellow pilgrims' behaviors, listen to their stories, ask questions, and take field notes as well as photographs.

Second, we conducted narrative semi-structured interviews with eight female and three male pilgrims. See table 1 for participant profiles. We used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to find our participants in order to cover the full pilgrimage experiences. The participants ranged from consumers who engage in a time-bound religious pilgrimage, to consumers who view their pilgrimage more as a (religious) holiday, to those who extend their visit as they feel very connected to the place. Pilgrims were asked to elaborate on their

expectations, preparations, procedures, highlights and disappointments of their personal pilgrimage experience; they were not asked about consumption specifically (Flick 2009). Two of the interviews were conducted via Skype; the rest during the pilgrimage itself. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. We completed data collection when we had reached theoretical saturation (Spiggle 1994).

Lastly, we draw on introspective data from two participant diaries and from one researcher diary. See table 1 for diarist profiles. Both participating pilgrims as well as the researcher wrote down regular records of their daily activities (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003). These diaries allowed for a deeper look into daily rhythms as a pilgrim as well as more extended reflections on the nature of the extraordinary experience. The fourth author is fluent in English as well as German. Besides two interviews that were conducted in German and translated into English using a decentering method (Campbell and Werner 1970), interviews were conducted, and diaries were written, in English.

We analyzed the field notes, interviews, diaries and photographs using an iterative, hermeneutic approach (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). To ensure rigor in the data analysis, we coded the data individually before comparing the emerging themes amongst the research team. We moved back and forth between data and theory to expose the emerging categories to iterative refinement (Spiggle 1994). This allowed us to uncover the process of how structure and antistructure interplay in extraordinary consumer experience, which we now elaborate on in the findings section.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## 4. FINDINGS

This study reveals the processes of how structure and antistructure interplay in extraordinary consumer experience (see figure 1). In our data we did see complementary forms of coexistence. This is represented in the figure by the arrow going directly from structure to antistructure, indicating that when structure and antistructure interplay less intensely with each other, consumers do not experience conflict between the two, and do not have to engage in tension resolution strategies. For the purposes of this study, however, we focus on the tensions that we identified within the data set, which allows us to explicate the nature of anastructure. Tensions result either from the undesired excess of structural or antistructural elements, or a lack thereof. To resolve these tensions, consumers engage in four strategies ranging from emphasizing elements that are part of antistructure; to transforming elements that are part of structure; to reorganizing structure and antistructure elements; and/or to increasing structure elements. In both forms of coexistence, consumers do not favor any pole of the continuum because structure can result in, or facilitate, pilgrims' desired antistructural state, thus demonstrating that structure and antistructure can transform into each other, and we show how that happens.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### 4.1. Conflicting Coexistences: Anastructure

Our analysis gives rise to a form of coexistence between antistructure and structure that is marked by conflicts. We refer to this field of conflict as anastructure. Anastructure is a transient state created by high levels of antistructural and structural characteristics within the same consumer experience. This tends to have a negative effect on the consumer experience and results in tensions that consumers have to resolve. Tensions result either from the undesired excess of

structural or antistructural elements, or a lack of structure or antistructure. Consequently, we conceptualize the relationship between the two as a continuum ranging from antistructural, to anastructural, to structural characteristics. In the following, we present four tensions and four resolution strategies used to negotiate these tensions that allow consumers to experience the benefits they are seeking from an antistructural experience regardless of where they lie on the continuum.

*Tensions Arising from Excess of Antistructure.* Pilgrims can face tensions that arise from a prevalence of antistructure in their pilgrimage experience. These tensions primarily arise from feelings of imposition or skepticism. First, instead of joyfully partaking in positive and collaborative social interactions and *communitas*, pilgrims do not necessarily want to socialize during their spiritual journey. However, they often have no choice but to engage in interactions with others and this can lead to feelings of imposition. Helen, for example, mentions certain moments in which she perceives *communitas* as unhelpful. She says:

*“Well, it was important, for example, when I was preparing myself for the confession, to be alone. I really need to be alone, to prepare myself, to remember what kinds of things have happened since my last confession.”* (Helen)

Mia also gives an illuminating example of how she is forced to interact with fellow pilgrims. She is asked to team up with another pilgrim but she perceives these exchanges as an imposition since she prefers to individually concentrate on her pilgrimage experience.

*“And then you are encouraged to find a partner, like the roommates, and then you can’t get on the bus without your partner [...] But I am trying to concentrate more on my spiritual journey there.”* (Mia)

Imposed interaction in an attempt to facilitate *communitas* is particularly evident in informants’ description of the structural organization of their pilgrimage.

Second, the prevalence of antistructure can result in attitudes of rejection and feelings of skepticism. Not all pilgrims come to Medjugorje as convinced believers. Some doubt God in general or Medjugorje as a pilgrimage center in particular. Priscilla, for example, has doubts about certain sacred experiences and miraculous happenings that she encounters in Medjugorje. *“Next we visited the cross statue which is supposed to be a miracle for healing. Again everyone was touching [...] the statue, hoping they could get some miracle too from that object [...]. I was a little skeptical about the statue so I touched it, but did not go crazy wiping the statue like some of the other pilgrims.”* (Priscilla, diary)

In contrast to Higgins and Hamilton (2016), we find that the myths surrounding pilgrimage sites can trigger skepticisms and push pilgrims away. Priscilla indicates above a more distanced stance towards Medjugorje and its meanings and rituals. She is reluctant and skeptical about the amount of spirituality and supernatural phenomena that she faces, and this feeling results in an uncomfortable experience for her.

*Tensions Arising from a Lack of Structure.* Tensions can also emerge from pilgrims’ perception of a lack of structure. Although pilgrims strive for transcendental experiences that have the power to overcome and change their ordinary lives, they also wish for secular everyday comforts. Some pilgrims, for example, suffer from the inconvenience and the rough accommodation conditions that a pilgrimage brings with it. Anja for example says: *“... there aren’t a lot of nice rooms here. How can I say it ... I was expecting something nicer. Maybe I am being pathetic right now [laughs] but I am used to a different kind of comfort because I live in Germany.”* (Anja)

These uncomfortable accommodations were a common refrain with regards to their experience of lack of structure, and strained their spiritual journey.

*Tensions Arising from Excess of Structure.* Our analysis shows that sometimes the prevalence of structural elements disturbs the sacred experience as well. Pilgrims perceive structural elements as distractions from their otherwise antistructural and liminal experience. Pilgrims, for example, feel tempted, and often also seduced, by the intense commercial shopping opportunities that Medjugorje offers and the various other possibilities that allow pilgrims to re-connect to their ordinary life, such as the Internet, social media platforms, or cell-phones. Mia, for instance, states:

*“Like the first and second night we spent all our money already, hahahaha!!... It’s too commercialized. [But] we like materialism, we like stuff, we like to bring things to our family and it’s there, it’s a temptation, what can you say... the crew is always encouraging saying “lease, ladies, don’t buy, don’t buy!,” but do you think we follow? No.”* (Mia)

Later she adds:

*“The first pilgrimage hasn’t really changed me at all, I still brought too many gadgets with me.”* (Mia)

Mia’s comments show the difficulties she has in detaching completely in her pilgrimage. In particular two factors, the market and technology, bring back the secular and play a limiting role in her pilgrimage experience, with the former highlighting how spirituality in Medjugorje is co-opted by marketplace logic. The affluence of markets and commercial exchanges disenchant the pilgrimage experience and makes Medjugorje appear like a “tourist attraction” (Daniel). The dissonant tone of commerce is a common aspect of contemporary pilgrimages (Scott and Maclaran 2013).

Furthermore, pilgrims have difficulties disconnecting from their ordinary lives because of obligations they perceive as waiting for them at home. ‘Profane’ obligations refer to family, household, friend, or job issues. Lesley reveals:

*“I am trying to be closer to Him, so when I pray I focus on that. But that doesn’t mean that my thoughts don’t start running wild, like sometimes I start thinking about my job and some personal issues and stuff like that.... I guess it’s hard to completely disconnect. ...I think about the reasons why I am here and about my life, that it could as well be easier... I think about my friends, my family, home, if everything is alright. I think about my cat and the plants.”* (Lesley)

Lesley has difficulties leaving her life behind and fully immersing into the sacred experience. Several pilgrims reveal similar difficulties. They worry about how their families manage the households during the pilgrims’ absence, or how they will accomplish certain tasks at work after they return home.

*Tensions Arising from a Lack of Antistructure.* Furthermore, pilgrims face tensions in the pilgrimage experience that result from a perceived deficiency of antistructure. Pilgrims sometimes feel frustrated and disenchanted because they cannot access the full-fledged transcendental and liminal experience and related feelings of *communitas*. Nancy, for example, explains:

*“I’m learning to pray, I’m really not like all the others here, so I’m trying to learn to pray and I’m trying to get better at it. It’s really hard for me ....”* (Nancy)

Nancy is frustrated because she perceives that her lack of praying skills makes her different from other pilgrims (boundary-accentuation) and prevents her from fully experiencing her spiritual journey. Similarly, Anja mentions that the feelings of togetherness and *communitas* remain inaccessible to her:

*“Everyone is by themselves; every person is praying on their own, I don’t really think you are able to build friendships here, like in other places, like when you are on holiday. You are kind of individually here. Every man for himself and everyone is praying on their own.”* (Anja)

Anja is disillusioned about boundaries she perceives exist between the pilgrims, and about the fact that she cannot find real friendship and communal bonds. In sum, pilgrims feel tensions when they experience excess of structure or antistructure, or a lack of structure and antistructure, altering the delicate balance between the two. We now turn to how they resolve these tensions.

#### 4.2. Resolution Strategies

We identify four strategies pilgrims use to reach a specific position on the antistructure/structure continuum that they consider desirable. We conceptualize a strategy as a bundle of discourses and practices. Thus, we show that pilgrims enhance their extraordinary pilgrimage experience by 1) emphasizing elements that are part of antistructure; 2) transforming elements that are part of structure; 3) reorganizing structure and antistructure elements; and/or 4) increasing structure elements (see figure 1).

*Emphasizing Antistructure.* Pilgrims in Medjugorje construe and move between sacred and profane moments making use of antistructural elements. We refer to this strategy as ‘Emphasizing Antistructure’. In use of this strategy, pilgrims, for example, perform the practice of telling miracle stories (Higgins and Hamilton 2016). Miracle stories have the power to enhance the sacred experience in Medjugorje and turn a secularized experience into a sacred one. Stories about miracles that have happened in Medjugorje can combat skepticism. These stories deal with miracles of nature, miraculous healings, or fortune rituals. Pilgrims engage in story-telling with their group members or with random pilgrims they meet in the streets or at the holy sites. Nancy was skeptical about the spiritual experience beforehand (see the section on tensions), but a miracle of nature – the famous spinning sun of Medjugorje – becomes a life-changing event. *“But, what we saw today, I think it kind of changed my life, I mean it was there. I don’t know how to describe it, but it was real. I mean you hear things about it all the time, and I said “Yeah, sure,” but I saw it today and it was true. She [her friend] kept saying “Look at the sun.” It was*

*so bright, I didn't have my glasses on, and then I looked and there it was! This big circle, big sun.*" (Nancy)

By engaging in the miracle story telling practice, pilgrims like Nancy change their position on the continuum towards the antistructure pole.

In a similar way, the practice of performing (group) rituals allows pilgrims to emphasize and enforce antistructure in the pursuit of *communitas* and keep the profane at bay (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Pilgrims use their pilgrimage groups to seek and engage in positive and collaborative relationships as well as deeper devotion. Field notes taken during the Adoration Hour capture this:

*"It started with the priest saying some prayers. People were singing along to some songs in English, Italian, French and German. They [the people] were so emotional, crying a lot and desperately hoping for something. During this Adoration Hour, there were some moments where everything was completely silent. One could really see the peace on the people's faces at that moment. It was amazing to see how people react; they really seem to feel the holy presence. It was really crowded, people were sitting on the floor also, it must have been like 400 people in there."* (Field notes)

The collective performance of singing and praying bonds pilgrims closely together and attenuates differences between them. As in Celsi et al.'s (1993) high-risk skydiving experience, differences between, and backgrounds of, participants lose relevance. Sandra's description of her experience in Medjugorje highlights this.

*"So it's, it's not important if it's in English, if it's in Croatian. Sometimes the Italian group and Croatian groups sing the same song [...] And somehow there is a connection between all of us that are there at the time."* (Sandra)

Nancy, for example, suffers from inaccessible *communitas* because of her inexperience with praying (see tensions). However, sharing spiritual experiences with other pilgrims and participating in group rituals, specifically the Holy Hour as described above, worked for her. She raves about the communal atmosphere:

*“It was the only thing that impressed me. Well, we go to church, it’s a religious place, and last night we went to Adoration [Holy Hour] and there was so many people! It was amazing, and how wonderful the atmosphere was.”* (Nancy)

Group rituals “surround[s] the contact of profane persons with the sacred” (Belk et al. 1989, 7). Thus, through rituals, pilgrims emphasize antistructure to hide structural elements or to gloss over a lack of antistructure. Practices such as telling miracle stories or performing rituals and participating in groups have the power to enhance the extraordinary experience, create *communitas* and turn a secularized experience into a sacred one. Using this strategy, pilgrims shift their position on the continuum more towards antistructure.

*Transforming Structure.* Pilgrims create an antistructural experience by making use of profane and often commercial elements and re-interpreting and transforming these elements. We call this strategy ‘Transforming Structure’. Through performing practices such as reconnecting to and romanticizing social roles, decommodifying the commercial, and seeking solitude, pilgrims facilitate their pursuit of spiritual goals and experience sacredness, liminality and *communitas*. They do so by vesting structural characteristics of the pilgrimage experience with sacred meanings.

The practice of reconnecting to and romanticizing social roles allows pilgrims in Medjugorje to view their routine daily roles as instrumental for their liminal and holy experience. Pilgrims often translate their inabilities to detach from ordinary life into actual aims and constituents of their spiritual journey. Anja, for instance, admits that her thoughts are always with

her family during the pilgrimage. As a woman, she feels that she has certain obligations and if she is not at home to take care of things, then someone else has to do it for her. Anja explains that she always prays for her family. These prayers are the main reasons that motivate her to come to Medjugorje. She wants to do something for herself but also for her family. Bearing this in mind, she fully engages in the pilgrimage and detaches from her ordinary life.

*“I pray, mainly, for myself and for my family. This was also one of the reasons why I came here. When I am praying my thoughts are here, where I am. Surely, I am thinking of my family too, as I am here without them, but I am present.”* (Anja)

Furthermore, similar to participants at the Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002) pilgrims engage in the practice of decommoifying the commercial to cope with tensions that arise from the numerous commercial vendors selling religious artefacts. Pilgrims embrace shopping opportunities at the markets, but at the same time they criticize the commercial abundance. Pilgrims deploy decommoification discourses that enable them to enjoy the commercial shopping experience without betraying the sacredness of their pilgrimage. In line with research on material culture and tourist souvenirs that shows that (religious) commodities can have sacred meanings (Starrett 1995; Masset and Decrop 2016), pilgrims refer to shopping as the possibility of prolonging their pilgrimage through taking sacred objects back home. They view souvenirs as relics of their experienced self-transformation (Masset and Decrop 2016) and think of shopping as an opportunity to engage in gift-giving that allows them to bring gifts from Medjugorje to family and friends who stayed at home. Or, they simply view the markets as blessed through the Holy Mother. Mike’s narrative illustrates the latter decommoification discourse:

*“Amazing, you can see them [shops] everywhere. And they are selling all these religious articles, rosaries. I have never seen such places, everywhere you can see a small store. I said: “Wow, this place is blessed.””* (Mike)

Lastly, pilgrims use the strategy of seeking solitude. This practice allows pilgrims to heighten their sense of self-awareness within the comfort of the group, to deepen their devotion and concentrate on their individual desires. Many accounts of liminality refer to such solitary situations, as pilgrims often felt spiritual closeness to God when they were on their own rather than collaboratively engaging with other pilgrims. Mia's case is illustrative. Mia admits that she likes to socialize and that she would never do a pilgrimage on her own. However, she also reveals a need for privacy and solitude, as she refers to being forced to pair up with a pilgrimage partner (see the section on tensions). Mia resolves these tensions through steady pull-outs from the travel group.

*“During prayer time I like to get away and have some time by myself too. Like this morning or when I go for a walk. [...] As a matter of fact, I missed the first chapel visit this morning because I went away by myself. [...] I did not climb the mountain because I did not have time, but I broke away from the group while they were eating and I went up the mountain where I could even picture Jesus crying. It was incredible [small pause]. And those are the moments where I can feel a holy presence because of the nature and the peace.” (Mia)*

Hiding from the group facilitates the pilgrimage experience for Mia. She experienced sacredness and felt spiritual closeness to God when she was on her own rather than collaboratively engaging with other pilgrims.

Together, pilgrims use this strategy to move their position on the continuum towards the structure pole. However, pilgrims then use the structure pole as a springboard to reach an antistructural experience.

*Reorganizing Structure and Antistructure.* To separate opposing but coexisting antistructural and structural characteristics and to attenuate related tensions, pilgrims engage in the strategy of ‘Reorganizing Structure and Antistructure’ to negotiate their experiences of

liminality and *communitas* and their mundane and profane lives. Through the practice of splitting time and activities, pilgrims shift their focus and split their time thoughtfully between sacred activities and “free” (commercial) time. In other words, different kinds of time and activities splits erect boundaries between the sacred and the profane (Belk et al. 1989; Kozinets 2002). These boundaries protect the sacredness of the pilgrimage while at the same time allowing a certain degree of commerciality and profaneness. Pilgrims who view the selling and buying of religious souvenirs as a negative temptation tend to restrict their time spent at the markets to certain time slots. Priscilla does not like *“the destruction or the temptation of the materialistic world, which is of course shopping,”* but she clearly separates pilgrimage time and free time and allows herself to spend her free time shopping: *“Like any pilgrim, my free time is spent shopping.”*

With regard to collaborative interactions with other participants, pilgrims also tend to split their time thoughtfully. They avoid most interactions during prayer time or shortly before confessions to concentrate on their spiritual goals. They regularly break out from the group to have a walk and be alone with their thoughts. During meals, during shopping at the markets, or on the way to the church, however, pilgrims often enjoy the social aspect of their journey. Mary and Katja, who experienced, like Mia, tensions of imposed antistructure, explain how they structure their schedules to cope with these tensions.

*“Well, while going to the Apparition Hill or to the Cross Hill I like to be alone, I just want to have my own peace of mind, but the rest of the time I enjoy interacting with the others.”* (Mary)

*“Well, we talk at times, we talk about this place, what the one or the other has seen. Some people talk, some do not. I am not really that communicative, but sometimes we talk about what is happening around here. But, for example, when I pray I like to be alone, I don’t talk to anyone.”* (Katja)

To align profanity with the wish to feel closer to God, pilgrims also perform the practice of accepting reality in sacredness. Although some pilgrims feel disenchanting by the commercialization of Medjugorje, they realize that the locals need to make a living and commercialization cannot be escaped – not even in a sacred place like Medjugorje. Daniel reflects on this:

*“Part of me tells me that it [the markets] shouldn’t be there, and one other part of me says like, you know, it’s the way things are.”* (Daniel)

Together, the re-organizing strategy helps pilgrims split their time and activities thoughtfully between sacred activities and “free” (commercial) time. Thereby, they do not move towards either antistructure or structure on the continuum, but they clearly distinguish between the two poles to resolve related tensions.

*Increasing Structure.* We observe that pilgrims in Medjugorje reuse typical elements that stem from a profane, commercial, and structural universe in a way that facilitates their spiritual experience. Different to the strategy of transforming structure, in which pilgrims convert structural into antistructural elements, in this strategy, pilgrims increase structure elements as facilitators to deepen their antistructural experience. Drawing from the ‘Increasing Structure’ strategy, pilgrims, for instance, perform the practice of preparing and absorbing information. Pilgrims use elements like travel guides, guidebook information or daily tour schedules to better understand the sacredness of Medjugorje. The collected knowledge relates the pilgrims to the place and facilitates the pilgrims’ immersion into the experience. Dana’s case is illustrative. She describes how the knowledge transfer through the tour guide contributes to and complements her sacred experience.

*“We prayed there and I really felt so close to Jesus [...] the view from up there is also amazing. The guide explained to us really nicely the history of the cross and everything. I know so many things now, I can tell my friends back home so that they can come too.”* (Dana, diary)

Mia’s case serves as another example. Mia describes herself as *“more of a realist, than hoping too much for a miracle,”* but she also found ways to facilitate her extraordinary experience.

*“It definitely helped me that I read the book beforehand, because not only do I know more about this place, but I can also see the faith in people’s eyes here. I can understand why they come here...”* (Mia)

Other pieces of information that facilitate pilgrims’ antistructural pilgrimage experience are the strict, routinized daily schedules that the travel guides provide to their travel groups. Pilgrims know exactly when to pray and when to visit the main attractions in Medjugorje. Lesley, for example, experiences difficulties disconnecting from her ordinary life (see tensions) and feels that her tightly organized daily schedule helps her in focusing on the important tasks.

*“Um, you know, I get up, eat and go to Church, where I pray, then I do whatever the schedule says, go to the Hill [Apparition] or to the Cross Mountain, then in the evening I go to Church again, for the Evening Mass or the Adoration Hour. Tonight it’s the Adoration Hour, so we will go there. We do whatever is on the schedule.”* (Lesley)

Furthermore, although pilgrimages are supposed to be antistructural and detached from ordinary needs, the practice of maintaining comforts suggests that pilgrims require a certain level of food and accommodation as a prerequisite for a rewarding pilgrimage experience. If this is fulfilled, pilgrims find it easier to focus on their liminal experience. Lesley reveals:

*“I am a very picky person and I don’t like rough conditions, like the cold, poverty or you know... ‘uncomfortable’ life. And I kind of experienced that here a little bit during my first pilgrimage,*

*but I think now it's better, the place where I am staying is quite alright, the rooms are nice, the staff is nice, they even have Internet..."* (Lesley)

Lesley repeatedly visits Medjugorje and she emphasizes that the improved living standard of the current visit, as compared to her last visit, positively contributes to her pilgrimage experience. Together, the strategy of 'Increasing Structure' allows pilgrims to instrumentalize structural elements in a way that facilitates pilgrims' extraordinary experience.

In total, we have shown four strategies that pilgrims use for moving on the continuum between structure and antistructure to reduce the tensions that can occur when they experience too much or too little structure or antistructure. Pilgrims resolve these tensions to enhance their experience and make it truly unique, meaningful and extraordinary.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

In this study we have explored the dynamic processes at play when consumers navigate the continuum between structure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences. Based on ethnographic research in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where pilgrims go through a full-fledged extraordinary consumer experience as defined in the consumer research and tourism literature (Arnould and Price 1993; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Higgins and Hamilton 2016; Tumbat and Belk 2011), we introduce anastructure as a conflict-laden transient state that lies between antistructure and structure, and we show how structure can lead to, and foster, benefits that are usually associated with an antistructural experience.

Extraordinary consumption experiences are best described through multifaceted characteristics that lie on a continuum ranging from antistructural, to anastructural, to structural tenets. Consumers can draw from all tenets at the same time to reach or enhance their emotional, meaningful, unique and self-transformative experience. Consumers foster collaborative as well as limited interactions; they pursue shared as well as singularized goals; they attenuate as well as

emphasize differences between participants; they immerse in *communitas* as well as focus on the self; and they experience detached moments that transcend commerciality as well as moments that are secular, profane and maintain commerciality. Our analysis shows that sometimes tensions occur between structure and antistructure, referred to as *anastructure*, that interfere with the consumer experience. We also show that consumers, rather than “merely hid[ing] betrayals, [and] maintaining dualisms despite the continued occurrence of contradictions and social tensions” (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1065), engage in strategies and related practices to dissolve these tensions and the dualism between structure and antistructure. With this more dynamic circulation model (see figure 1), we extend current theorizations of extraordinary experience.

This framework enables us to make two important theoretical contributions and provide implications to the consumer behavior and tourism literature and practice. First, we identify *anastructure* where tensions emerge from the coexistence of structure and antistructure. *Anastructure* is a transient category that lies between, and that does not clearly belong to, the poles of antistructure and structure. The findings explicate that *anastructure* is stressful and conflict-laden. It is characterized by external influence, obligation, force, coercion, necessity and/or disturbance as well as by individual strategies employed to reduce conflict to enhance the experience. We systematically identify the nature of these tensions and strategies that are used to ameliorate them. We are able to do this via conceptualizing structure and antistructure as opposite ends of a continuum, with consumers able to move along the continuum via negotiation strategies. Thus, we present a dynamic process, rather than seeing structure and antistructure as binary opposites, and our model allows us to conceptualize how one can turn into the other.

Pilgrims oscillate between antistructural, *anastructural* and structural positions in their aim to achieve a desirable balance between a liminal, communal experience and their structural positions in ordinary life. Turner (1974) acknowledges the interrelationship between structure

and antistructure even in the ideal antistructural site of a pilgrimage. Our study demonstrates that although pilgrims strive for a spiritual experience typically defined by antistructure, they can use elements of structure to reach this state. This helps to break down the binary of the sacred and profane, structure and antistructure that is prevalent in the consumer research and tourism literature.

Second, we demonstrate that structure serves distinct purposes for consumers that empirically demonstrate Turner's (1974) theorizing on how structure and antistructure can "modify one another continuously over time" (279) and how "anti-structure is periodically transformed into structure and structure into anti-structure" (284), an aspect of Turner's thinking that is rarely acknowledged within the consumer research and tourism literatures. While complementary forms of coexistence do exist, and are represented in Figure 1 via the arrow that goes directly from structure to antistructure, without any tensions to be resolved in between, we have focused on the conflicting forms of coexistence, to allow us to explicate anastructure. In the conflicting form, we find that consumers can transform structure elements from a profane universe to access a romantic, communal, transcending immersion into the antistructural experience. Consumers reconnect to their social roles and apply them as themes of their prayers, sacralize the commercial markets, or seek solitude to achieve a more spiritual experience. Viewing past findings through this lens, consumers are transforming structural elements for their antistructural and idealistic needs, as when participants at the Burning Man festival constantly engage in decommodification practices to conceal the commercial nature of their exchanges (Kozinets 2002), when visitors to Heritage Village, USA, sacralize secular items (O'Guinn and Belk 1989), or when surfers fetishize their boards with "magical contagion" (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1065). Thus, by reframing and reinterpreting structure, consumers move towards the antistructural end of the continuum.

In resolving the tensions in anastructure, consumers can also increase structure to benefit their extraordinary experience. Pilgrims instrumentalize structural elements, such as commercial touring, routinized schedules and comfortable hotel accommodations, to facilitate their immersion into the spiritual experience. Figure 1 shows the corresponding paths from tensions via these two resolution strategies ('Transforming Structure' and 'Increasing Structure') to antistructure.

This study also contributes to research on extraordinary experiences in general and on pilgrimages in particular. In contemporary societies consumers engage in self-transformations that are closely aligned with the processes of "secularization of religion and the sacralization of the secular" (Wallendorf, Belk and Sherry 1989, 1). Extraordinary experiences that go "beyond everyday life" (Megehee, Ko, and Belk 2016, 1) can serve as "catalyst for experiencing the sacred" and the self-transformational (Ulusoy 2016b, 252). Our study shows that sacred and self-transformational experiences result from consumers appropriately drawing from antistructural and structural characteristics while navigating anastructure when engaging in their experiences. More specifically, and with regard to research on pilgrimages, we show that marketplace resources such as tour guides and accommodations assume an active role in facilitating transformational experiences. Higgins and Hamilton (2016, 30) argue that "transformation is neither facilitated by the marketplace nor the consumer, but rather by the nebulous unknown 'something'." In contrast, we believe that pilgrims, although potentially unaware, often draw on antistructural and structural elements including the marketplace, and apply resolution strategies in anastructure to enhance their extraordinary experience and facilitate their self-transformation.

This study also advances a more multifaceted understanding of pilgrimages and religious travelling which constitute an increasingly growing field of research in tourism. Collins-Kreiner's (2010) findings indicate an increasingly obfuscated boundary between tourism and pilgrimage

(Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli, and Manuel-Navarrete 2014; Shuo, Ryan, and Liu 2009). Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) recognize that visitors have diverse experiences and mental states that may change in time and intensity according to their own personal characteristics. Recent studies embrace this perspective by prioritizing the subjective experiences of individual pilgrims (Higgins and Hamilton 2016; Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016). Nilsson and Tesfahuney (2016), for example, see today's pilgrims motivated by the search for individual spiritual experiences, gradually shifting the pilgrimage site's meaning from a collective religious identity into one that is fleeting, porous and personal or individualized. Our study builds upon this by showing that structure in the form of limited interactions, self-focus, and commercialism is an important aspect of the pilgrimage experience. Pilgrims rebuff social exchanges in search of solitude and inner peace; they pursue individual and non-spiritual goals such as collecting travel experiences and spending time with good friends; they participate in commercial touring and heavily immerse themselves into their shopping experiences; and they have difficulties leaving behind their daily obligations as caring mothers or ambitious employees.

The prevalence of structure in contemporary pilgrimages is not surprising considering the increasing market presence that has evolved around religious journeys. Scholars no longer view pilgrimages from a purely religious, traditional and cultural perspective, but also from a modern society standpoint, and commonly regard pilgrims as religious travelers, modern secular travelers, and experience seekers (Collins-Kreiner 2010). The widespread assumption that tourism is commercial in nature while pilgrimage is not reflects only nostalgia (Scott and Maclaran 2013). However, what is surprising is the paradoxical role of structure in achieving or facilitating a consumer's antistructural experience. Our analysis shows that structure can turn into, or enable, antistructure. Pilgrims, for example, use solitude rather than *communitas* to enable sacred moments; or they insist on comfortable hotel accommodations to facilitate their

state of mind in Medjugorje. The strategies of ‘transforming structure’ and ‘increasing structure’ allow pilgrims to instrumentalize profane and commercial tools to enhance sacredness and liminality. Together, the prevalence of structure in pilgrimages as well as the paradoxical role of structure in achieving antistructure in pilgrimages adds a theoretical nuance to the understanding of pilgrimages in the tourism literature.

Finally, this study provides practical implications for service providers of extraordinary consumption experiences; in particular for pilgrimages. Service providers can learn how social structural spaces of consumption integrate antistructural and structural elements to offer a compelling and rich experiential package to consumers (Pine and Gilmore 1998). In the context of pilgrimages, tour guides can help pilgrims with the emphasis of antistructure elements by spreading stories and engaging participants with fellows to foster romantic, communal ideals. When setting up pilgrim groups, tour guides should keep in mind, however, that pilgrims use their groups both to engage in collaborative relationships as well as to hide from these groups in search for solitude. Further, travel agencies and tour guides as commercial actors do not necessarily need to fear that they will disrupt an antistructural consumer experience. The provision of information, local knowledge, and organizational help are actually structural elements that can facilitate an extraordinary experience, as they free up the consumer to focus on aspects of their experience that will lead to transformation. Lastly, travel agencies and tour guides can offer packages that help pilgrims to easily distinguish between structure and antistructure elements. The separation of “free time” from pilgrimage time on the daily schedule, for example, can help to attenuate potential unease that pilgrims have when visiting the local markets for shopping. Taken together, service providers should acknowledge the different resolution strategies and provide pilgrims with offerings that help them apply their preferred strategies to make their experience truly extraordinary. Destination managers of pilgrimage sites should

highlight the communal, sacred, spiritual, and romantic aspect when branding their religious destinations. This is because, although pilgrims can instrumentalize structure to reach these antistructural benefits, the extraordinary lies in the antistructural.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In sum, we show that by actively navigating antistructure and structure elements, consumers steer through tensions and negotiate their experiences of liminality and *communitas* and their mundane and profane lives. Pilgrimages constitute an ideal setting for studying anastucture as conflicting structure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences, considering its prototypical antistructural nature (Turner 1973) and its increasing structural characteristics through marketization (Kedzior 2013). Thus, this study can help us to understand other contexts where consumers seek the extraordinary and self-transformation. Yet, further research should explore how anastucture is manifested in other extraordinary experiential contexts and investigate in greater depth which tensions in anastucture relate to which strategies.

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Table 1: Participant profiles

## Narrative interview participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Nationality (and country of residence if different from nationality)	Length of stay	Number of Medjugorje pilgrimages
Mia	Late 50s	Female	South Korean; living in the US	One week	1
Paolo	Early 30s	Male	Italian	Numerous pilgrimage activities over one year	1
Mike	Late 50s	Male	Philippino; living in the USA	One week	1
Nancy	Early 70s	Female	American	One week	1
Lesley	Early 30s	Female	English	Four days	4
Mary	Early 20s	Female	Croatian	Three-four days	3
Anja	Late 50s	Female	German	Three days	2
Helen	Early 40s	Female	Bosnia & Herzegovinian; living in Germany	Three days	2
Katja	Late 40s	Female	Croatian	Three days	4
Sandra	Mid 30s	Female	Croatian	One day	5
Daniel	Early 20s	Male	Netherlands	One day	1

## Diary participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Nationality	Length of stay	Number of Medjugorje pilgrimages	Period of diary completion
Priscilla	Late 50s	Female	USA	One week	1	Four days
Dana	Early 30s	Female	United Kingdom	Four days	2	Three days
Researcher	Early 20s	Female	Romanian; living in Austria	Four days	1	Four days

Figure 1: The dynamic interplay between structure, anastructure and antistructure in extraordinary experiences

