Selling Pain to the Saturated Self

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How can we comprehend people who pay for an experience marketed as painful? On one hand, consumers spend billions of dollars every year to alleviate different kinds of pain. On the other hand, millions of individuals participate in extremely painful leisure pursuits. In trying to understand this conundrum, we ethnographically study a popular adventure challenge where participants subject themselves to electric shocks, fire, and freezing water. Through sensory intensification, pain brings the body into sharp focus, allowing individuals to rediscover their corporeality. In addition, painful extraordinary experiences operate as regenerative escapes from the self. By flooding the consciousness with gnawing unpleasantness, pain provides a temporary relief from the burdens of self-awareness. Finally, when leaving marks and wounds, pain helps consumers create the story of a fulfilled life. In a context of decreased physicality, market operators play a major role in selling pain to the saturated selves of knowledge workers, who use pain as a way to simultaneously escape reflexivity and craft their life narrative.

Keywords: extraordinary experience, pain, embodiment, ethnography, sociology of consumption, experiential consumption, knowledge work

Pain is a fundamental facet of human existence. We have all felt it. We have all suffered from it. Pain has such power that even a simple migraine can render us incapable of functioning in the world. Consumers spend billions of dollars every year on medication and health care for just this reason—to alleviate pain. The simultaneous appeal of pain-inducing consumer experiences is thus a confounding phenomenon. Obstacle races that induce intense physical pain and exhaustion are marketed as a challenge. On one hand, consumers seek medication to soothe their pain. On the other, many consumers are willing to pay for experiences that are marketed as intensely painful. How can we make sense of this paradox?

Although pain is a central facet of the human condition, it "remains understudied and under-theorized within the social sciences" (Green 2011, 378), especially in consumer research. Consumer researchers have long acknowledged that consumers may seek physically and emotionally painful experiences (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), but the topic of pain itself has rarely been addressed.

Our research puts forward a more comprehensive understanding of pain and its role in extraordinary experiences. We develop our insights from an ethnography of Tough Mudder, a particularly grueling adventure challenge involving a series of approximately 25 military-style obstacles to overcome in half a day: running through burning

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hay bales, wading through torrents of mud, slithering through tightly enclosed spaces, plunging seven feet into freezing water, and even crawling through 10,000 volts of electric wires (see details about Tough Mudder obstacles in the following table). Injuries have included spinal damage, strokes, heart attacks, and even death. Yet, rather than being discouraged by the company's warnings of potential injury, the promise of intense pain, or even the hefty entrance fee (starting at around US $140), over 2.5 million men and women had entered the challenge as of September 2016 (Jerome Hiquet, Tough Mudder Chief Marketing Officer, personal communication, September 2016).

Our research has found that obstacle racing participants enter this kind of challenge for a number of reasons: they are enthusiastic about running as a team, in contrast to the isolation of endurance events like triathlons; they turn to obstacle racing to add a very distinctive experience to their list of achievements; and they are drawn to the primitive qualities of confronting their bodies with various elements (e.g., electricity, freezing water, mud).

However, even though these different lines of explanation are consistent with past research on memorable extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Keinan and Kivetz 2011), some puzzling questions remain: How can we comprehend consumers spending significant amounts of money on an experience that is deliberately marketed as painful? What does pain add to an extraordinary experience?

Extraordinary experiences help us transcend the monotony of daily life and its lack of surprises (Cohen and Taylor 1976). Engaging in an intense experience like skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) or river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993) is also attempting to escape boredom. Hobbies and holidays are "routes out" (Cohen and Taylor 1976, 114) that allow us to get away from the tedious repetition of everyday routines. Immersion in a natural environment in particular is described as an especially regenerative experience that compensates for the damaging effects of urban life (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013).

The appeal of intensely physical experiences also resides in the discomfort they generate. Consider that mountaineering often entails "exhaustion, snow-blindness, sunburn, altitude sickness, sleeplessness, squalid conditions, hunger, fear, and realization of that fear (in the form of accidents)" (Loewenstein 1999, 318). Loewenstein argues that "pain and discomfort are, to some degree" the point of mountaineering (p. 325). But while Tumbat and Belk's (2011) description of climbing Mount Everest powerfully captures the individual and fiercely competitive dimensions of mountain climbing, their account largely eschews the process of enduring pain that mountaineering involves.

Obstacle	Description
Death March	Mudders charge up a mountain on a red-graded ski run.
Devil's Beard	Participants get caught like a fly in a spider's web of low cargo nets.
Boa Constrictor	Participants crawl through a cold, dark, confined tunnel.
Tired Yet?	Mudders run through a sea of tires, some of which are full of mud.
Tree Hugger	Participants run up a ski slope with only trees to support them.
Ball Shrinker	Participants support themselves on a slippery rope to cross a cold mud pit.
Mud Mile	Mudders crawl through a mile of immersing mud trenches.
Kiss of Mud	Participants eat dirt as they crawl on their bellies.
Hold Your Wood	Participants drag a large log up a ski slope.
Hey Bales	Insurmountable bales are placed in the Mudders' path.
Evil Knievel	Participants rely on each other to make it over this slippery pyramid.
Spider's Web	Participants fight their way up and over two muddy cargo nets.
Electric Eel	Mudders crawl under electric wires delivering a 10,000-volt electric shock.
Walk the Plank	Mudders jump 15 feet into a cold muddy pond.
Underwater Tunnels	In freezing, muddy water, Mudders duck under obstacles in their path.
Glacier	Teams scramble up a 100-foot wall of ice to reach the summit.
The Gauntlet	Mudders run through a half-pipe.
Arctic Enema	Participants are submerged in freezing cold water, under a chain fence.
Red Hot Blood Bath	Mudders must eat a hot pepper and then jump into a pool of water dyed red.
Funky Monkey	Participants cross a muddy lake on greased monkey bars.
Berlin Walls	Camaraderie is generated as teams help one another over the 12-foot-high walls.
Tower Hurdle	Mudders climb over a maze of chair lift towers.
Fire Walker	Four-feet-high flames blaze as Mudders run through kerosene-soaked straw.
Turd's Nest	Suspended in the air, participants try not to fall as they cross a fragile net.
Greased Lightning	Mudders slide down a steep hill, landing head-first in a pond.
Everest	This keystone obstacle is a greasy half-pipe climb. Runners are required to wait at the top and help their fellow Mudders up.
Electroshock Therapy	Teams run, crawl, and jump through 10,000-volt electric wires.
Twinkle Toes	Participants balance on a narrow wooden beam over an icy pit.

More broadly, consumer scholarship on extraordinary experiences has not explored how pain potentially contributes to these experiences.

In addition, we must better understand the sociocultural context that frames escape attempts. As our study will demonstrate, it is difficult to understand how pain and exhaustion could add meaning to an extraordinary experience without considering both the reduced physicality of office life and the intense boredom contemporary work practices seem to generate (Costas and Kärreman 2016). We must also consider the demands of sustaining a coherent yet constantly revised biographical narrative (Giddens 1991). When added to the worries and constraints of everyday life, the demands of these reflexive practices create a "saturated self" (Gergen 1991). The weariness of being a self (Ehrenberg 2009) is something knowledge workers seem especially keen to escape. As a result, a painful event like Tough Mudder specifically targets "cubicle-bound masses yearning to breathe free" (Stein 2012). Building from the insight that pain always lies at the intersection of biology and culture (Bendelow and Williams 1995), we study pain as an experience blending the material and the social, mind and body, and human and nonhuman elements as interwoven entities (Bendelow and Williams 1995, 2002). We combine these various levels of analysis to study the mystifying role of pain in extraordinary experiences.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In building the theoretical foundations of our study, we draw from past consumer research on extraordinary experiences, as well as insights from a variety of disciplines on pain, to help us analyze and understand this puzzling phenomenon: why would consumers pay for experiences that are deliberately marketed as painful?

Extraordinary Experiences as Escapes

Extraordinary experiences such as river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi et al. 1993), climbing Everest (Tumbat and Belk 2011), surfing (Canniford and Shankar 2013), and participating in the Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002) or the Mountain Man Rendez-Vous (Belk and Costa 1998) resemble Tough Mudder. Indeed, these adventures all allow individuals to free themselves from the tedium of the everyday by engaging in an event that is intense and temporally marked-out, which are the defining features of an extraordinary experience (Abrahams 1986). From this perspective, these various activities are escape attempts (Cohen and Taylor 1976) providing relief from the structural demands of institutional arrangements (Turner 1969).

Past scholarship has brought to light various features of contemporary life that individuals are eluding: the repetitive monotony of the "9 to 5 lifestyle" (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998, 103); family responsibilities (Kozinets et al. 2004; Taheri et al. 2016); social obligations and the frustrations they generate (Belk and Costa 1998; Hewer and Hamilton 2010); the phoniness and inauthenticity of commercial interactions (Kozinets 2002; Grayson and Martinec 2004); the boredom of contemporary work (Costas and Kärreman 2016); the accelerated tempo of modernity (Brissett and Snow 1993); confinement (Schouten and McAlexander 1995); and the overcivilized dimension of urban life, which cuts individuals off from nature (Edensor 2000).

While the work of the imagination and immersion into fantasy worlds are powerful forms of escape (Jenkins, Nixon, and Molesworth 2011), extraordinary experiences that happen in natural environments seem to provide individuals with a distinctive form of regeneration. Indeed, past research portrays the experience of nature as a healing experience. Contact with natural elements offsets the enervating effects of office work (Arnould and Price 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013). For instance, walking in the country is "an escape from the 'inauthentic' enactions of everyday urban life, moulded by 'over-civilized' norms of behavior" (Edensor 2000, 87). Past research suggests that extraordinary experiences, by offering immersion and confrontation with the natural elements, bring regeneration and transcendence in ways that evoke the wilderness cults of the nineteenth century and the idea that the wilderness could offer purification from the ills of civilization (Ray 2009).

As Tumbat and Belk (2011) demonstrate, though, escape attempts into the wild are often much less communal and romantic than they seem. Evidence from research on mountaineering shows that, while climbers escape into the wild, climbing remains intensely competitive and individualistic (Loewenstein 1999).

Extraordinary experiences can also generate what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as "flow," a phenomenological state of total absorption and involvement that diverts people's attention from the mundane by shifting their focus to the experience at hand. When individuals experience flow, they temporarily lose their sense of place and time, freeing them from the intense temporal structuring and busyness of everyday life (Hoschild 1997). Overall, various studies in the fields of psychology and consumer culture all converge to present extraordinary experiences as escape attempts (Cohen and Taylor 1976).

However, barring recent exceptions (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Hewer and Hamilton 2010; Woermann and Rokka 2015), past consumer research has rarely focused on the role of the body in extraordinary experiences. In Arnould and Price's (1993) research on river rafting, the body appears mainly in informant quotes describing the "natural high" of "feeling all the muscles work in harmony" (p. 39). Celsi and his colleagues (1993, 1) describe how a skydiver changes "her body position from a dive to

a flare, much like a bird landing or swooping in on prey." Belk and Costa (1998) talk about excessive drinking as a way for mountain men to flaunt the rules of city life. At the Burning Man festival the body is a surface that participants paint to transcend their everyday identity (Kozinets 2002).

Despite evidence that getting close to nature in river rafting, mountain climbing, or surfing is also about mobilizing the body in ways that differ from the everyday, consumer researchers have usually avoided discussing the embodied dimension of extraordinary experiences to focus instead on the way consumers experience the wilderness and the meanings they attach to it (Arnould and Price 1993). To use Joy and Sherry's (2003, 280) turn of phrase, researchers have focused more on "emplacement" than on embodiment in analyzing the bodily dimension of extraordinary experiences.

In contrast, recent work has managed to foreground the primacy of the body in extraordinary experiences (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Hewer and Hamilton 2010; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Hewer and Hamilton (2010) portray salsa dancing as a form of release from the stresses of the everyday. A salsero describes his dancing as a way to "release everything from your body" (p. 115). Canniford and Shankar's (2013) research is also noteworthy in analyzing the embodied and sensorial processes in surfing. Their research acknowledges the way "materials of nature" (p. 1035), such as the "ethereal materiality of the sea" (p. 1055), interact with surfers' bodies in regenerative ways. With salsa dancing, skydiving, river rafting, or surfing, individuals escape into another world, but they also use their bodies in ways that are therapeutic.

These studies of embodiment are consistent with the broader epistemological project, in various disciplines, to go beyond the mind/body dualism of Cartesian thinking. As Lock (1993, 136) puts forward: "interpretations that seek explicitly to collapse mind/body dualities, or that are essentially dialectical or montage-like in form, are now privileged." Building from this approach Scott, Martin, and Schouten (2014, 4) advocate for consumer research a "new materialism that rejects dualisms in favor of a holistic monism, and it rejects reductionism of any kind in favor of whole-system thinking." Similarly, in this article, we build from Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological approach, which replaces the subject/object and mind/body dualisms with the continuum of life expressed in his conceptualization of "flesh" to describe the continuity between the world and the body, and analyze the world in terms of the body's corporeality.

Research using a phenomenological perspective is concerned with what the body does—that is, the active role of the body in social life (Crossley 1995)—and it focuses on the phenomenological field that enwraps subjects during certain activities. For example, "the phenomenal field of skiing consists of proprioceptions of sharp acceleration, abruptly changing orientations of the body, wind in the face, changing vistas of the surrounding landscape, different sounds, and so on" (Woermann and Rokka 2015, 1490). In a similar vein, Joy and Sherry (2003) further establish the way cognitive processes are rooted in the body's interactions with the world, by studying the role of embodiment in shaping the imagination. Finally, drawing upon a more "sociologised" form of phenomenology (in contrast to Joy and Sherry's focus on the unconscious), Allen-Collinson and Owton (2015) research the sensory experience of running—for instance, by showcasing "the hot body drenched in sweat, the cold body inhaling icy shards" (p. 262). In our research, we try to stay connected to this more carnal and sensory sociology (Crossley 1995) in order to analyze a painful experience as it unfolds.

The Role of Pain in Shaping Experiences

While experiential marketing guidelines emphasize the need "to entertain, stimulate and emotionally affect consumers through the consumption experience" (Tynan and McKechnie 2009, 503), the literature on the design of experiences almost never mentions the issue of pain in creating experiences that consumers will find appealing. For instance, while scholars acknowledge that consumers "often experience negative and positive affect at the same time," a prevailing assumption in consumer research is that "people try to pursue pleasure and avoid pain" (Schmitt 2011, 27). Yet pain is a fundamental part of many consumer experiences, and as our findings will show, it is critical to an experience like Tough Mudder.

Pain surfaces in a variety of past consumer research scholarship, even if it is often in passing. For instance, when studying cosmetic surgery, Schouten (1991, 413) mentions the "discomfort, pain, and risk" people expose themselves to as they seek to "conform to culturally prescribed standards of beauty" by going through extreme cosmetic procedures. Tumbat and Belk (2013, 54) notice for climbers of Everest that experiences "got interrupted because of the uncontrollable nature of the undertaking. People got sick (e.g., infections, altitude sickness) and accidents happened on a regular basis." Finally, although he does not focus on the issue of pain, Thompson's (2005) study of the American natural childbirth community demonstrates how women refusing medicalized childbirth spaces rely on the cultural model of natural childbirth to view and talk about pain management techniques.

A deeper analysis of past research on pain reveals four key additional insights: (1) pain helps bring our bodies back to our attention; (2) pain creates a bereavement of the self that is crucial to many rituals; (3) pain facilitates physical rediscovery and spiritual elevation; and (4) pain is fundamentally a biocultural phenomenon.

First, pain allows people to become more aware of their corporeality (Leder 1990; Roux 2014). Patterson and Schroeder (2010) show that the curious marriage of

pleasure and pain inherent in the tattooing process brings people's attention to their bodies. Studying mixed martial arts practitioners, Green (2011, 381) argues that intense pain "has an immediacy that pushes inwards," directing the subject's attention to the body part that aches, entailing a retreat of the subject into his or her body to focus on particular sensations and body parts. Roux (2014, 76) cites the "cathartic value" of the pain of tattooing that makes one informant feel like "her body exists."

Second, pain is central to various rituals, especially rites of passage. Morinis (1985, 51) argues that while pain has generally been considered a "by-product" of rites of initiation, it is one of its most important components. When they are experiencing the intense pain of biting, cutting, or excising, the initiands of a rite of passage suddenly gain the awareness that something significant is happening. Pain also tears the initiand away from old routines and certainties. Morinis (1985, 60) talks about pain as a "peak experience" that "dishabituates" by assaulting existing patterns of thought. Saketopoulou (2014, 262) argues that pain is "conducive to allowing the self to be stitched anew in novel and productive ways." Pain helps facilitate the "unmaking and making of the world" (Scarry 1985) that is at the core of transition rites (Schouten 1991).

Third, adventure sports enthusiasts, such as mountain climbers, talk about reaching spiritual elevation or "grace" through pain (Krakauer 1997, 136):

> "And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace."

Drawing from a wide range of contexts, Le Breton (2000, 2) argues that participating in extreme sports helps participants develop a "personally generated spirituality achieved through the ordeal." When studying tourists hiking the Inca Trail in Peru, Cutler, Carmichael, and Doherty (2014, 164) argue that "memorable experiences are more complex than providing pleasure [. . .] it was the moments of difficulty, of overcoming pain and struggle, which led to understandings of self and more meaningful and memorable tourist experiences." These findings corroborate Arnould and Price's (1993, 24) description of extraordinary experiences potentially leading to "self-renewal and personal growth," but they also highlight the potential role of pain in this regeneration and transformation of the self. Pain, when it is chosen, becomes an agent of metamorphosis, helping individuals develop a new understanding of their body and its limits (Le Breton 2010).

Finally, as Thompson's study (2005) suggests, pain cannot be reduced to a set of biological responses. We always learn to interpret and feel pain within specific sociocultural and historical contexts. Pain is "always saturated with the visible or invisible imprint of specific human cultures. We learn to feel pain and learn what it means" (Morris 1991, 14). The meanings that people attach to pain always emerge in a social environment, in the interaction with "other bodies and social environments" (Bourke 2014, 16). Specific contexts shape whether it becomes legitimate or not to express one's pain (Le Breton 2006). Consequently, pain is best studied in the "messy real world that it naturally inhabits" rather than in a laboratory (Bourke 2014, 16).

Building from this suggestion to study pain in context, we study pain anthropologically. We take the perspective, extensively detailed by Le Breton (2006, 2010), that pain is not the recording of a physiological datum, but an interpretation that is colored by the social, cultural, and personal background of the person experiencing it. Pain is fundamentally a very individual and intimate experience, but the meaning we give to it is always tied to a complex sociocultural matrix. Pain emerges at the confluence of culture and biology (Glucklich 2001). Our objective in this research is to link these different dimensions of experienced pain and to understand what kind of role they play in escape attempts.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

After reviewing past research on pain, we identified a variety of methodological challenges. For instance, if pain is such a personal experience, and if the experience of pain is so difficult to communicate to others (Scarry 1985), how can we investigate and describe this experience? Moreover, what kind of representational strategy can we employ to problematize the body through discourse and beyond the mind/body dichotomy? Dualistic thinking has been so prevalent in shaping Western intellectual history that we still lack the words, concepts, and theoretical frameworks to conform to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological project.

In order to deal with these methodological issues, we have used a wide range of ethnographic methods, which we detail below and in the following table. As we seek to develop an ethnography that attends to the "physical, material, psychological and emotional dimensions" of pain (Buckingham and Degen 2012, 337), we deploy various types of data collection, including: (1) participant observation; (2) the collection of visual materials; (3) in-depth interviews; and (4) netnography.

Participant Observation

Our lead researcher conducted the bulk of the ethnographic fieldwork, taking on three different roles to provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the Tough Mudder experience: as a spectator, a volunteer, and a Tough Mudder participant. As a spectator she was able to take ethnographic field notes detailing the chronology of the event, the interaction between participants and obstacles, and the sensory qualities of the experience itself

Research site	Researcher role	Data
Drumlanrig Castle, Scotland (2012)	*Observer:* Participants arriving into local town; obstacle course and base camp at the event	GoPro videos (two hours); pictures (132); field notes (2,038 words); researcher diary (4,830 words)
Glenworth Valley, Sydney, NSW, Australia (2012)	*Participant observer:* Participated in a team of three. Two research assistants capturing video and taking pictures	Pre- and post-event phenomenological interviews with photo elicitation (142,512 words); GoPro videos (two hours); pictures (111); researcher diary (10,490 words)
Fernhill Estate, Mulgola, Sydney, NSW, Australia (2013)	*Participant observer:* Working with a team of Tough Mudder volunteers to support the event; living with the same two female Mudders for nine months	Pre- and post-event phenomenological interviews with photo elicitation (50,669 words); GoPro videos (two hours); pictures (117); field notes (3,550 words); two participant diaries (2,504 words)
Lake Las Vegas, Nevada, United States (2015)	*Participant observer:* Independently completed Tough Mudder	Pre-event phenomenological interviews (9,482 words); GoPro videos (two hours); pictures (418); field notes (17,550 words); two participant diaries (1,952 words)

(e.g., sounds, sensations, smells, striking images). As a volunteer, going behind the scenes of the course enabled her to better understand the careful crafting of obstacles and the critical role of the Tough Mudder organization in fashioning a very distinctive kind of experience.

As a participant in two Tough Mudder challenges, our lead researcher was also able to develop a more intimate understanding of the event. As in other contexts, the lead researcher used her body as a tool for inquiry and knowledge creation (Green 2011), engaging in a process of self-witnessing—that is, the observation of her own experience, as she interacted and ran alongside other Tough Mudder participants. The ability to walk, sit, and run with other people creates an affinity, empathy, and sharing of emotions that would not have been possible without running the same race. Running, swimming, climbing, crawling, balancing, twisting, pushing, pulling, and falling with Tough Mudders helped our lead researcher feel and better understand the embodied experience of participating in Tough Mudder.

Visual Materials

In documenting the social life of the body, we pay particular attention to visuals, including photos we took of the events, videos captured using a GoPro camera, photos published in the press, photos posted by Mudders after the event, and photo elicitation during interviews (Heisley and Levy 1991). As in other research contexts, we consider visuals as critical to the analysis of the body (Pink 2015); hence, GoPro footage was important in recording the naturalistic observation of the participants' bodies rather than what participants said about their bodies (Belk and Kozinets 2005). During the event, the lead researcher wore a GoPro to capture her experience in sounds and images. In the role of a spectator, one of the two nonparticipating researchers also took still images and videos of the event to further reflect on the various sequences of the experience.

In-Depth Interviews

The lead researcher conducted pre- and post-event interviews with 26 Mudder participants. In-depth interviews conducted before the race helped us better map participants' life stories, their ways of explaining their participation, and the meanings they ascribed to this grueling experience before actually participating in it. Informants were recruited via a snowballing technique (see our participant profiles in table 1). On average, these pre-event interviews lasted 1.5 hours. Post-event interviews lasted between one and two hours, and we used photo elicitation to anchor the interviews in the participants' concrete experiences of the event and to provide a frame to develop stories about their Tough Mudder participation (Dion, Sabri, and Guillard 2014; Heisley and Levy 1991). The lead researcher relied on her own pictures of the event as mnemonic and somatic prompts of the experience (Tarr and Thomas 2011). During these post-event interviews, the lead researcher was able to share her own emotions, scrapes, and wonderment with other Tough Mudder participants, helping to develop the kind of empathetic understanding of research participants that immersive ethnographic fieldwork can provide. The phenomenological interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed and coded for themes. We have followed the journey of participants and detail how they deal with pain at different points in time. In addition, in late 2015 we conducted a long interview with Tough Mudder's CMO, helping us better understand the way this organization dramatizes pain by carefully designing obstacles.

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Tough Mudder event
Amber	27	F	Industry Analyst	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Anthony	27	M	Doctor of Medicine	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Barry	29	M	Senior Systems Engineer	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Brook	28	F	Registered Nurse	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Deena	37	F	Executive Assistant	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Dom	27	M	Personal Trainer	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Edward	30	M	Emergency Nurse Educator	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Eric	29	M	Senior Fire Engineer	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Gigi	26	F	Gym Manager	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Jacob	36	M	Personal Trainer	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Jess	31	F	Registered Nurse	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Kara	31	F	Emergency Clinical Nurse Consultant	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Kim	32	F	Social Media Strategist	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Lisa	25	F	TV Producer	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Marcus	30	M	Investment Manager	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Melissa	39	F	International Communications Manager	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Mike	24	M	Mechanical Engineer Student	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Nick	38	M	Associate Director	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Peter	23	M	Marketing Honors Student	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Phillip	33	M	Medical Services Advisor	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Reese	28	M	Electrician	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Robert	30	M	TV Producer and Editor	Sydney, Australia, 2012
Ruben	29	M	Project Chemist	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Sam	28	M	Human Resources Consultant	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Sebastian	28	M	Paramedic	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Stewart	33	M	Tough Mudder Master of Ceremonies	Sydney, Australia, 2013
Teresa	23	F	Student	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Tony	23	M	Freelance Artist	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Trey	22	M	Student	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Tyler	22	M	Student	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Uli	35	F	Nanny	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Wayne	35	M	Warehouse Manager	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015
Will	35	M	Personal Trainer	Lake Las Vegas, USA, 2015

Netnography

We complemented our ethnographic data with a netnography (Kozinets 2010). In February 2012, our lead researcher began informal observation of the Mudder Nation online community to become more familiar with the organization and its community. The netnographic procedures involved analyzing photographs, documents, press materials, and other online data but also interacting on various forums with other Tough Mudder participants. The netnographic component of our research program was conducted over a three-year period with a particular focus on six online forums of the Mudder Nation website: events, missed connections, obstacles, stories, teams, and training. In addition, we searched and collected data from about 40 blogs written by Tough Mudder participants, which frequently included detailed descriptions of their different types of pain experiences. Finally, we browsed three social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—to gather pictures and posts of Mudders. Our netnographic research was also particularly fruitful in analyzing life after the event, where impressions and pictures, as we will show, play a critical role.

Analytical and Representational Strategy

We followed the extended case method, or ECM (Burawoy 1998), to analyze our data and generate new theoretical insights. We emphasize two dimensions of the extended case method as it is used in our analysis.

First, in line with the core tenet of ECM, our analysis does not offer a comprehensive mapping of the Tough Mudder event. Indeed, an overall approach would detail the collective dimension of Tough Mudder (Weedon 2015), since this is a critical part of the way the event is marketed and a significant feature that surfaces in informant interviews when they talk about the event's appeal. When describing the most memorable parts of their experience, Mudders often allude to the atmosphere of camaraderie and the generous expressions of supportive behavior they witnessed first-hand. However, we avoid a lengthy description of the camaraderie dimension, as this particular aspect only reiterates the importance of sociality and community to explain the appeal of extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993).

Instead, our data analysis moves back and forth between existing theories and our empirical material with the

objective of extending and reconstructing new theories of extraordinary experiences. We met periodically to share experiences and impressions, to disseminate data, and to identify, discuss, and adapt relevant theoretical frames in drafting the interpretations. After considering several theoretical frameworks to help explain the event's appeal and meanings, we homed in on the role of pain as a particular form of escape. We proceeded to develop different approaches to analyzing pain, from the personal level of lived pain, to the micro-social level of group interaction during the event, to the meso level of the organizational dynamics involved in the ritualization and marketization of pain, and finally to the macro level of reduced physicality. Together these different levels of analysis help in better understanding the value and meaning participants give to their pain (Desjeux 1996).

Second, since the representation of pain is especially difficult, we searched for various ways of producing generality (Burawoy 1998). Indeed, we believe the world of embodied experience is better explained as being more-than-representational. It is not that we cannot represent sensuous, corporeal, painful experience, but that the moment we do so we immediately lose something. Representations tell only part of the lived experience. But this does not mean that we cannot at least get a taste of it through Mudders' words and pictures, seeking to detail the pain from within and to concentrate on "corporeal knowledge that resists cognitive contemplation" (Hill, Canniford, and Mol 2014, 387). Conceding that we can never really represent such a private experience, we argue that it is possible to search for an intermediate solution by carefully mobilizing excerpts of audio, photo, and video reports that focus on the ongoing movements of bodies, spaces, and objects together (Canniford and Shankar 2013). In addition, following Denzin (1997, 228), we argue that the type of introspective ethnography undertaken by the lead researcher bypasses "the representational problem by invoking the epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other."

FINDINGS

Our findings are organized to describe three complementary levels of analysis. First, we focus on pain as a personal experience, and we show that pain facilitates a reappearance of the body to the participant's consciousness. Second, we describe how pain becomes meaningful and gains significance through an intricate process of ritualization and dramatization. What Tough Mudder is selling is a dramatized pain that symbolizes a rebirth of the individual's corporeality. Finally, we look at what happens in the aftermath of the event. We demonstrate that pain operates very differently during and after the event. When pain floods their consciousness, participants seem unable to develop complex thoughts. Pain temporarily suspends the reflexive project of the self. After the event, however, the tangible manifestations of pain, in the form of wounds and marks, help participants stitch together the narrative of a fulfilled life.

Pain and the Reappearance of the Body

Tough Mudder participants experience many different kinds of pain: the fleeting pain suffered at a single obstacle that can quickly fade away, the long-lasting pain resulting from injury or total exhaustion, localized pain in a shoulder or knee, and holistic pain extending to the whole body. Pain at Tough Mudder can be simply ephemeral and local when lungs are sore or when shins are covered in scabs, or total and lasting when participants are severely injured. As we will demonstrate, these various configurations of pain work together to bring the body into sharp focus.

The Body in Focus. We are two months before race day. The lead researcher prepares for her second Tough Mudder challenge in Las Vegas. As she trains, body parts and functions that ordinarily recede into the background of her consciousness suddenly summon her attention. She describes the physical challenge of a preparatory mountain run: "

> My breathing became ragged towards the top and I tilted my hands as though I were holding hiking poles to maximize the efficiency of my steps. I clung onto the temporal nature of the discomfort. Although it was temporary, I was aware it was building fast, as if I were in a small compartment that was rapidly filling up with water" (field notes 2015).

After another intense training session involving 150 pull-ups, we find her tending to her sore arms. She is not able to type anymore:

> "I couldn't straighten my arms. I was in agony, even if I kept my arms bent it still hurt because the tendons around my elbow linked up my arms to my back. I now notice I can't type properly. I loaded up on Chinese remedies, had an agonizing shower then hit the hard pain killers—Ibuprofen" (field notes 2015).

Figure 1 shows her bruised arms covered in dandelion ice, a traditional Chinese remedy for severe muscle bruising. At this particular moment, all her attention is directed to a specific part of her body that aches.

After another training run, the lead researcher also talks about the additional difficulties she experiences walking:

> "A colossal mass of agony greeted my ligaments the next morning after training. It made me really appreciate what they do, how they support me, balance and stabilize my entire 5ft8 being, and now I have beaten them into an abyss of fragility and pain. I couldn't walk properly" (field notes 2012).

FIGURE 1

A TRAINING INJURY

When she feels the onset of pain in specific body parts (discomfort in the chest, arms that cannot type, legs that hurt while walking), suddenly her focus is taken over by the body. In addition, mundane activities like breathing, typing, or walking suddenly appear difficult. The body can no longer do what it once could, and this inadequacy further underscores the importance of the body to everyday activities.

The experience of the body in focus is amplified during the event itself, where participants are exposed to various kinds of pain in many different parts of the body. The lead researcher describes going through the first obstacle, called Death March:

> The first obstacle, *Death March*, is a steep incline in the hot midday sun. I want to cry—one mile in and my body feels exhausted and limp in the heat. Each inhale is hot and dry. As I climb the track, the view of the course expands. Below me, to my panic, I see no shaded areas. I feel panicked. The heat is disorienting. Tears start to build up in my eyes I want to sob and I feel angry that Tough Mudder would run a course in the scorching desert without shade. I am running in an oven and it suffocates the energy and muster from my lungs. My breath is prickly in the heat and labored. My hands have expanded in the heat and the skin around my fingers feels tight. My pulse radiates from my swollen hands. I'm freaking out now (field notes 2015).

Participants are then quickly exposed to different configurations of pain: the discomfort of feeling the scorching sun; the suffocating effects of the heat; the emotional suffering that sees the lead researcher oscillate between anger and panic.

As they progress through the different obstacles, participants also feel pain in different parts of their bodies. For instance, in recounting the Arctic Enema—an obstacle where Mudders slide into a large dumpster of ice water—a participant enumerates the various effects on his body:

> "I can't breathe. My legs aren't working. My head is going to explode! My arms are too cold to drag me out. That was horrendous" (James; blog 2013).

Suddenly, the gnawing unpleasantness of pain forces participants to focus on parts of their bodies they rarely paid attention to. The body becomes the object of attention and everything else becomes background.

In addition, because participants probably would not be willing to endure three hours of continuous pain, the course is designed to alternate bouts of pain with pleasurable moments. Here, Melissa and Kim describe the relaxing feeling of wading in warm mud:

> Even just getting covered in nice warm mud is a really nice feeling and just swimming across rivers is cool too. That was much more exciting than a regular Sunday. (Melissa; interview 2012).
>
> I've never felt so cold in my life. Then you can warm up when you get in the mud again . . . it doesn't hurt as much as a half marathon, but you certainly experience a lot of different situations. (Kim; interview 2013).

The contrast between pain and pleasure not only enables Mudders to finish the race, but also makes the sudden onslaught of pain more surprising. Participants are slowly walking in warm mud and in the next obstacle they are subjected to freezing water or electric shocks. Pain arises abruptly and "punctures the scene with novelty" (Leder 1990, 72).

The Body as an Alien Presence. When participants go through especially painful obstacles they experience their body as a kind of "alien presence" (Bendelow and Williams 1995, 148). For instance, Yushi describes limbs that are "not listening":

> "You jump into the vat of ice water, try not to hyperventilate as your body goes into shock, dive under the wall mid-way through the dumpster, make your way to the other end and attempt to climb out, while your limbs are CLEARLY not listening to what your brain is commanding them to do" (Yushi; blog 2014).

The lead researcher describes her experience of the same obstacle:

> "I slide down a steep caged slide into deep freezing muddy water with ice cubes dancing around on the surface. My body retreats into a numb shock. Then suddenly it all hits me. My head experiences a slow release throb of pain, an ice headache starts to take space in my skull. My legs that

> were once working with my mind—moving forwards to get me out of the ice dumpster—are now frigid" (field notes 2015).

It is as if, through an intensely painful experience like Arctic Enema, the body and its limitations made their presence felt again. Participant Kim is surprised by the reactions of her body, which she now disparages as "a piece of shit":

> "It's weird, I've never had the physical experience when my mind has been so alert, but my body just cramps up and it's quite surprising when my body reacts in such a useless fashion to such adverse conditions. I don't know, you hear about people whose bodies turn into supermen and I've discovered mine was a piece of shit. It really did cramp and it made it really difficult to get out the water" (Kim; interview 2013).

Drawing from Leder (1990), we interpret the dualism these quotes betray as phenomenological rather than purely ontological. With legs that refuse to move out of freezing water, the body is experienced as "separate from and opposite to the will of the subject" (Leder 1990, 88). The participant suddenly experiences the body as an uncooperative and inadequate entity. While we live in our bodies, and while the body is the site for cognition, in a painful experience like Tough Mudder the body is experienced as a new presence, thereby reinforcing the Cartesian representation of the body and mind as separate entities.

The Ritualization and Marketization of Pain

Tough Mudder is an intricately choreographed event that produces meaning through ritualization, with pain as a critical component of this process. We highlight four major dimensions of this ritual: (1) a main theme of dramatized pain; (2) a temporal sequencing that helps convey the transformative capacity of the ritual; (3) ritual artifacts, including obstacles and mud, that concurrently produce and symbolize this rediscovery; and (4) a public dimension of the ritual as a spectacle of pain. We end this section with a description of the organizational dynamics underlying this ritualization. We show that Tough Mudder specifically targets knowledge workers and uses a ritualized and dramatized pain to induce a corporeal rebirth—that is, a specific form of self-renewal that sees participants regain the consciousness of their physicality.

Cultural Theme. Pain is the main "cultural theme" (Firat and Dholakia 1998, 10) of this event. When consumption experiences are dramatically structured, "experiences are intensified" (Holt and Thompson 2004, 438), and the Tough Mudder organization plays a critical role in the intensification of this theme. Tough Mudder is designed to have a clear plot, evoked in the key question addressed to potential participants: "Are you tough enough for Tough Mudder?" (and in the tagline, "Find out if you've got the skill, strength, and sheer will to make it through a Tough Mudder alive"). Obstacles are given tough names like "The Gauntlet," "Red Hot Blood Bath," and "Ball Shrinker." These names are imbued with a specific rhetoric that helps dramatize pain.

The progression of obstacles culminates with Electroshock Therapy and its 10,000 volts, which shake bodies and provoke extreme pain. The finish line reached by the participant signals the resolution of misfortune and the end of an intricately designed bodily drama.

Similar to rites of passage, pain is not punitive but transforming, with the body serving as the memorial of this transformation (Bourdieu 1992). Importantly, though, Tough Mudder does not allow participants to reach a new status in society, although the organization does help participants signal that they have completed more than one Tough Mudder by bestowing different colored headbands. Instead, Tough Mudder participants are buying into a process of self-renewal. As demonstrated by Glucklich (2001, 207) for sacred rites, "pain creates 'absence' and makes way for a new and greater 'presence,'" which is in our case an embodied presence.

Temporal Sequencing. There is a clear temporal structure to the event, as in other forms of ritualized activities (Rook 1985). In contrast to the tortured subject (Scarry 1985), participants know that their pain will be of limited duration. Tough Mudder is astutely sequenced, with a clear beginning and end as bookends of a process of rediscovery through degradation. At the very start of the race participants assemble in an enclosed area surrounded by a high wooden wall. An energetic master of ceremonies perched on a stand summons a new wave of participants ready to start, as recounted by the lead researcher:

> When approaching the start line, the commentator could be heard psyching up hundreds of Mudders that were about to be released. Lots of "Woohoos" and "Hoorahs," the air of health, vibrancy and happiness was palpable. To enter the "bull-pen" (start pen) we scaled a six-foot-high wall, which launched us into a pack of six hundred other Mudders. Egyptian pharaohs, naughty nurses and tribal face paints were some of the costumes which flavoured the pen. The crowd was young, fit, tough, white and mostly male. Tough Mudder teams congregated like cattle as energizing heavy metal music rippled through the apprehensive cohort. Mudders were now in the final stages of a highly orchestrated sensory production line (field notes 2012).

The carnivalesque atmosphere of the start pen (e.g., costumes and music) contrasts with other competitive events where the focus is on individual performance from the outset. The founder of Tough Mudder's main competitor, the Spartan Race, uses this carnivalesque atmosphere to discredit Tough Mudder as a "get-together at a bar or a birthday party," emphasizing the fact that the Spartan Race is timed and "athletic" (Weedon 2016, 46).

In describing the atmosphere as carnivalesque, we rely on Bakhtin's insight that the carnival is a place for man's "second nature" to be alive again (1965/1984, 75)—that is, for aspects of the body that cannot freely express themselves in everyday life to find an outlet during the carnival. Similarly, Tough Mudder participants are brought into a context where they can roll in the mud, laugh, exclaim their pain, and more broadly explore various aspects of their bodies. More than playful identity resistance through costume and language (Goulding and Saren 2009), Tough Mudder allows the body to re-emerge in its more animalistic form, breaking from the more civilized body (Elias 1978) in all kinds of release.

Ritual Artifacts. An intricate system of ritual artifacts helps produce and symbolize this transformation. The reconnection with a less civilized, more animalistic physicality emerges out of the interaction with material elements such as the obstacles and, importantly, mud. As the name indicates, mud is a critical element of the challenge and differentiates Tough Mudder from other adventure events.

After the start, participants disappear under a layer of mud. Mud creates an ambiguity of role and identity, resulting in a state of con-fusion (cf. the etymology of *confusion* as *confundere*, i.e., "pour together"), where the dissolution of social markers facilitates an ephemeral bond between Mudders. Mud also works as a type of social glue bonding participants, most of whom have not met before. Eric mentions the role of mud as a "great leveler":

> "Everyone's muddy, everyone's tired, it's a great leveller, it doesn't matter if they're fat people, thin people, muscled people, there's locals, foreigners, and a lot of people who wouldn't normally speak to each other outside of that event. But as soon as you are in that mess and one poor bastard is up to his neck in shit, you've got to help them out" (Eric; interview 2012).

Beyond the role of mud in creating a social link, we note the way Eric equates mud to excrement, thereby evoking Bakhtin's (1965/1984) insight that the carnival is also an excretory ritual that celebrates the "lower stratum of the body" (Thompson 2007, 117) and "organic functions such as eating, drinking, farting, defecating and copulating" (Langman 2008, 660).

Apart from symbolizing the release of a second, more animalistic nature, mud also effectively symbolizes transformation. Transformation is a critical dimension of rites of passage (Bell 1992; Turner 1987), and mud is a particularly powerful way to evoke it. Indeed, to be in the mud is to be in between, in a liminal and ambiguous state between life and death. Douglas (1996, 47) argues that the "viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change." The viscosity of mud is a symbol of matter coming to be (Sartre 1956) in a process of rebirth.

FIGURE 2

MUDDYING THE SUIT

Source: PA Photos

Mud and pain, in this context, are important artifacts that help symbolize the emergence of a more unbridled nature. Notably, we observed several Mudders wearing business suits (see figure 2). Tough Mudder is a place where symbols of dull corporate work such as business suits are tarnished by those who wear them only to get them quickly muddied.

Like dirt, mud can be anthropologically conceived as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 36), and when mud covers participants dressed in business suits, as figure 2 illustrates, it also becomes the profanation of civilized sterility. An important dimension of this sterility is the physically constraining nature of modern office work. What mud and pain help surface are aspects of physicality that modern office work denies. What the Tough Mudder organization provides is the ritualized frame in which this degradation becomes meaningful.

Spectacle of Pain. A critical component of this ritual is the tension between the private and public dimensions of pain that participants go through. While pain is an experience that makes the subjects retreat into their bodies, when

they run in a crowd of other participants, pain also takes on a public dimension.

When a participant describes the last obstacle as a “corridor of pain,” he is not only talking about the dense structure of suspended electric wires that is featured in the Electroshock Therapy obstacle; he is also evoking the spectators and participants who have already finished the race and have congregated on each side of this corridor, watching Mudders as they run through the electric wires:

> “As we plodded to the last obstacle a crowd awaited us. A crowd resembling those of the Coliseum, baying for blood. They knew it was going to hurt and wanted it too [sic] [. . .] There was a ‘Oooooh’ from the blood thirsty crowd. We looked down the corridor of pain. There was Jeff pulling himself up off the floor” (James; blog 2013).

A video of the Electroshock Therapy obstacle posted on YouTube is particularly striking, having garnered almost half a million views. Here we see Mudders crawling on the ground trying to avoid the electric wires. The camera zooms in on one particular participant, who gets knocked out by the electric shocks and falls into the mud, eliciting laughs from the men watching and filming the event’s finale. An intricately crafted sociomaterial apparatus, such as the “corridor of pain” James mentions, helps transform pain into a spectacle that others can watch and laugh about.

An image captured by our lead researcher’s GoPro camera also illustrates how pain becomes a spectacle (see figure 3). As she writes in her field notes: “The life was cracked out of him by those wires. It appears as though he had just been hit by a car.” We see a participant on the ground, lying on his side, as a volunteer holds his head, and while one participant seems to be pointing at the injured Mudder angrily, the woman next to her seems to be smiling, and two other participants on the left seem to be laughing.

When spectators laugh at Mudders falling face down into the mud, brought to their knees by the electric shocks, they seem to be laughing not out of a sense of superiority, since many spectators who laugh also went through similar

FIGURE 3

THE SPECTACLE OF PAIN

episodes of disarticulation and electric shocks. Instead, laughter seems to emerge at the same time as the appearance of the body *qua* body—that is, the body living without the artifice we erect to maintain our bodies in our cultural surroundings. They laugh as if the veil of cultural work has been lifted. The spectacle of pain, then, is the spectacle of the body suddenly appearing on a ritualized stage where shouting one's pain and laughing about pain becomes natural and valid.

Physical Malaise as a Market Opportunity. While the theme of corporeal renaissance emerged etically as we analyzed our data, we also found references to the idea of rebirth in the event's promotional materials. Tough Mudder founder Will Dean compares the event to a "kind of muddy baptism" (Widdicombe 2014) and has accordingly designed the event as one that takes participants through a dramatized process of transformation to achieve this rebirth.

When marketing the event, Tough Mudder primarily targets white-collar professionals. According to Dean, these consumers live a strange predicament: "They may make 100 times more than their fathers, but their hands are soft. We designed Tough Mudder to fill that void" (Stein 2012). From this perspective, participants seem akin to the "dead men working" organizational scholars have evoked (Cederström and Fleming 2012). They are drained by the daily tedium of office work and frustrated by the reduced physicality of such work. Indeed, our informants repeatedly contrast Tough Mudder with the time they spend "sitting in an office":

> "I spend a lot of time at home just sitting on my ass if I'm not up at the gym. There is something inside telling me to get up, get out more, meet new people as well" (Dom; interview 2012).

Like many of our other informants, Dom feels frustrated with the way he currently uses his body at home and has a nagging desire to "get up" and challenge his body. Similarly, Lisa mentions her desire to be challenged:

> "With my job, it's very sedentary, so it's nice to feel I'm being challenged with a physical outdoors nature-based activity. It's a bit different to working in an office" (Lisa; interview 2012).

This is also true of professions that would not necessarily qualify as sedentary. Kara, a nurse educator who participated in a Tough Mudder race, spends most of her time sitting down:

> "I would probably spend 10% of my time in meetings, 50% of my time sitting in front of the computer screen . . . 10% planning activities in my office with the educators" (Kara; interview 2015).

As emphasized in other research on extraordinary experiences, informants also talk about Tough Mudder as providing a temporary escape from the burdens of everyday life. Mudders express a desire to escape routine and go through an absorbing flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). However, in contrast to the way flow experiences have been described, we observe an embodied experience achieved through pain, rather than a purely cognitive accomplishment.

Overall, our insights on the ritualization and marketization of pain further demonstrate that pain always gains meaning in a specific context. In the case of Tough Mudder, pain becomes a symbol of renaissance through one's interaction with a structured sociomaterial environment, but also and importantly in a sociocultural context of physical malaise and saturated selves (Gergen 1991), allowing participants to let go of everyday concerns and let their corporeality re-emerge.

Forgetting, Remembering, and Narrating Pain

Our findings demonstrate that pain operates differently during the event and in its aftermath. During the event, extreme pain leads to a state of confusion. Participants are unable to completely grasp what is happening to them. Extreme pain obliterates their capacity for reflexivity and reduces their ability to remember what happened to them during the most intense obstacles.

After the event, participants still feel the pain of sore muscles, but they also expend significant resources in narrating their pain, using pictures of wounds and scars to share their experience with others. Participants thus oscillate between the suspension of reflexivity induced by pain, and the crafting of their autobiography, with the experience of pain as a particular episode of their life narrative.

Forgetting Everything. When they are in the obstacles, participants are totally focused on their body and their pain. Pain forces participants to be in the here and now of the experience. There is an element of compulsion associated with pain in the way freezing legs demand immediate attention.

When the pain is especially intense, though—for instance, when participants are subjected to electrocution—it knocks them down:

> "Well I just felt like a shock in my brain and I just knocked out automatically. And you can't control that shock. You just . . . It just knocks you down. It feels weird but you can't tell someone how it feels, you have to experience it" (Tyler; field notes 2015).
>
> "I just remember, I'm walking straight, and the next thing I know I was in a face full of mud, like drowning. Like I was knocked out completely, like out cold. It's kinda scary but I was like—have to keep going" (Trey; field notes 2015).

During our interviews with them, participants like Tyler and Trey found it hard to recall what happened to them during these intense obstacles. It is as if acute pain had reduced their capacity to record and describe their experience in detail. Mike recounts going through the last obstacle:

> At the end, the *Electro-Shock Therapy*, that just destroyed me. I went to charge through and I got struck. I don't remember what happened. I got knocked out [. . .] Then I woke up again by another shock and I just crawled as fast as I could to get out of there [. . .] Then I came out. The guy put the orange headband on me, and I was a bit dazed. He said, "Are you alright man?" and I said "Yes" but I wasn't. I really wasn't OK. My mum's got photos of me just standing at the end, just drinking a Solo and the water. I was damaged pretty much; that really hit me (Mike; interview 2012).

The last obstacle's name, Electro-Shock Therapy, evokes the self-shattering and the regenerative qualities of the event. Indeed, Electro-Shock Therapy is named after ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), a treatment designed to obscure painful memories and give mental health patients a new lease on life as a result.

In addition, the description of Mike's experience reveals the coexisting desires to forget everything during the event but also to keep traces of that experience that can last. Mike's recollection of the last obstacle is cued by the photos his mother took of him at the finish line, demonstrating that his memory of the experience is partial and relates only to certain intense moments such as getting "knocked out," whereas other memories are obscured. The fact that Mike's mother is waiting on sidelines waiting to get pictures of him receiving electric shocks, suggests that even as they try to forget the everyday in painful obstacles, participants like Mike also keep and revisit mementos of the event after finishing the obstacle race.

When they are on the obstacles, though, pain modifies participants' relationship with the world. Pain creates a state of confusion, in the way Mike cannot really tell whether he is "alright." As participants finish the event, after a last bout of electricity, they describe feeling dazed and lost:

> "I wasn't feeling bad, but I wasn't feeling good, I don't know how to explain it, I wasn't in shock, I wasn't worried, I wasn't in pain, but I wasn't all there, I was a bit rattled. It would have taken me 20 mins to settle down. I didn't feel like my beer. I didn't drink my beer" (Mike; interview 2012).

Mike's experience of not being "all there" is consistent with past research arguing that extreme pain obliterates "the contents of consciousness" (Scarry 1985, 38).

The suspension of reflexivity—that is, the incapability of developing complex thoughts during bouts of extreme pain—seems to operate as an escape for our research participants. Through intense pain, they extricate themselves from the worries and frustrations associated with everyday life. On his blog, a Mudder, having completed the course, evokes coming back to reality after being disconnected from it:

> "Weary, partially injured, but pleased we eventually made our way back to the car. Ready for our road trip back to the normality of screaming children, laptops and Tescos. It was that thought that prompted me 'I wonder if we could just stay here and do it all again'" (James; blog post 2013).

Tough Mudder participants like James describe wanting to escape the normality of "screaming children, laptops and Tescos." They talk about escaping the routine of everyday life and the monotony of work. They frame their Tough Mudder experience as "time off."

These stories of overworked individuals wanting to escape the tedium of office life are consistent with other phenomena, such as hyperstressed financial workers in London paying to spend their lunch breaks floating inside darkened isolation tanks where they achieve a dream-like state (Cederström and Fleming 2012). What is distinctive about Tough Mudder, though, is the way participants achieve this escape through pain rather than isolation, sensory overload rather than sensory deprivation.

Pain also has effects that last beyond the event. After finishing the race, participants talk about seeing their life in a new light. Marcus declares below how Tough Mudder allows him to "put it all in line":

> Then you re-frame that whole thing. I mean, I work in a corporate bank, but I like to think I have my head screwed on my shoulders. I go to work for means. Some people work 70 hour weeks. As a race we trust in things that don't really exist, this man in the clouds who supposedly created us all, trust in the government that say they do right by us. We conform like chess pieces but don't really get the game. I guess Tough Mudder allows you, just for a day, to go out and suppose just put it all on the line, say you know that none of that matters. I'm just gonna use my body for what it was intended for and do something different and I guess that why it's rising (Marcus; interview 2013).

Marcus describes the constraints of "70 hour weeks" as well as feeling like being part of a "chess game" in a way that evokes the resistance that institutional structures generate. Our lead researcher experiences the frustrations induced by repetitive work:

> "Last year for four months all I did for 6–7 days a week was work. For the most part I'd learn content for a day, teach for a day, learn for a day teach for a day etc. It was a cycle of learn and regurgitate, it was monotonous, I felt trapped" (field notes 2015).

In contrast to the repetitive tedium of work our lead researcher recounts, when she participates in Tough Mudder, her body becomes the center of her attention. Tough

Mudder's appeal lies at least partly in its ability to let participants escape work and the discourse of ambition structuring work (Costas, Blagoev, and Kärreman 2016). Through pain, they manage to escape their selves (Baumeister 1988). This "self-escape" is facilitated by the onslaught of painful sensations, which provokes a temporary suspension of high-level self-awareness by directing attention to bodily sensation.

Remembering Pain. In the aftermath of the event, participants still live with the pain of sore muscles, sprained ankles, and bruised ligaments. When she wakes up, our lead researcher feels pain in different parts of her body, a pain that prevents her from accomplishing simple tasks:

> When I sneeze, it's as though my entire torso cries in pain. The pain is sharp. My sneeze is jarring. I feel like tiny hands are gripping all the tendons surrounding my intercostal and abdominal muscles and ringing [sic] them out like twisting moisture out of laundry—but instead of moisture it's acid seeping out! [. . .] Second morning: I get up at 6am. My body is more sore today and my elbows feel raw as I reluctantly leverage myself out of bed. As I land on my feet the pain in my muscles wakes up. I slowly walk towards the bathroom, my ligaments around my ankles are screaming up my calves. My hip-flexors bite into me with every step. It takes me a few seconds to orientate my walking into the most pain-free technique—there is no such technique! (field notes 2015)

The residual pain that stays with participants is, we argue, part of the process of rediscovering the body. On her blog, Serena talks about hurting in places she "didn't even know existed":

> I hurt in places I didn't even know existed. It really does feel like I went through a human sized pin ball machine. It hurt lifting my coffee to my mouth. I'm glad all I ended up with was sore muscles and scrapes (Serena; blog 2012).

Another Mudder, James, takes an inventory of wounds and other ailments on his blog:

> "Abs that hurt so much that I can't sit up to get out of a chair . . . the area between the top of the foot and the front of the leg, whatever that's called hurts terribly . . . sore shoulders . . . bruised ribs . . . hammies, quads, and calves are all sore . . . As I limp around the house, kelly reminds me that I'm 40 40 and I'm too old to be doing this" (James; blog 2011).

The body remains a key interface of these different memorializing practices. As in other contexts, the experience is inscribed in the body (Hewer and Hamilton 2010), in wounds, lingering pain, and pictures that provide evidence that the body has suffered. Hence, participants share many pictures of their wounds on blogs and other social media platforms. On Twitter, a participant showcases the bruises on her arm and shoulder (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4

DISPLAYING BRUISES

As additional evidence that her body has suffered, Jess also kept the receipts from her physiotherapy sessions long after the event:

> "I kept the t-shirt, recently chucked it out. I think they give you a certificate online . . . Still got my physio receipts (laughs) . . . my headband's in my sock drawer" (Jess; interview 2013).

In keeping mementos of the experience, Jess has evidence that something significant and real has happened to her body. Injuries provide confirmation that the body has lived and survived, because it bleeds and shows signs of life. The web is full of videos of the event captured with GoPro cameras. Often positioned on a helmet, GoPros become a way for participants to capture the experience and create additional evidence of the corporeal renaissance we have described. Mementos enable the body to surface for an extended period of time after the experience.

Narrating Pain. After participants finish, Tough Mudder also becomes a story that they can narrate to others, something the Tough Mudder organization builds into the experience by creating what it calls "buzzworthy obstacles." In our interview with him, the Tough Mudder CMO insisted that a large part of his job and that of the design team was to come up with obstacles that are dramatic

and memorable enough to become part of a story that participants will want to share on social media. From the very beginnings of the organization, Tough Mudder's management has recognized people's desire to share evidence of their ordeal with their friends.

On social media and in their everyday life, participants proudly display the symbols of having finished the event. In a 2013 interview, Deuce talks about his Tough Mudder tattoo as a "conversation starter," and Tim proudly displays his Tough Mudder t-shirt when he goes running and continues to update his tattoo each time he participates in a race:

> "I have a Tough Mudder tattoo that I update after each time I do it, but everyone sees my finisher's shirt when I'm running around town or in road races" (Tim; Tough Mudder Facebook Group 2015).

Records of the event—like t-shirts, tattoos, or the headband that Mudders receive when they finish the race—also become conversation starters on social media. Twitter teems with pictures of participants at their workplace after the event; a Mudder sporting a Tough Mudder headband and a tie wrapped around his head; pictures of Mudders sitting in their cubicles at work, proudly displaying their Tough Mudder headbands. We interpret these pictures of Mudders sporting headbands at work as further evidence that Tough Mudder is a carnivalesque transgression (Langman 2008) that occurs through the body and emerges as a response to the futility of the body that the sterility of office life accentuates.

The ability to endure pain becomes the main theme of the story Mudders tell their friends. Ruben talks about enduring pain as a distinctive "accomplishment":

> "I accomplished something really big. And I remember the first year that I did it I went out onto University Avenue in Tempe with a bunch of friends, and I just felt so accomplished because I knew this was something that not everyone did. It's kind of unique; not everyone is willing to push themselves through so much pain and that type of thing, and you just feel fantastic" (Ruben; interview 2015).

Ruben's pride in having accomplished something that "not everyone did" is consistent with the idea of consumers checking off items on an experiential checklist (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). However, the commitment to an intensely painful experience like Tough Mudder does not seem to arise out of a "productivity orientation" (Keinan and Kivetz 2011, 935), but rather from a desire to expose the body to experiences that have been expunged from office life, such as intense pain.

The narrative consumers craft after finishing Tough Mudder is that they have explored a new dimension of their humanity through their body:

> "You kind of come away feeling like you've lived a little bit more. You take your mind and body to a new level of endurance" (Marcus; interview 2012).

What participants like Marcus achieve through Tough Mudder is the rediscovery of their corporeality, but also the sense that, in experiencing the ordeal of painful obstacles, they have "lived a little bit more." The various records of the event become narrative resources helping consumers build the story of a "fulfilled life" (Rosa 2010). This is a story that participants tell others, but it is also a story that participants tell themselves. What they are constructing, by enduring pain, is the very personal drama of a life filled with experiences. Even as participants prepare to go back to work, the memories and records of their pain serve as powerful evidence that they have savored the various worldly options on offer, and that their life is fuller and richer as a result of the pain they have endured.

DISCUSSION

We approached this ethnography as the solving of a mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007). Consumers spend billions of dollars each year on pain relievers, yet at the same time extreme and painful experiences like Tough Mudder are becoming more popular by the day. In order to better understand this puzzling dilemma, we closely examined past scholarship on extraordinary experiences in consumer research (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2011).

Marketed pain is a theoretical "breakdown" (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, 1266), an anomaly that existing theories, models, and vocabularies cannot fully resolve. Indeed, past consumer research is limited in helping us understand how pain could add meaning to an extraordinary experience, or why consumers would pay to endure pain.

In contrast, our research opens up new avenues of thinking about extraordinary experiences, as a way for consumers to rediscover their forgotten bodies, and as temporary moments of escape from their self. These insights, we believe, highlight the centrality of the body in endowing extraordinary experiences with meaning.

Pain and the Rediscovery of the Body in Extraordinary Experiences

Pain produces a very specific kind of embodiment. The stinging discomfort of icy water and the rattling pain of electric shocks transform the body into the "thematic object of the subject's experience" (Zeiler 2010, 335). The body in pain no longer functions as "a *from* structure, the painful body becomes that *to* which he attends" (Leder

1990, 74). In contrast, when museum-goers look at paintings, their body is that *from* which they attend *to* the world of art (Joy and Sherry 2003). Similarly, even when surfers feel in "union with the wave" (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1055) or skiers are enwrapped in the sensory qualities of their experience (Woermann and Rokka 2015), their attention is still largely focused on the goals ahead of them. Pain disrupts this relationship with the world.

The focused attention on the body that pain enables is especially attractive to knowledge workers who spend their professional lives sitting in front of computers, as members of the "sitting civilization" that Virilio evoked (1976). Even though some of the participants we interviewed include firefighters, nurses, and physicians, we were surprised by the amount of time they spend in front of a computer and engaged in administrative tasks. For these participants, but even more so for white-collar workers, pain operates as an especially effective way to feel their body again. For investment bankers, consultants, and other knowledge workers, the phenomenological rediscovery of the body offsets the physical malaise and corporeal absence they experience in their everyday life.

The popularity of marketed pain we surface here underscores an especially troubling irony: white-collar workers paying to experience pain, while many less privileged individuals endure chronic, unavoidable pain. In working-class contexts pain is often concealed for fear of exposing one's weaknesses (Kotarba 1983; Wacquant 2003). In contrast, our research features consumers who are willing to pay significant money for the pain that others simply cannot avoid.

Building from these insights, our research contributes new ways of thinking about extraordinary experiences: as tied to the malaise that many individuals experience in their "decorporealized existence" (Leder 1990, 3). The success of intense physical experiences such as CrossFit (Dawson 2015), ultramarathons, or mixed martial arts (Green 2011) is at least partly connected to the corporeal absence that characterizes urban life in most of the Western world. For the time-starved individual, obstacle racing and other forms of short but intense and painful activities provide a brief but acute reappearance of their bodies.

Beyond extreme physical challenges, though, we must consider that the appeal of many extraordinary experiences analyzed in past consumer research materializes from the reappearance of the body. Feeling the force of the river in rafting (Arnould et al. 1998), the waves in surfing (Canniford and Shankar 2013), or the "pain and discomfort of mountaineering" (Loewenstein 1999, 324) can, at least partly, be explained as a reaction to the disappearing of our bodies into the comfort of our chairs. Similarly, practices such as tattooing and body piercing appear as Dionysian expressions of bodily frenzy, reflecting a search for a more fundamental embodied humanity focusing on ritual, the body, and, importantly, pain (Langman 2008). An experience organization like Tough Mudder may be in the business of creating an ideologically resonant brand experience (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Holt 2004), but more importantly it is fundamentally in the business of carefully constructing ritualized rediscoveries of the body through a sophisticated sociomaterial setup.

Pain and the Desire to Escape

In their study of mountaineering, Tumbat and Belk (2011, 46) argue that "most studies of various forms of extraordinary consumption experiences within the CCT tradition are framed as in opposition to or an escape from structure." In framing extraordinary experiences as escape, they claim, past studies have overlooked much of the "individual, competitive, contradictory, and power-based aspects involved among individuals" (p. 46). In other words, by framing extraordinary experiences as escape from structure into antistructure, past research seems to have succumbed to a romantic illusion. Our work is consistent with Tumbat and Belk's (2011) perspective on extraordinary experiences as potentially individualistic pursuits. Indeed, the rediscovery of the body we just described is a very individual project, even if the roots of this malaise are societal.

However, in contrast to Tumbat and Belk, we believe the concept of escape remains a pertinent way to theorize extraordinary experiences. Beyond the reappearance of the body, this ethnography suggests that pain, when it is deliberately chosen, potentially enhances an extraordinary experience. Escape, we argue, provides an important way to think about consumer culture, yet we need to explain exactly what people are trying to escape through pain and how this type of escape differs from the romantic escape described in previous research (Arnould and Price 1993; Canniford and Shankar 2013).

Escaping into Another World Versus Shattering the Self. The kind of escape we are describing contrasts with the escape into another world that past consumer research on extraordinary experiences has mostly focused on. Whether it is the sublime beauty of the ocean that goes "beyond the reach of urban culture" in surfing (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1056), the escape into antimarket enclaves (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002), or tourism as escape (Rojek 1993), past research depicts extraordinary experiences as taking place in liminal spaces and borderlands that offer consumers some respite from everyday constraints and market logics. Schouten and McAlexander (1995, 52) describe how members of the Harley Davidson subculture see their bikes as the "antithesis of all the sources of confinement (including cars, offices, schedules, authority, and relationships) that may characterize their various working and family situations." Extraordinary experiences, in this body of work, are escapes into a real or

imaginary "dreamtime," away from the everyday worries that plague the saturated self. The road (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the river (Arnould and Price 1993), or the ocean (Canniford and Shankar 2013) provide temporary escapes into another world.

However, escaping toward a parallel (and even utopian) antistructure is significant but not necessarily sufficient for people overloaded with the nagging anxieties of the saturated self. They also need something to help them forget everything.

Pain is not only a powerful way to remind participants of their corporeality. Extreme pain also produces a kind of "self-shattering" (Saketopoulou 2014, 262) that is an unraveling of the reflexive self, as if the self had been blown up into pieces floating in the air. Baumeister (1997) writes that "in masochism, pain operates as a kind of narcotic: It blots out broader, symbolic patterns of thought, including meaningful definitions of self that stretch across time, space and multiple roles" (p. 138). Research shows that acute exercise leads to a disengagement of higher-order prefontal cortex areas, making it hard to process complex information (Dietrich and Audiffren 2011). Scarry (1985, 4) suggests that physical pain brings about "an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned." One of the most striking aspects of Tough Mudder is witnessing participants shrieking and shouting during especially painful obstacles. Pain fills their entire universe, helping them to forget about their everyday life. They experience what Le Breton (2015, 194) calls "*la blancheur*," or "whitening," a hollow state where people disappear from themselves, leaving the rest of the world in abeyance.

Within the contemporary context of intense reflexivity (Archer 2012; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1990) and "weariness of being a self" (Ehrenberg 2009), pain and bodily exhaustion offer a temporary relief. Experience organizations like Tough Mudder are selling a ritualized shattering of the self that is especially attractive to the worn-out "cognitariat" (Miller and Ahluwalia 2012), knowledge workers who are not only working jobs of limited physicality but also feel the burden of constant self-actualization (Costas and Kärreman 2016; du Gay, Salaman, and Rees 1996).

The kind of self-erasure we describe here is similar to the kind of escape from reflexivity that seems to color experiences as diverse as binge drinking (Griffin et al. 2009), binge eating (Heatherton and Baumeister 1991), sadomasochism (Baumeister 1988), and clubbing (Goulding et al. 2009). Baumeister (1988) argues that sadomasochistic practices started to flourish in Western societies as they turned more individualistic and burdened the self with new demands. According to Griffin and her colleagues (2009), binge drinking is a way to annihilate the self, with young men voluntarily getting drunk to the point of passing out. When studying clubbing, Goulding and her colleagues (2009, 767) describe the appeal of "losing it"—that is, returning to "a more fundamental, childlike, emotionally driven state of consciousness" with the help of drugs and electronic music. Here we note that while clubbing and obstacle racing operate through very different material setups, they are strikingly similar in their participants' pursuit of self-erasure. And while clubbing achieves the suspension of self-reflective processes through the use of Ecstasy, Mudders achieve a similar state by being flooded with intense pain. What these different forms of self-loss suggest is that beyond the romantic notion of escape into nature, self-suspending forms of escape also reveal the weariness of the saturated self.

Yet we must also consider that even if Tough Mudder participants appreciate "losing it," an experience like Tough Mudder is successful because pain leaves traces that evoke the achievement that comes from testing one's physical limits. Even as they seek to withdraw from the world, participants are active in constructing an individual narrative featuring their lived body experiences for the rest of the world to see.

Constructing an Embodied Biography. Even if "losing it" and shattering the self are attractive propositions, Tough Mudder participants are simultaneously engaged in practices of self-representation. The ubiquity of GoPro cameras mounted on participants' heads is a case in point. During the event, participants escape the burdens of the everyday, but they use machines to record their experience.

After the event, the display of bruises on social media or the writing of blogs help participants keep a narrative going. They become the hero of their own story, something that is clearly echoed in GoPro's recent invocation to "Be a hero!" Importantly, though, this narrative is painted in blood and carved in scars. The body becomes both a tool and a symbol of the performance that one can achieve. Pictures and blogs provide tangible evidence that participants are effective entrepreneurs of their own selves. The "cognitariat" (Costas and Kärreman 2016; Miller and Ahluwalia 2012) partake in marketed experiences such as CrossFit or Tough Mudder, where they can temporarily escape the draining worries of work, but can also continue to "construct a professional self" (Costas et al. 2016, 18). Even if for a moment, pain helps them escape their selves, they eventually go back to the unrelenting construction of self-identity that characterizes modernity.

Consumers now turn to market intermediaries, such as Tough Mudder, that sell not just another experience but the resurrection of the body, together with an escape from the self, as well as the possibility to tell the story of a life spent exploring the limits of the body. The proliferation of GoPro and YouTube videos of extraordinary experiences such as river rafting or skydiving occurs at least partly because a fulfilled life also means exploring the lived body. What organizations like Tough Mudder sell to consumers

through extraordinary experiences is also the possibility for their bodies to "tell" the story of a fulfilled life.

The idea of "escaping from the self," then, might in fact be based on a serious ambiguity. This ethnography features knowledge workers who, even as they try to forget themselves, build up their experiential resume through pain and wounds. In that sense, Tough Mudder participation is merely a dramatic attempt to escape the burdens of identity and reflexivity, something that ultimately seems inescapable.

Having said that, the temporary moments of self-shattering we describe in this ethnography can be analyzed as clandestine acts of mutiny. They are akin to the silent resistance to Big Brother at work, reminding us that "the contemporary employee now rarely desires more, less, fairer or better work, but simply some kind of silent and unceremonial escape or exit from the scene of paid employment" (Fleming, 2013, 490).

Far from being futile and ineffective attempts to escape modernity and the servitude of office work, these moments where people temporarily suspend their reflexive self can be conceived as a new type of escape route. They represent daily acts of hidden subversion akin to "imperceptible politics" (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008, 71). The only person who sees an individual's escape into him- or herself is that individual, so his or her escape is imperceptible to everyone else. This makes it impossible to determine exactly when people may be engaging in escapes. Some escapes may even be disguised as performances used to construct the individual's experiential resume (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). Others operate as a safety valve that the system has itself set up and promoted to help people get away from the imperative of being themselves (Ehrenberg 2009). Escape is not always grandiose; it also lies in the ephemeral and unremarkable instants of disidentification. What we have described here is a particular kind of escape that betrays the desire to flee the burdens of identity, and the role of the market in facilitating escape through pain.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author conducted all the in-person fieldwork from January 2011 to November 2015. The second author closely supervised this process and also conducted in-person fieldwork at the field site in September 2012. All authors jointly analyzed the data. The first two authors conducted online fieldwork. Data were discussed and analyzed on multiple occasions by all authors using the first author's field notes, photographs, videos, artifacts, participant diaries, and online notes as well as the second author's field notes, photographs, and videos. The final ethnographic study was jointly authored.

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