“I’m a Completely Different Person Now”: Extraordinary Experiences, Personal Transformation, and the Sport Organization

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A satisfactory participant experience is important to sport providers because satisfaction can lead to retention (cf. Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). However, sport providers should also be concerned with creating extraordinary experiences as these experiences can generate lasting shifts in beliefs and attitudes, including toward the provider (Schouten, McAlexander & Koenig, 2007). Extraordinary experiences are characterized by interpersonal interaction, separation from the usual, and feelings of self-transformation or personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993). Personal transformations can be a particularly important outcome of extraordinary experiences for sport providers as these transformations allow individuals to develop a “new self-definition” through “expanding consciousness” (Wade, 1998, 716). This new self-definition has the potential to include an identity linked with the sport organization or sport in general. To date, there has been little research in understanding sport’s ability to provide extraordinary experiences, beyond risky or extreme sports (cf. Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012; Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993; Dodson, 1996; Shoham, Rose & Kahle, 1998, 2000). This research project examines the relationship between extraordinary sport experiences, participant’s feelings of personal transformation, and impacts on sport and the organization.

Texas 4000 is a community of cancer fighters who “train, fundraise, educate, and bring hope to those with cancer” for one year before their participation culminates with a 4,500 mile bike ride across the country. University students apply to participate in the organization, and once accepted they begin planning, fundraising, volunteering and training for their ride. This bike ride allows members to interact with members of the communities they ride through to spread “hope, knowledge, and charity,” and is characterized by interactions with fellow riders and individuals met along the ride, separation from normal routines and responsibilities, and feelings of self-transformation. Since the ride’s inception, 471 individuals have completed the ride.

These 471 alumni were recruited via e-mail, and 32 riders agreed to participate in this study (6.7% of all alumni). They participated in Skype, phone, or in-person semi-structured interviews (depending on their proximity to the primary researcher) that examined the participant’s backgrounds and motivations to participate, their participation in the organization leading up to the extraordinary experience of the ride, their experience on the ride, and how it has impacted their life in the months and years since participation. The questions were derived from work on transcendent customer experiences, extraordinary experiences, and personal transformations (cf. Lundberg, McCormick, Tanguchi & Tibbs, 2011; Schouten et al., 2007) and reviewed for face validity by a panel of sport management and qualitative research experts. Participants were three months to ten years removed from their experience, and represented a wide range of leadership positions in the organization, year in school (e.g. freshman, sophomore, etc.), ride years (i.e. the year they completed the ride), majors, and ages. Interviews were then transcribed and coded first using in vivo codes followed by pattern codes (Saldaña, 2009).

Participants’ described undergoing a “life-changing” transformation that was built through the extraordinary experience of the summer ride. Although participating in the organization prior to the ride gave them some skills necessary for the ride, the interpersonal relationships that developed during the summer, the rituals and traditions, the memorable and intense physical and emotional challenges, new and unusual activities and events all led to feelings of personal transformations for participants. The riders reported that after riding across the country they felt a sense of moral responsibility to the organization and individuals they met through the experience to continue living their life with meaning and purpose. Additionally, the experience left them with a sense of empowerment that endured for years after their experience. Finally, participants continued their relationships with fellow riders and others they had met along the ride.
For organizations looking to build a sense of community around their brand, cause or sport, providing an opportunity for personal transformation through extraordinary experiences can be an opportunity to build a lasting community. The findings of this study support previous research into extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Schouten et al., 2007) and extend the understanding of how extraordinary experiences create personal transformation that lead to community integration beyond the brand to include other associations of the experience that extend the experience for many years.