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Unanticipated Practice Disruption: Experiencing Purgatory

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Practices — as routinized behavior consists of bodily and mental activities orchestrated by things and their use, knowledge, knowhow and state of emotion (Reckwitz, 2002) — are integral part of our living and consumption efforts. Repetition and anticipation are ways through which we manage uncertainty, risk and potential anxiety. In fact, routinization is the fundamental mechanism through which a sense of ontological security (or deep trust in life activities) are achieved (Gidden, 1984; Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). Focusing on anticipated disruptions (i.e., decreased rainfall), Phipps and Ozanne (2017) illustrated the emergence of new ontological states of (in)security as a result of a routine disruption. Nonetheless, disruptions are not always anticipated, nor are managed through reflexive efforts. Unanticipated disruptions such as unanticipated war, flood, fire, cancelled flight, car accident, power cut or illness create an unwanted, unplanned and in many cases unimaginable situational context for consumers. In this study, we aim to unpack the enactment of physical, mental and social processes by which consumers experience the state between unanticipated disruption and the original state of security, the state that we titled purgatory.

We adopted an ethnographic approach in this study to account for observable actions as well as feelings, sense making processes and meanings associated to those actions. Unanticipated disruptions are challenging (if not impossible) to observe. Hence, we chose K2 2008 disaster as the context of our study, an event which has been accurately documented and has been visually recorded (i.e., through GoPro videos). Further reflexive interviews with key people involved in the incident provided the full understanding of the context. The early morning of 1st August 2008 saw a total of 32 climbers preparing themselves in their quest to conquer the summit. The slow pace eventually led to climbers (18 out of 32) reaching the summit as late as 8 pm, a dangerous situation on a peak where 2 pm is considered relatively safe. On their descending effort, climbers faced multiple disruptions including lack of energy, darkness, lack of oxygen, avalanches and loss of ropes. Eventually, 11 climbers lost their lives, three were severely injured and the rest were emotionally affected including those who had lost their families.

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We identified three key processes through which climbers made sense and managed disruption:

Apprehension

There have been multiple interpretations of what the disruption was including the slow ascent, too many climbers, low skilled climbers, disrespecting responsibilities, communication failure, high attitude, avalanche etc. Not only climbers had dissimilar perceptions of disruption but also their realization of disruption occurred at different points in the journey. Interestingly, a few climbers did not even perceive any disruption and completed their experience in a routinized way (although they realized it retrospectively). Apprehension involved a set of activities (rather than a moment of realization) including the sense making of disruption, re-evaluation of disruption signals, anxiety management and coping decision. Climbers' identity work was salient in this process, where they constantly defined and redefined themselves, their status and differences with others opposing their views.

Improvisation

The coping actions were improvised by the climbers and they (individually or collectively) adopted different ways of dealing with the disruption. The improvisation heavily was based on the evaluation of resources and their imagination of the situation using the most similar experiences in the past. Furthermore, climbers engaged in boundary spanning practices to create new resources or bring new use to the existing resources. Climbers engaged in two set of practices: a) the ones routinized through previous resource interactions based on available resources (e.g., descending on ice using their physical skills) and b) those practices that they invented through their boundary work (e.g., descending with no use of axe).

Recovery

The survivors and the families and friends of those who died went through a physical and mental recovery from the course of events. At the initial stages after the crisis, recovery involved a deep reflection on the causal attribution of disruption and finding the truth. Given the fluid nature of the disruption, there was a gap on the way events were interpreted by different actors, however the views have converged over time through direct and indirect dialogue. Finally, affected climber moved on from the crisis by managing their emotional engagement with the event. Moving to the state of embedded security was evident in those initiating similar practices (e.g., another adventurous expedition). Throughout the interview

however, we have realized that not all of the climbers achieved ontological security and some may never engage with such practices.

Our findings have theoretical implications for routine disruption and practice literature. Firstly, we showed that consumers facing unanticipated disruptions aim to move to the original state of embedded security, in contrast with anticipated disruptions where they adapt to the new state of security (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). Secondly, we illustrated that practice disruption is a cultural process, socially constructed by people going through it. In fact, in many cases consumers may consider their state of ontological insecurity as a component of the practice rather than a disruption. In those cases, climbers perceive disruption signals as betrayals of the nature and engage with a set of practices to take back the control of the nature (refer to purifying practices, Canniford and Shankar, 2013). Consumers respond to disruption signals to defend, enhance and recreate their identity and use their apprehension of disruption as a form of demythologizing practices to disentangle their consumption investment from a devaluing myth associated with the disruption (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). Finally, we indicated that institutions, their boundaries and identities defined within those boundaries disappear at points between practices disruption and state of embedded security. In this setting, timeflow (i.e., "a practice's ability to induce a certain pattern of experienced temporality in those performing the practice", Woermann and Rokka, 2015, p. 1487) does not exist as no pattern of temporality is embedded in cultural resources. Indeed, consumers experience full power over institutions and social boundaries (Foucault, 1982), whereas they are bounded by time to create new resources and institutions.

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