

## Agents in paradise

Experiential co-creation through  
emplacement, ritualization, and  
community

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### KEY POINTS

- Consumers co-create their consumption experiences with producers.
- Consumers have powerful and personally significant experiences in themed environments.
- A form of playful consumption that we call “ludic autotely” occurs in themed environments, and smart marketers are recognizing this.
- Consumers “play along” with marketers’ rules, but only to a certain extent.
- Spectacles are perhaps the ultimate form of consumer experience, and they may be changing and becoming more open to consumer co-creation.

Did you ever fly a kite in bed?  
Did you ever walk with ten cats on your head?  
Did you ever milk this kind of cow?  
Well, we can do it.  
We know how.  
If you never did,  
you should.  
These things are fun  
and fun is good.

Dr. Seuss (1960) “One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish”

Dr. Seuss’ simple and beautiful poetry artfully communicates a basic truth. Human beings are not content simply to lie in bed, to walk a straight line, or to milk a regular type of cow. They constantly seek new experiences. More important than the mere provision of these experiences, however, is the role of imagination in their enactment (Sherry, 2005). The characters in Dr. Seuss’ stories – as in so many other children’s fables from *Peter Pan* to

*Dragon Tales, The Neverending Story* to *Where the Wild Things Are* – are actively creating their own experiences out of the raw materials at hand.

Consumers have always lived in an experience economy (Joy and Sherry, 2003). Consumers have always engaged imaginatively, creatively, and constructively with the world around them. In recent times, many marketing managers have become enamored with the concepts of experience economies (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and entertainment economies (Wolf, 1999), which tend to be interpreted (superficially and, especially in relation to Pine and Gilmore's work, we would argue wrongly) as promising hordes of hungry, empty consumers waiting to be entertained by the vast thematic offerings of producers: theme parks leading to theme hotels, theme stores, theme restaurants, wall-sized screens in stores, museums, churches, gymnasiums, schools, and so on (see Gottdeiner, 1997). Yet, acts of consumer imagination are complex and multifaceted, embodied and erotic, often driven more by needs for authenticity and self-expansion than by the desire for entertainment.

In this short chapter, we seek to turn the page on experientiality as a provided phenomenon and reveal it as a complex lived phenomenon in consumer life. Experientiality – or materiality, in the terms of consumer culture theorists – with the material world, with objects, places, brands, and ideas occurs in major ways outside the marketer's ability to observe and ability to control. Consumers tend to be tricky wild things who find their own uses for marketed things and brands to be more interesting than those intended by marketers. Seeking authenticity and truth as well as fun and amusement, consumers bring their own conceptual and creative apparatus to the party.

To illustrate and develop these ideas, we will offer a range of examples from our ethnographic and netnographic research, carried out both individually and collectively. Through our consumption looking glass, we followed consumer experiences in place, time, theme, and imaginary, immersed ourselves in diverse marketscapes and flagship brand stores, attended media fan conventions, roamed doll stores and sports bars, and participated in traditional village fetes and mass-mediated festivals. Our investigative focus has taken us from the middle of the Nevada desert to the rural prealpine mountains of Italy, from downtown Chicago to Toronto's airport noise-drenched suburbs.<sup>1</sup> Seeking the elusive "passive" consumer who seeks the out-of-the-box experiences of modern marketing's experience economists, we were less than disappointed instead to find different brands of material experiencers, creative co-producers who added and enhanced their experiences. These consumers placed themselves on multiple stages, acted the parts, and became the experience.

Through their experiences, we extrapolate principles to assist our understanding of the types of powerful marketplace offerings that can bridge the distance between spectacularly mediated theme worlds and augmented authentic grassroots experience. In so doing, we try to close many gaps: between mass marketing and local meaning; between commercial constructions and communal feelings; between digital technology and meat puppet bodies. The result is co-created experience driven by marketers and consumers in which person and public presence become a part of the retail corporation's stage, energy, expression, and meaning, and where marketer authenticity can never be completely included in a brand, but only be signaled by its openness.

## THE INTERPRETIVE COORDINATES OF EXPERIENCE CO-CREATION

We can extend Turner's classic metaphor that says that marketers study consumers for the reasons and in the ways that fishermen study fish, while consumer researchers study consumers for the reasons and in the ways that marine biologists study fish. Notwithstanding, for the moment, the fact that researchers and marketers are, in this metaphor, actually themselves fish as well, the implication is that good consumer research can help marketing by teaching about consumer habits, thoughts, and so forth, and thus helping marketers to better bait their hooks. We would argue that a number of scholars, thus far, have taken a view from the surface of the water. The critical scholars of spectacle (e.g., Debord, 1995) tend to see flocks of consumers being prodded and tricked into marketers' nets through the use of attractive theming-as-bait. Consumers are seen to be bombarded and overwhelmed, dazzled by design, blinded by behavioral science and frenetic engineering into evacuating first their minds, then their wallets.

On the other hand, pro-experience managerial gurus such as Wolf (1999) see schools of consumers swimming hungrily and fruitlessly through the waters of the market, looking for the right kind of lure. Writers such as Wolf argue that shopping is an outlet not only for bargains but for the satisfaction of genuine needs for lightness, fun, and the sharing of life experiences that make life worth living. In short, the one school of thought sees consumers are overwhelmed, driven by producer interests, and the other sees consumer driving the process of commercial experience creation, with producers responding to their needs and feedbacks.

Recently, a more nuanced view has emerged, treating the prior polarizations as partial propositions. Many scholars (Eric Arnould, Linda Price, Linda Scott, Lisa Penaloza, John Sherry, and Robert Kozinets) have written about the active role that consumers play in the process of experiential production–consumption. Consumers treat the complex common grounds of physical commercial playspaces in many ways as their own dropdown menus, drifting and choosing rapidly through their nearly infinite combinations in a myriad of ways (see, for example, Sherry, 1998). As explored in some depth at the sports-themed entertainment complex ESPN Zone Chicago (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004), the interests of consumers and producers are embedded within each other in a process they call "interagency."

Instead of a dichotomous view of agency in which two parties – consumers and producers – vie for control, our findings at *ESPN Zone Chicago* vividly illustrate another model: one of embedded consumer–producers, where consumers produce producers' products at the same time and as much as producers consume consumers' consumption.

Their argument is that "the will of consumers and producers turns out to be far more overlapping, mutual, and interdependent than commonly recognized" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004, p. 671).

Taking this interagency perspective as our starting point, we are beginning to explore the theoretical coordinates that lead to the promised land of deeply meaningful and significant

consumer experiences. What do consumers do with and in the freedom of movement granted them by open environments? How are they creative, and not creative? When do they push back and resist, and when do they simply sit back and enjoy? We are finding that playing with agency is all a part of the play, that the successive taking control and surrendering of the reins of consumer experience is, in itself, an important part of the game of marketing (see Brown, 1995; Deighton and Grayson, 1995). Consumption is a dance of polarities. Through this ancient ritual, self, community, and identity in a corporate consumer culture are inculcated, reinforced, clarified, played with, and transformed.

### **FIRE: A COMPARISON OF GRASSROOTS RITUALS WITH THE IRRESISTIBLE LIGHT**

We begin our overview of grassroots participation with a rather occult example drawn from our fieldwork. Rob and John have been studying the Burning Man festival since first encountering it in a *Wired* magazine article in 1996. The Burning Man festival is a large, proto-Utopian gathering centered upon the burning of a large wood and neon figure of a man, in which community forms quickly and, through the large area of space of the Black Rock desert, is liberated and fired up for playful, ideological, and spiritual pursuits that take place, in some sense, outside the strictures of ordinary market and social logics (Figure 2.1). After several months of working together, the three of us began discussing overlapping fire festival traditions. Stefania noted similarities between the Black Rock festival and the Burning Old Man and Woman Joy Fire of her native Italian village of Premosello Chiovenda (see case vignette 2.1 for a general overview).



**Figure 2.1** *Self-expression and creation of Sacred Space/Time at Burning Man.*

One of the key aspects of Burning Man is what has been termed in another investigation the event's "ludic autotely," which is the phenomenon through which the event's participants are largely responsible for creating and maintaining the playspace for other participants, outside of central organization, financing, or planning. It is play for play's sake, which of necessity plays havoc with formal organization. As with Burning Man's grassroots growth, participant enthusiasm, and creativity, the participants of the folklore traditions in the north of Italy and in the rest of Europe feel a strong sense of communal connection and participation through their fire rituals. As in many cases of ancient traditions drawing from pagan or religious origins, these rites involve the use of fire as propitiation, a necessary means of achieving "purification" from evil, old age, or pain, and/or to ward off death. They are sacrificial in the literal sense – fire is used to leave behind that which is undesired.

A similar neo-Pagan ritual meaning has emerged – largely unbidden by the event's organizers, it seems – by the participants in Nevada's Burning Man. Participants ask each other what they came to burn, and use the ritual fire as a lace to psychically purify their lives by seeking self-transformation through the removal of encumbrances in their lives (Figure 2.2). Often, they will burn photographs or other personal memorabilia that link them to past negative habits, people, and ways of thinking.



**Figure 2.2** *The Infinite Fire at Burning Man.*

In recent years, studies of consumer behavior in a community of young people in a small village located in the mountains of northern Italy, Premosello Chiovenda, have revealed an analogous reinterpretation of this sacrificial fire (see case vignette 2.1). This ritual, called *Carcavegia*, involves the burning of a male and a female figure, which are ceremonially named for the oldest man and woman living in the village. The naming and burning are thought to be good luck for the elderly citizens, but very likely draw from earlier times when they, or stand-ins for them, were sacrificially burned, probably in a fertility ritual or other appeasement of supernatural forces.

In this village, a few volunteers have been given the responsibility of organizing the event for the rest of the community by the local authorities and associations responsible for organizing cultural activities. Over a period of time of six years, we repeatedly observed this group of young people. There were about a dozen young males, who strictly followed local traditions. We observed them as they organized the event as well as during the rest of the year. In the past, the event was considered by these people to be a time for participating in village social life, which they found enjoyable and rewarding. However, the new organizers have recently begun viewing the event in a special way. Rather than regarding the bonfire simply as a game or social event to occupy them for one week in the year, as was the case for their fathers and grandfathers before them, this generation seems to be treating the event more seriously. Unlike their predecessors, they spend more time on a number of activities which transcend ceremonial preparations. They invest considerable time in the forest, cutting wood, preparing the effigy, and then running through the village streets signaling the date of the approaching event. They invest significant time to prepare people socially and emotionally for the ritual experience, just as organizers did in the distant past when the ritual was not only considered traditional or entertaining, but was also rich and redolent with religious and magical meanings.

### CASE VIGNETTE 2.1: CARCAVEGIA<sup>2</sup>

Red sparks and smoke are illuminating the darkness of a freezing night in early January, rising up over the flames consuming two human-like figures, while around the great bonfire, the dark and heavy sound of the horn mixes with a repetitive, plangent ringing of the bells.

This scene, which harkens back to faraway times and places when human sacrifices were common, unfolds in contemporary Premosello Chiovenda, a mountain village in Valle Ossola, a valley in north-east Italy about 100 km from Milan. The celebration is the "*Carcavegia*," a traditional ceremony that villagers have perpetuated from time immemorial, when every 5 January they meet in the middle of the village to burn *al vecc* (the old man) and *la vegia* (the old woman). The ritual begins with the building of a pyre from any combustible material available. The two human-like, stuffed figures representing the oldest persons from the village are placed on the top the pyre (Figure 2.3).

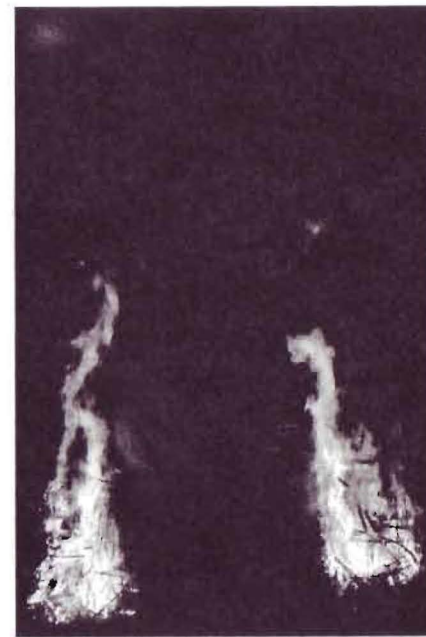


Figure 2.3 The fire of *Carcavegia*.

As for other events in various localities along the Alpine chain and in the Po valley that are comparable in terms of both period and means of celebration, the origins of *Carcavegia* remain as mysterious as ever. We can attribute Celtic origins to this ancient tradition; according to some local historians, this ceremony recalls the pagan feast of the dendrophors who raised a pine dedicated to Cibebe and Attis. Following other interpretations, we can link these rituals to the pagan sun theory and the natural cycle of the seasons or to the purification theory. In many instances, the bonfire ritual symbolizes burning and keeping witches, and therefore evil, away.

Nowadays, the ceremony has lost its original meaning; nonetheless, it has kept a magic and spiritual allure. In the *Carcavegia*, the bonfire is merely the epilogue of a festival that begins on 2 January. Teenagers and young men are the ones who are in charge of staging the ceremony as part of a tourist event that combines tradition and entertainment in a folkloristic mood. Up to the evening before Epiphany, the streets are full of young people collecting combustible material for the pyre to the sound of horns and bells, while others make the stuffed figures of the *vecc* and the *vegia* with a card around their necks bearing the names and surnames. Year after year, obviously, given the longevity of the locals,

the chosen persons change. At the last Carcavegia, in 2005, the man had been born in 1914. This is certainly not a sign of disrespect toward senior citizens but, rather, the continuation of a tradition based on the idea that burning the oldest two in the village can bring good luck. If the two persons cannot go out in the evening, the day before, they can even invite the young people with the *pupun* (the stuffed figures) to their home and offer drinks and sweets. Rarely are the man and woman to be burnt in effigy offended by the honor received (Figure 2.4).

In the recent past, the event in Premosello Chiovenda has begun to embody a different meaning for this community of young organizers. The performance of the bonfire ritual and its staging activities are becoming more and more a representation of their identity and the signification of their shared and distinctive social project.

The young male organizers do not view the event as a transitional period in their lives. They have invested themselves in it and made it a symbol of their lifestyle. Indirectly and unknowingly rebelling against the more liberal and secular lifestyle of their parents and fellow villagers, a trend started by the ambitious yuppies of the 1980s, their role in maintaining their grandfathers' and great-grandfathers' lifestyle involves laying claim to their group identity by way of contrast to the contemporary life of their local community. This seems very much like the generational pendulum swings between secular and religious ideologies and conservative and liberal ideologies noted by a number of historians.

During the rest of the year, these young males study, practice sports, and go to bars and



Figure 2.4 Al vecc (the old man) and la vegia (the old woman) burned in 2004.

other places of entertainment, just as most other people of their age. But their lives are spartan, based on the simple and genuine values of life in the mountains. They relish authenticity. To them, this ancient ritual is a way to strip away the modern world and its multiple levels of falsehoods and wrongs. Although they live the life of well-off adolescents and young people alongside that of peasant life, they are returning to a simpler agrarian lifestyle based upon tradition and nostalgia. They devote themselves to agriculture and animal rearing, having bought, either individually or collectively in the last two years, animals for breeding. They renovate old stables. They are supporting themselves mainly by physical labor and economic sacrifices. Their day is divided between doing things connected with their social status as high school and university students, sons, workers and so on, and performing acts connected with creating a lifestyle that more faithfully brings them into touch with a primal, older way of life that they consider to be authentic and genuine. Observing the multitasking represented by their behavior, actions, speech, and consumer styles, it is interesting to note how this form of identification and distinction from previous generations requires the performance of the fire ritual for its legitimization.

This ritual provides the stage on which they act out their chosen lives, enact their reference values. It represents the ability, strength, and energy catalyzed in the boys' daily lives, the part that other people do not see during the year and which, in the final analysis, should not be seen because it is linked to the value of simplicity. It is an enactment of local ethos more than merely a retro-touristic performance for outsiders. Mountain life does not require individuals to make their lives into a spectacle; only nature and transcendent forces are required. Bonfire time, or Carcavegia as it is called in Premosello, is a time for turning nature's life cycles into a spectacle, from birth to death, for the appearance of magic, the sense of the wonder of nature that follows its course as it always has, year after year. Nature is incorporated, embodied, and harnessed in the ritual giving local ethos a primal charge, in classic Turnerian fashion.

Given the importance of this time and the intrinsic sacredness of the ritual, the spectacle has to be magnificent. Just as with Burning Man's ever growing and ever more mass-mediated spectacle, the bonfire must be very high as it symbolizes the strength and energy of the people who have created and tended it. Competitive and masculine, the bigger the fire, the stronger and more suitable the male. The fire should be huge, frightening, and imposing, signaling a more powerful village than the neighboring village, halfway down the mountain, which is holding its own fire ritual. The bonfire glows out on the mountain, proclaiming an existential "we are here" once a year, and simultaneously symbolizing the continuity of life. The young men, far from conformists, have their own sense of right and wrong, driven by the fire's innate competitive rules. They resist the safety restrictions imposed by the local authority for the event, viewing them as antithetical to the event's competitive meanings and striving soul. They are unwilling to compromise; "their" fire must be large and frightening, not small and unimpressive. Much is at stake.

The fire's success symbolizes the abilities and legitimacy – the worthiness in the eyes of whichever gods one chooses – of this small village community. Likewise, it elevates the team of young men who, fighting against the postmodern tide of capricious and superficial

demands of the ever-changing global present, are able to prove through a rite of passage that they can handle well the fire passed on to them by prior generations.

The Burning Man and Burning Old Man and Woman Joy Fire rituals have common origins and surprisingly similar themes. The deep involvement of consumers in the Burning Man festival has been documented extensively elsewhere (e.g., Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets and Sherry, 2004). However, the organization, competition, spirituality, and self-governance of these shared experiences are, we believe, no accident. They are central to our understanding of the forces that drive the communal adoption of participation in social environments (Figure 2.5).

The spectacle, the emancipatory, purifying, cleansing, and literal power of fire, is no doubt part of the ritual, but “fire” is an energetic concept that could be applied to many spectacles in our world, including concerts, celebrity, mass media appearances, religion, sports, war, and even major business spectacles such as trade shows. Each, like the bonfire, promises its own variety of transcendence as well as entertainment. Each has a fanatical following. Each has its leaders and its more passive audiences. But especially in the fire rituals we have described above, the active participation by devoted attendants, which we call a form of “ludic autotely,” is crucial to belief and to psychic resonance. At Burning Man, where thousands of people build theme camps for one another, where people are constantly admonished to “radically participate” and that there are “no spectators” at the event, active co-creation is woven into the very fabric of the gathering. The grassroots result of this participation is simple, primal, and profound. When people participate – whether they be Mountain Men re-enactors, Civil War re-enactors, Renaissance Fair re-enactors, Star Trek fans, X-files convention organizers, Star Wars movie line campouts, river rafters, sky-divers, anti-Nike activists, Mac user groups, online coffee connoisseurs, massively multiplayer Halo2 gamers, or Harley-Davidson brandfest organizers – they are brought into the circle of the fire. In ludic autotely, they create for each other. They share with and care for one another.

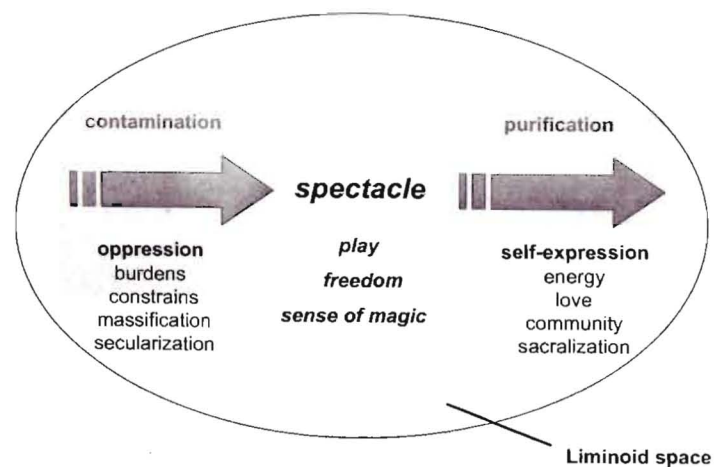


Figure 2.5 The co-creation of fire rituals.

other. They build on the creative energy of their fire. They create a separate space, away from the mundane. Through their sacrifices and gifts, they co-construct a sense of the sacred.

The liminal is a threshold quality of the second stage of ritual that involves a change to participants, often a transformation of their social status (Turner, 1974). The liminal state, when ritual actors are betwixt and between their old and new identities, is characterized by ambiguity, openness, disorientation, transition, and indeterminacy. In industrial societies, the process is called “liminoid” (Turner, 1974). The process of purification in Figure 2.5 takes place in a particular liminoid zone, with all of the liminal’s sense of uncertainty and possibility, but with none of its formalized ritual status change.

## IN ANOTHER FUEGO: THE COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION OF CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

We will consider a form of consumption that is related to the experiential themed environment of places such as ESPN Zone, a super-themed multifarious sports bar-based entertainment complex created by the master imaginers at the Disney Company (Figure 2.6).

In Italy, we have studied and found similar types of behavior at two major fairs for car lovers and related sports, Motor Show and My Special Car Show (see case vignette 2.2). For five days every year, fans sharing this interest meet in Bologna for a regular annual meeting to preview new cars and racing sports items, to try out new technology, to have “hands-on” experience with the cars and motorbikes of the future, to see their favorite champions racing. They gather for the pure pleasure of performing in front of enthusiasts. In this context,



Figure 2.6 The atrium of ESPN Zone, Chicago: the gateway to the world of televised experience of sport.

consumers temporarily live in a world full of surprises and fun linked to their favorite sport, they build on their own identities as experts, and they gather information and enjoy the experience of living at the forefront of innovation. By trying out the new cars and new technology, visitors can not only exchange ideas about the products and develop their own brand preferences, but can also test their expertise and build their own identity as racing connoisseurs.

## CASE VIGNETTE 2.2: MOTOR SHOW AND MY SPECIAL CAR SHOW

The Motor Show, held for more than thirty years in Italy, is a sector-focused exhibition dedicated to the world of motoring, cars, and motorcycles. In December, more than a million motoring enthusiasts keep an appointment for nine days, during which the most important global producers present the innovations in the sector to dealers and to the public. The exhibition covers an area of 460,000 square feet, of which 300,000 square feet is dedicated to competitions, performance exhibitions, and product tests. In this area, there are more than 400 exhibitors of cars, motorcycles, and related products and services.

The exhibition has been enriched over time. Today, alongside the presentation and testing of product innovations, competitions and product exhibitions of the highest level are held in which champions from various disciplines participate, meeting their fans in an atmosphere of entertainment and in celebration of the motor industry (Figure 2.7).

In line with the strategy of making the visitor/consumer ever more the protagonist, the organizers have held a second event alongside the exhibition, dedicated to car enthusiasts, and in particular to car tuning. Since 2004, Rimini has been the location for the "My Special Car Show" dedicated to the "celebration" of the personalized car. During this event, not only can the players in the custom and sports car sectors present their products and services, but consumers can

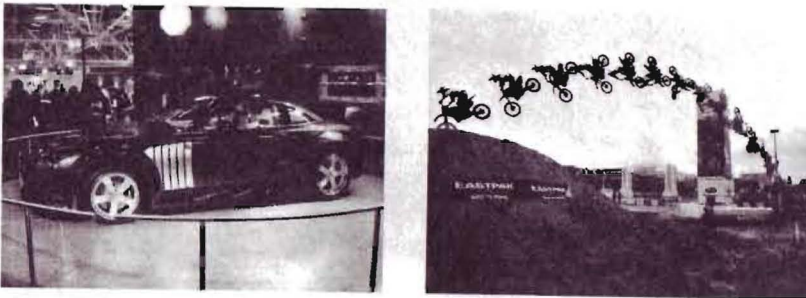


Figure 2.7 New product exhibition and entertainment at the Motor Show.

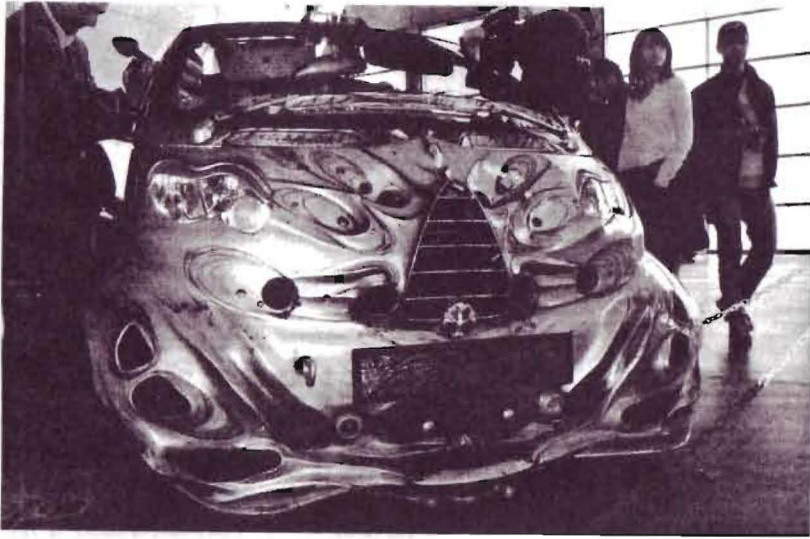
also exhibit their own personalized cars and share a common passion with the visitors. In the "My Special Club" section, clubs can hire special areas where they can show their members' cars. In this context, the exhibition space and opportunity are important occasions not only to share a passion but also to "exhibit" and to be observed, even rewarded.

Of major interest to us was the participatory aspect of the show, its own brand of ludic autotely. Because some of the consumers wish to star in the show and feature their own personal experiences, and resist the limited ways in which the marketers expect them to participate, for several years, the fair has had a section dedicated to custom cars and cars personalized by consumers. Much as with Burning Man's many art cars, theme camps, and technological innovations, ordinary people at these shows exhibit their own personalized cars, showing interested visitors the devices and innovations that they have created with their own taste and creativity.

Gradually, the section took on the role of a stage for a person's own performance, for the intermingling of individual identity project, life themes, interests, and branded products. In this situation, the consumer/builder and the visitors who share interests and curiosity contribute to the creation of an event and a phenomenon, going beyond the boundaries originally envisioned by event organizers. This transformation from trade show to star of the show seemed to make all the difference to participants. The level and degree of entertainment shifted, and the experimental area assumed the coordinates of liminal space (Turner, 1974). New layers of authenticity and meaning accreted. Over time, the phenomenon became so significant that the organizers created a special fair dedicated exclusively to this section of the main fair, which is held today in another city, Rimini, at a different time of the year. Today, therefore, car enthusiasts have their own physical space and time for an ad hoc event which ultimately ratifies their "sovereignty."

As one of the participants explained, these consumers/builders sometimes dedicate hundreds of hours of their free time to work on their cars, using their creativity and practical skills to make them unique. During the event, their "baby" comes to life in front of an audience that can appreciate and understand its value and also relate to its creators (Figure 2.8).

What is fascinating to note about these examples is the role of consumer participation in even the most industrial events. The indomitable creativity of the human spirit shines through these examples, as consumers usurp ESPN Zone's themed environment and, say, use a rifle simulation to turn into snipers preying on innocent bystanders, or to become celebrities in a pickup game of basketball on a mini-court (see Kozinets *et al.*, 2004). In Burning Man, major degrees of freedom are fully utilized, producing an out-of-this-world artistic and experimental experience. In fact, the etymology of both the words experiment and experience are the same: the Latin root *experiri*, a test or a trial. Consumers are testing creatively, trying through their actions to express themselves, their individuality. This



■ **Figure 2.8** Exhibiting creativity at My Special Car Show.

experimentation is found throughout all four of our example sites in varying degrees but, in each case, the results are profound and unmistakable: where consumers are given large degrees of freedom to create or co-create with organizers, they feel it as authenticity, a type of soulfulness and meaning, and they respond with enthusiasm, energy, and action. Marketers may think that their job is to provide a prepackaged total experience – but consumers must add their dreams, ideals, values, history, meanings, and personalities to these raw ingredients. In the end, it is only the consumers' experience that counts.

Play becomes a competitive activity in these environments as well, and this is another powerful force (Figure 2.9). Consumers struggle against time and each other, in rituals originally designed – and perhaps still culturally and biologically wired – as placemarkers in time and space. They contend with other elements as well, notably an *arrangement of the game* which surrounds the process. This includes the rules and order of the game, the hedonistic aspects of the game, the degrees of freedom, the types of players and referees, the creation of a game-playing community that shares the game and thus realizes it or makes it real. It also includes the *real and imaginary space* in which the game takes place, the place wherein the game's contrasts with day-to-day reality are made evident.

Playfulness in these rituals becomes not a side-benefit, but an expression of their very essence, as luminous, frightening, and powerful creative forces play with lives and human events, so too do humans play with the forces of ritual and nature. The play, the ritual, the participation, the growth, and allusions to transformation and transmutation are essential and fundamental activities in themselves, ontological constituents of human life (Fink, 1986) that, we would argue here, are fundamental to experiential marketing practice and consumption. “The play’s the thing” is a bardic encapsulation of ludic autotely.



■ **Figure 2.9** Play at ESPN Zone.

### WALKING ACROSS THE BONFIRE: CONSUMER CREATION AND CO-CREATION

Anthropology and phenomenological geography tell us that the importance of the physical and tangible environment of a space cannot be understated and must be carefully managed. Space is transformed into place through the incorporation and acknowledgment of cultural meaning, of boundaries, rules, structures, paths, which consumers interpret and use as journey-makers to find their own ways. As marketers design experiences, it is powerful to consider what consumers will use these experiences for. Each pilgrimage may be part of a larger pyramid, each experience part of a larger journey. Experiences become the raw material of life. Place becomes a space for need fulfillment, interpreted, sculpted, modeling.

The co-creation of consumer experience by a self-aware, creative, and active consumer who is able to interpret and freely redefine rules and proposals from marketers can be based on several foundational elements that we have described in this chapter: rules, challenges, competition, community, tradition, history, enactment, and embodiment. The presence of strong culture enhances all of these elements and, in today's society, as suggested by the Italian and American fire rituals, a strong sense of tradition and nostalgia seem to signal authenticity to consumers. With their own creativity, imagination, and openness, marketers and their companies might design experiences responsive to customization by the consumer. Marketers might view even the most elaborate experiences as ingredients that consumers will use in different ways for their own differing recipes for life and happiness. Consumers become the co-authors of their own experiences, assisted and listened to by marketers, who offer an incredible profusion of images, myths, stories, and experiences.

The never-ending story of consumers as co-creative wild things will then continue, as



the children's stories foretell that they will. With marketers in tow, consumers will mix and match, blending, as our opening Dr. Seuss rhyme avers, kites and their beds, and walking with a row of upright cats on their heads. The boundless creativity of the consumer is, and always was, the source of marketing experience and consumption experientiality.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What other examples can you think of that involve the strong consumer co-creation of experience?
  - If consumers create their own experiences, doesn't this mean they are producers? Can you create and consume at the same time?
  - Does it really make sense to call all shopping mall experiences creative or experiential? Or might these ideas just apply to certain stores or spaces?
  - Which are some of the strongest forces that drive consumers' participation in these environments?
  - What do you think the future holds for playful consumer experiences such as the type we described here? Will we see more or less of them? Why?
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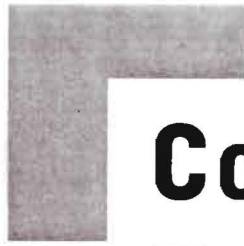
## NOTES

- 1 Containing some original material, this chapter also summarizes and combines the findings of already published research, while both recapitulating and advancing new theory. Through citation of this larger body of work, we refer readers throughout to these other studies.
  - 2 We are grateful to our key informants, Pierantonio and Silvano Ragozza, for their contribution in collecting data about the origins and evolution of the Carcavegia ritual.
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