What Makes Consumption Experiences Feel "Special"?
A Multimethod Integrative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a simple theoretical question of high substantive relevance: What makes a consumption experience special in a consumer's mind? To answer this question, the authors report an extensive multi-method investigation involving a grounded theory analysis of numerous consumer narratives and in-depth interviews, a field survey, a scale development study, a natural language processing analysis of more than 3 million Yelp reviews, a preregistered multi-factor causal experiment (and its preregistered replication), a blind comparison of hundreds of matched visual Instagram posts by third-party observers, and several small application studies. The findings converge in identifying three major psychological pillars of what makes consumption experiences feel special to consumers, each pillar involving different facets: (a) *uniqueness*, which arises from the rarity, novelty, irreproducibility, personalization, exclusivity, ephemerality, and surpassing of expectations of the experience; (b) *meaningfulness*, which pertains to the personal significance of the experience in terms of symbolism, relationships, self-affirmation, and self-transformation; and (c) *authenticity*, which relates to the perceived genuineness and realness of the experience in terms of its psychological proximity to some original source, iconicity, human sincerity, and connection to nature. As illustrated in the General Discussion, the findings have important substantive implications for the engineering of hedonic consumption experiences.

Keywords: customer experience; experiential consumption; special; extraordinary; experience economy; experience engineering

From spa massages to gym workouts, cooking lessons to bar hopping, video gaming to fine dining, playing sports to livestreaming, and museum exhibitions to live concerts, much of today's economic activity revolves around the consumption of experiences. We increasingly live in an "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore 1999/2019): one where the creation of value arises not from the provision of products or services *per se*, but from the delivery of desirable consumer experiences. Euromonitor estimates that, in the U.S. alone, spending in the experience economy may reach $8.2 trillion by 2028 (Boschma 2022). At the same time, and not surprisingly, competition in the experience economy has soared (Bremner 2024) as more and more companies vie for consumers' limited attention, time, and money, which are the primary demand-side currencies of this economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999/2019).

The increased competition in the market of value-creating consumer experiences raises an important business question: How can marketers *elevate* consumption experiences—whether they be dinners at restaurants, VR sessions, or museum exhibits—in such a way that consumers identify these experiences as "special" and, therefore, desirably distinct from other similar experiences available in the marketplace? Marketers able to make consumer experiences "special" should logically benefit from higher consumer demand, greater willingness to pay (WTP), higher customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), and so on. This general business question (of how to elevate consumers' experiences), in turn, raises a theoretical question: What makes experiences "special" in consumers' minds? This is the fundamental question that we investigate in this research. Specifically, we seek to identify major psychological factors that drive the perceived specialness of experiences across a broad range of consumption and marketplace settings. We refer to such factors as psychological *pillars* of the specialness of consumption experiences. We aim for the identified pillars to not be industry- or

context-specific, as we intend our findings and insights to be broadly generalizable and thereby useful for marketers across many experience categories. The identification of such pillars has substantive implications not just for businesses and providers in the experience economy, but also for consumers interested in elevating their own experiences or those of others.

Building on prior consumer literature on "extraordinary experiences," our research provides a more *integrative* understanding of the more general concept of special consumption experiences by synthesizing insights from numerous consumption narratives and in-depth interviews, a field survey conducted on Broadway in New York City, a scale development study, a natural language processing analysis of four million Yelp reviews, a preregistered multi-factor causal experiment, a blind comparison of hundreds of matched Instagram posts by third-party observers, followed by several application studies. Through this extensive multimethod investigation, which covered dozens of experience categories (indeed, more than 400 hundred categories in one study), we identify three consistent pillars of experiences that consumers deem special: (a) the *uniqueness* of the experience, (b) the *meaningfulness* of the experience, and (c) the *authenticity* of the experience. In addition, we unearth multiple *facets* of each of these pillars, that is, different ways in which they arise in common marketplace settings. Specifically, we find that *uniqueness* can arise from the rarity, novelty, personalization, exclusivity, irreproducibility, ephemerality, or surpassing of expectations of the experience; *meaningfulness* arises from the personal significance of the experience in terms of relationships, symbolism, self-identity, and self-actualization; and *authenticity* arises from the perceived genuineness and realness of the experience in terms of its psychological proximity to some original source, iconicity, human sincerity, and connection to nature. By embodying more specific instantiations of the pillars in

the marketplace, these facets suggest practical ways in which consumption experiences can be made more unique, meaningful, or authentic, and thereby more special.

As one of the first empirical attempts to synthesize the primary drivers of perceived specialness across a large number of experience categories using a multimethod approach, we do *not* claim that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are the *only* determinants of special consumption experiences. The perceived specialness of consumption experiences is such a complex and subjective phenomenon that it is clearly multiply determined (Pham 2013). However, even if our systematic investigation of the phenomenon cannot be exhaustive, there is still substantial value in uncovering and documenting the major roles that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity consistently play across numerous consumption experiences. Future research can build on our findings to uncover additional pillars of special experiences and refine our proposed conceptualization.

ON "ORDINARY," "EXTRAORDINARY," AND "SPECIAL" CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

A Continuum of Experiences

Consumption experiences vary along a continuum of ordinariness to extraordinariness. Most consumption experiences—such as drinking a sip of soda, buying groceries, or browsing social media on a smartphone—are "ordinary" in the sense that they are commonplace, routine, and a regular part of most consumers' everyday lives (Abrahams 1986; Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014). While they constitute the vast majority of consumption experiences, ordinary experiences typically do not elicit strong emotions (Duerden et al. 2018) and do not leave strong memory traces (Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009).

On the opposite end of the spectrum are consumption experiences that can be characterized as "extraordinary." Examples that have been examined in the literature include skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), multiday whitewater rafting trips (Arnould and Price 1993), and Mount Everest climbing expeditions (Tumbat and Belk 2011). Such experiences are, by definition, relatively rare. Indeed, the *Oxford American Dictionary* defines "extraordinary" as something that is "*very unusual* or remarkable" (emphasis added). Unlike ordinary consumption experiences, which are typical of consumers' day-to-day lives, extraordinary consumption experiences usually entail a strong departure from everyday life (Battacharjee and Mogilner 2014; Belk and Costa 1998). They tend to be very immersive and emotionally intense (Abrahams 1986; Arnould and Price 1993; Orazi and van Laer 2023).

Consumption experiences that would be characterized as "special" occupy the upper range of this continuum. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* the word "special" refers to something that is "[1] distinguished by some unusual quality; [2] held in particular esteem; [3a] readily distinguishable from others of the same category." Consistent with this dictionary definition, we define special consumption experiences as those that *are deemed to have some unusual, elevated quality that makes them remarkable, memorable, and distinguishable from ordinary consumption experiences*. Special consumption experiences are therefore defined from the consumer's perspective (i.e., experiences that the consumers themselves perceive to be special). In our conceptualization, special consumption experiences include *both* experiences that are truly extraordinary (e.g., a northern lights expedition in Iceland) *and* experiences that, while perhaps beyond the realm of the ordinary, would not typically be considered "extraordinary" (e.g., watching a well-known musical on Broadway). Therefore, we regard special consumption experiences as a more inclusive category than the type

of experiences typically examined in previous research on extraordinary experiences, which we discuss next.

Insights from Extraordinary Experiences

As a starting point for investigating the pillars of experiences deemed "special" by consumers, it is useful to review the literature on "extraordinary consumption experiences," which offers anthropological analyses of a variety of intense experiences such as skydiving (Celsi et al. 1993), multiday whitewater rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), Mountain Men "rendezvous" (Belk and Costa 1998), the Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002), rave weekends (Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002), extreme mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011), passionate surfing (Canniford and Shankar 2013), grueling Tough Mudder challenges (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017), religious pilgrimages (Husemann et al. 2016; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), and multiday live-action role-playing (LARP) events (Orazi and van Laer 2023). These studies illuminate relevant recurring patterns across different types of experiences that could be considered "extraordinary."

First, as already noted, extraordinary experiences are typically highly immersive and emotionally intense. Consider, for instance, the physical endurance and willpower required to ascend Mount Everest (Tumbat and Belk 2011), or the mental and emotional demands of convincingly assuming the role of a fictional character for several days in a LARP (Orazi and van Laer 2023). Immersiveness and emotional intensity are signature characteristics of extraordinary experiences.

Second, participation in extraordinary experiences is often motivated by a desire to temporarily evade the constraints of one's everyday reality, whether it is through prolonged immersions in nature (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Lindberg and Østegaard 2015), a temporary

adoption of alternative identities (Belk and Costa 1998; Goulding and Saren 2009), or self-exposure to extraordinary risks and physical challenges (Celsi et al. 1993; Scott et al. 2017). From an anthropological perspective, such extraordinary experiences can be regarded as creating a liminal space in which normal rules and structures of everyday life are temporarily suspended (Turner 1969).

Third, extraordinary consumption experiences frequently foster the emergence of intense feelings of social connection and togetherness among participants. These feelings, called "communitas," tend to transcend the standard social roles and hierarchies that structure ordinary relations (Turner 1969). For example, when asked to describe the most memorable part of their experience, Tough Mudders often point to the camaraderie and general sense of support that they felt and witnessed as participants (Scott et al. 2017). Likewise, participants in rave weekends report a sense of communion and being on the "same wavelength" with other ravers whom they had never met before (Goulding et al. 2002).

Fourth, extraordinary experiences are generally infused with a high degree of sacralization and ritualization, even when they are not fundamentally religious. For example, on a particular river, whitewater rafters were encouraged to kiss a rock before facing a series of wild rapids in order to ensure a safe passage (Arnould and Price 1993). Similarly, counter-culture extravaganzas such as the Burning Man festival typically include communal ceremonies such as the famous burning of the event's eponymous effigy (see Kozinets 2002). Such practices suggest that extraordinary experiences are often perceived as having a transcendent quality.

Perhaps the most critical characteristic of extraordinary consumption experiences is that participants often appear to be transformed by these experiences in terms of personal growth and self-discovery. Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) observed, for instance, that religious pilgrimages

can help pilgrims realize the benefits of "decelerating" across different aspects of their lives. Similarly, Orazi and van Laer (2023) found that LARP participants tend to approach their lives differently after leaving these extraordinary experiences. Hence, the defining characteristic of extraordinary experiences may be their transformative power.

On the Need for a Broader Perspective in Studying Special Consumption Experiences

Although the literature on extraordinary experiences provides a useful perspective on the possible drivers of special consumption experiences, it is important to go beyond this literature for several reasons. First, recall that, by definition, extraordinary experiences constitute only a small subset of the broader range of experiences that consumers may consider special. And this subset of experiences tends to be quite atypical. Therefore, findings from this literature about the character of "extraordinary" experiences (e.g., feelings of communitas, self-transformation, high emotional intensity) need not be representative of what makes a broader range of consumption experiences special.

Second, studies in this literature were not specifically designed to address the research question that we investigate, which seeks to uncover the drivers of what makes consumption experiences "special." These studies instead focused on a variety of theoretical issues raised by different extraordinary experience contexts such as the dramatic structure of skydiving as a form of high-risk consumption (Celsi et al. 1993), the tension between structure and antistructure (Turner 1969) in pilgrimages (Husemann et al. 2016), or the embrace of sexual identities that challenge mainstream cisgender cultural expectations in Goth festivals (Goulding and Saren 2009).

Third, in previous literature on extraordinary experiences, the extraordinary character of the experience was typically assumed *ex-ante* by the researchers, who selected a particular

context to investigate (e.g., extended whitewater rafting trips, pilgrimages, Mountain Men rendezvous) under the presumption that the contextualized experience is "extraordinary." If one is to understand what makes certain consumption experiences "special" *from the consumers' perspective,* it is vital to allow the consumers *themselves* to identify which experiences are special to them, rather than predetermine which consumption experience deserves to be investigated.

Therefore, the literature on extraordinary experiences is a starting point for examining what makes consumption experiences "special," and a more integrative investigation is ideally one that (a) is specifically dedicated to understanding the fundamental drivers of such experiences; (b) considers a broader range of consumption experiences that are more typical of those that consumers encounter in the marketplace; and (c) allows the consumers themselves to identify the experiences that are special to them.

Overview of the Studies

Study 1 grounds this investigation in actual lived experiences of consumption by utilizing rich informant narratives to identify the key pillars of consumption experiences deemed special across a wide range of settings. Through a grounded-theory analysis of numerous in-depth interviews and written narratives, we uncover three major psychological pillars of special consumption experiences: uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity, each with its own facets. In study 2, we test the proposed framework in a field setting by surveying theatergoers outside a popular Broadway musical venue immediately after performances. Consistent with our propositions, we find a strong correlation between measures of the three major pillars and the overall perceived specialness of the musical-watching experience. In study 3, we replicate and refine the results of study 2 by developing and validating scales to measure each of the key

constructs. The results imply that the three proposed pillars are not generic predictors of positive experiences in general but of special experiences in particular. In study 4, we generalize our emergent conceptualization of special experiences by performing a natural language processing (NLP) analysis of more than 3 million Yelp reviews across more than 420 experience categories. Study 5 obtains more direct evidence that the proposed pillars are causally related to the perceived specialness of consumption experiences. Whereas the first five studies rely on verbal accounts of consumption experiences, study 6 provides convergent support for the propositions using purely pictorial representations of consumption experience scraped from Instagram. Finally, studies 7A–7D offer simple demonstrations of how different facets of the identified pillars can be operationalized to increase the perceived specialness of various consumption experiences.

STUDY 1:

A GROUNDED-THEORY ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

This first study aims to develop an emergent conceptualization of what makes consumption experiences special from consumers' perspective. Consistent with recent work on consumer fun and other emotional experiences in the marketplace (Oh and Pham 2022; Pham and Sun 2020), we used a grounded-theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2012) to identify and conceptualize three important pillars of the perceived specialness of consumption experiences, along with their respective facets, which are different ways each pillar arises in various consumption settings.

Method

Following standard grounded-theory procedures, we first assembled an extensive set of qualitative data about lived personal experiences of consumption deemed to be special. The data

consisted of (a) more than 400 written narratives detailing personal accounts of experiences across a wide range of consumption contexts, and (b) 26 in-depth interviews conducted with a broad spectrum of consumers of different backgrounds and age groups. Unlike in most previous research on extraordinary experiences, the consumption experiences and contexts whose accounts we analyzed were selected by the consumer informants themselves. We submitted these qualitative data to a mostly inductive conceptual analysis via an iterative process of coding, writing memos, and thematizing (Charmaz 2006; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014; see web appendix 1a [WA-1a] for more details on our methodology).

Written Consumption Narratives. A total of 437 respondents (M_{age} = 36.86, 48% female) were recruited in different waves of data collection online from Prolific Academic. The domain of interest was defined for all respondents as "consumption experiences meant for enjoyment," described as those whose "main purpose … is to enjoy oneself, feel good, and have a good time." The following examples were provided: "enjoying a nice meal, attending a concert or a sports game, going to the movies, going to the spa, going on a trip or a vacation, checking out a store for fun, playing board games, watching an entertaining TV program, visiting an amusement park, going camping, etc." After reading this introduction, respondents were asked to consider their own consumption experiences through specific prompts meant to uncover various layers of special consumption experiences. The prompts varied across different waves of data collection to provide slightly different lenses through which respondents could reflect on their special experiences. Respondents were free to select which experiences to describe and share, thus providing a more "bottom-up," consumer-driven perspective on these experiences (see WA-1b for a full description). Of the 437 written narratives that were submitted, 417 (M_{age} = 36.91, 48%

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female) were retained as usable after removing those that contained gibberish or were flagged as likely produced by generative AI. The average usable response contained 109.19 words.

In-Depth Interviews. The written consumption narratives were supplemented by 26 in-depth, one-on-one Zoom interviews with a diverse set of consumer informants who received a $15 Amazon gift card for their participation. As summarized in WA-1c, these informants included 16 men and 10 women, representing a broad range of age groups ($M = 31.38$, SD = 14.34) and occupations (e.g., students, staff member, corporate communications officer, retiree). Although 12 of the 26 were based in New York City, the others were located in 14 other cities, including two outside the US. Following established procedures (Miles et al. 2014), we used semi-structured interview guide, which created a consistent structure while allowing room for follow-up questions and clarifications. In line with the procedure used for the written narratives, the interviews started with a description of the scope of experiences of interest ("consumption experiences meant for enjoyment"). After this introduction, interviewees were asked to reflect on and recount personal consumption experiences that they found to be special. The interviews typically lasted 45 minutes to one hour, with the longest session lasting two hours.

Data Coding and Analysis. Audio recordings from the in-depth interviews were first transcribed into textual format. Then, using MAXQDA, a widely used software for in-depth analysis of qualitative data, we engaged in a systematic process of coding, labeling, and categorizing the data based on meaningful themes and concepts to arrive at the emergent conceptualization.

Results: An Emergent Conceptualization of Special Consumption Experiences

Across the 417 written narratives and 26 in-depth interviews, our informants described lived experiences of consumption spanning more than 25 categories, including dining, travel,

concerts, nature, and sports (see WA-1d for a representative list of categories). A deep, iterative grounded analysis of the copious text provided by these narratives and interviews revealed that despite the considerable diversity of consumption experiences that the informants described, the specialness of these experiences appears to arise from three important psychological pillars: (a) uniqueness, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) authenticity. All consumption experiences deemed special by consumers in our sample seemed to derive their specialness—an unusual, elevated quality that makes them remarkable, memorable, and distinguishable from ordinary experiences—from one or more of these three major psychological factors. In addition, our analyses revealed different facets of the pillars, offering a more detailed perspective on how each pillar typically operates in consumption settings. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of this study's findings and a roadmap for the presentation of these findings.

FIGURE 1:
AN EMERGENT CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPECIAL CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES
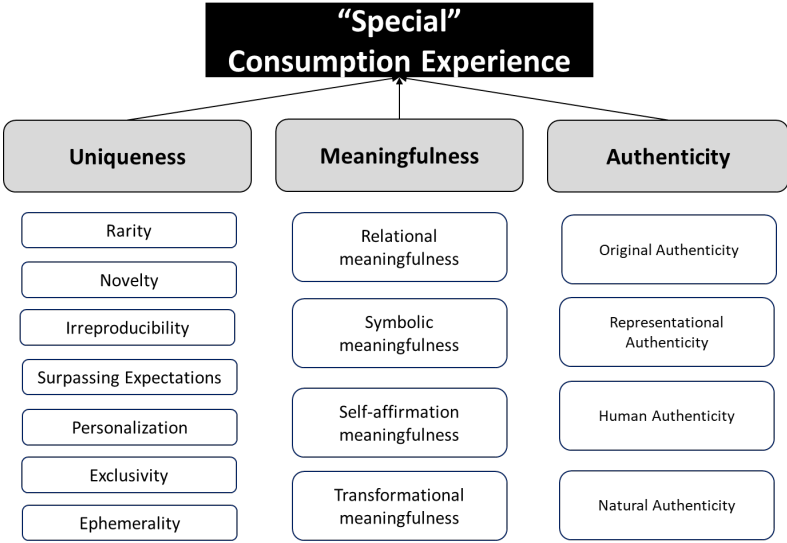
1. Specialness as Uniqueness

Across a wide range of consumption contexts, numerous informants highlighted uniqueness as a primary driver of the specialness of their experiences. Their accounts often

included terms and phrases such as "out-of-the-ordinary," "rare," "different from the usual," "unexpected," "unique," "not every day," and "once-in-a-lifetime." For example, a 37-year-old male wrote, *"When I was 14, I went to my first concert with my best friend. The experience was special because we got to see our favorite band in person ... and—due to it being our first concert—was an experience that could never be duplicated. Sharing a moment like that with a good friend made it particularly impactful ... it stands out, it's unique, and it's forever memorable."* For this informant, what made the experience special is in large part that it was his first concert, an experience that could not be duplicated, and that was therefore unique. Another informant recounts the following experience: *"I am not really a dancer [I] just happen to love it so much until I joined a dance group. Lucky me I was chosen among few others to perform for a charity night with a lot of ambassadors. I don't think I will have another chance to do that again, making me proud and still can't believe it until now"* (female, 44). Again, what made this experience special for this informant is that the opportunity to dance in front of a group of ambassadors was unique and unlikely to happen again. Therefore, a major pillar of the specialness of consumption experiences is *uniqueness*, which we define as the degree to which consumers perceive their experience to be distinct from more common experiences that can be easily encountered and reproduced.

The finding that many consumption experiences derive their specialness from their uniqueness is not entirely surprising given that most English dictionaries define the word "special" as something unusual. Nevertheless, a deep analysis of the narratives and interview transcripts reveals a rich, multifaceted conception of the notion of uniqueness as a pillar of special experiences. Indeed, our analysis uncovered seven different ways in which particular consumption experiences can be distinct from more common experiences, and thus unique. We

call them "facets" of uniqueness: (a) rarity, (b) novelty, (c) irreproducibility, (d) the surpassing of expectations, (e) personalization, (f) exclusivity, and (g) ephemerality. Each of these modes of distinctiveness can activate perceptions of uniqueness and thereby a sense of specialness. Therefore, conceptually, using the language of measurement theory, these various facets should be seen as *formative* antecedents of the uniqueness of special experiences rather than reflective indicators of a homogeneous uniqueness construct (Jarvis, MacKensie, and Podsakoff 2003).

Rarity. In many accounts of special consumption experiences, the uniqueness of the experience emanated from the relative rarity of this type of experience. By rarity, we mean the extent to which the experience is regarded as uncommon, as opposed to commonplace, for people *in general*. As an illustration, for most people, witnessing a solar eclipse is a more unique experience compared to admiring a full moon because the former is a much rarer event. Similarly, for most consumers, skydiving is a more unique leisure activity than hiking because far fewer people engage in the former than the latter. Describing a boat tour in Florida where he saw dolphins up-close, a 21-year-old male noted, *"It's not every day one sees dolphins, especially how close we go to them, so it was special."* A second informant described a visit to a rather unique spa in Canada with a pool where *"there was music piped into the water so you could only hear it if you were lying back in the water with your ears under the surface"* (female, 40). For her, the place was special because *"there are so few places like this."* When asked to define what makes some "consumption experiences feel especially special," another informant responded, *"I think a very special consumption experience is something rare, possibly unique, that you might include on a 'bucket list' of things to do before you die"* (male, 35).

The notion of "bucket list" mentioned by this last informant underscores both parallels and contrasts with the literature on extraordinary experiences. Indeed, many, if not most, of the

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consumption contexts studied in this literature—such as climbing Mount Everest, skydiving, Mountain Men rendezvous, Burning Man, and LARPs—are "extraordinary" in part because of their relative rarity. However, rarity is not the only way in which consumption experiences come to be regarded as unique. In our analysis, we uncovered additional facets of uniqueness, many of which have eluded the theoretical lenses of the literature on extraordinary experiences.

Novelty. For many of our informants, the uniqueness of their experience emanated not from its objective rarity among people in general but from its relative novelty to the individual in particular. Whereas rarity pertains to how uncommon an experience is in general, the novelty of an experience relates to the extent to which a particular consumer perceives the experience to be new, unfamiliar, or different from previous experiences that they had. To illustrate, while attending a baseball game is by no means a rare experience in general, it may still be a novel experience for someone who has never been to such a game. Consider the following account from a 23-year-old female informant: *"I went horseback riding near the Rocky Mountains. This experience was special to me because I live in the eastern part of the US and it was my first time ever traveling out west. I had never been horseback riding even though it is a pretty common sport for the people in my area (I live near the Appalachian Mountains). … all these things made this a special experience for me."* Across all accounts of special experiences, novelty was the most frequently mentioned source of uniqueness, with most accounts highlighting the novelty of experiences that were not objectively rare.

Irreproducibility. Many informants recounted experiences that they considered to be unique and special because they regarded them as irreproducible for some reason. One informant recounted a visit to a zoo with her fiancé: *"The zoo was empty because it was getting close to winter time so it was very cold outside. Luckily, this large zoo had tons of indoor exhibits so we*

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still got to see a lot of animals. Normally that zoo was extremely busy. So it was this special experience that felt like it would never happen again where we'd get nearly the entire zoo to ourselves" (female, 29). Another informant recalled a memorable family dinner at a Mediterranean restaurant, where belly dancers encouraged some patrons to dance with them: *"One dancer chose my son from our table and my son got up and danced. I still have pictures of him dancing with the beautifully-clad dancer. I could never re-enact this event, as my father was there and he has now passed away"* (female, 60). Informants provided a variety of reasons for why their special experiences could not be replicated, such as the passing of a loved one with whom the experience was shared (as in the preceding account), the experience being too expensive to reproduce, the experience arising from an unlikely combination of circumstances, or experience providers discontinuing their activities (e.g., a rock band that has since retired from touring).

Surpassing Expectations. Consistent with classic dictionary definitions of the word "special," which allude to some elevated quality of the object, in many informants' accounts, consumption experiences were perceived to be unique and thereby special because the informants' consumer expectations were exceeded, and they were positively surprised. A typical scenario is a customer service delivered at a level that surpasses common marketplace practices, as in the following account: *"The last time I went on vacation, an employee made me a very special flower arrangement. She left it in my room. She didn't speak English and I didn't speak much French but we were able to communicate appreciation for each other. This person made my experience special with their small act of kindness"* (female, 58). The surpassing of expectations or positive surprise does not necessarily need to come from a service provider. In the following account, the informant's expectations regarding her birthday celebration were

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exceeded because of her friends' unexpected thoughtfulness: *"...people ... made it extra special by surprising me with decorations and a cake with my name on it. They gifted me with books which caught me by surprise because I had no idea they remembered I love books"* (female, 29).

Personalization. Experiences can also feel unique, and therefore special, through their personalization. Consumption experiences that are specifically tailored to consumers and customized for them tend to be more distinctive and feel more special compared to standard experiences. For example, a 27-year-old female informant described a particular dining experience as special because the server *"took the time to learn why we were dining out that night, gave us personalized drink and food recommendations."* Another informant who used to be a service provider observed that it is well-known that personalization makes customer experiences more special: *"When I worked in catering they always said the best way to make a dining [experience] special is by making it feel personalized to people's experience ... ask them what their favorite song was and play it, bring out their favorite dessert for free, or give them a special drink tailored to what they like"* (female, 25).

Exclusivity. Across a wide range of consumption contexts, informants often alluded to the perceived exclusivity of their experience as another way in which consumption experiences feel unique and therefore special. Experiences that are seen as not accessible to everyone or limited to a select group of individuals are more likely to be considered unique and special. Prototypical examples involve luxury consumption, as illustrated by the following account: *"I was in Cape Town in South Africa and I stayed in one of the very expensive hotels there. From the airport, I had a chauffeur waiting for me in an exquisite Mercedes Benz bus fully loaded with everything I could need ... I was treated like royalty"* (male, 46). Even non-luxurious experiences can feel exclusive if they are seen as not accessible to everyone, as illustrated by the next account: *"I*

went on a trip to several countries in Europe for several weeks and got to see new things in person that I had only ever seen pictures of, try new foods ... meet new people that live in those countries ... it was ... exclusive because most of my friends had not been to those places or even left the country before" (female, 24).

Ephemerality. Although less common in our data, some experiences seemed to draw their uniqueness and specialness from ephemerality. Experiences that are seen as only temporary, short-lived, or fleeting tend to be regarded as unique and special. Returning to a previous illustrative example, witnessing a total solar eclipse is special not just because such eclipses are rare but also because they last only a few minutes. Similarly, a 43-year-old male informant recounted a ziplining experience in Wales: *"We went on the longest zip wire which was approximately a mile long and lasted about 45 seconds ... the wire took you down ... at speeds of over 100mph. The experience was exhilarating but I wish it had gone on a little bit longer. The briefing lasted 45 minutes ... all for an experience that was over in a blink of an eye!"* Describing a concert by Alison Moyet, one of his favorite singers, a 49-year-old male wrote, *"...of course I wanted her to just keep playing for hours but it only lasted a couple hours. And that she played some of my very favorite songs made it an incredibly special and memorable experience."* Interestingly, many experiences in the extraordinary-experience literature (e.g., Burning Man, skydiving, LARPs) also seem to draw part of their extraordinary character from their ephemerality, which contributes to the liminality and transformative power of these experiences (Turner 1969).

2. Specialness as Meaningfulness

Besides alluding to the uniqueness of their experiences, many informants referred to the meaningfulness of their consumption experiences as a major reason why they were special. In

their written narratives and one-on-one interviews, informants often used words and phrases such as "significant," "important to me," "meant a lot," and "meaningful." Therefore, a special consumption experience is not necessarily one that is unique in terms of rarity, novelty, personalization, and so on—it may be one that *means something* to the consumer. The meaningfulness of a consumption experience can be defined as the extent to which the experience is perceived to have personal significance beyond its immediate enjoyment. As with uniqueness, our analysis uncovered different facets of the meaningfulness of consumption experiences. These include (a) the relational significance of the experience, (b) its symbolic significance, (c) its significance in terms of self-affirmation, and (d) its transformational value.

Relational Meaningfulness. In numerous accounts of special experiences across a wide range of consumption contexts, the specialness of the experience stemmed not from the consumption itself but from *whom* the individual shared it with. Most informants' accounts of special consumption experiences mention the presence of close others, such as a spouse, romantic partner, parents, siblings and/or close friends, with whom the experience was shared. In those accounts, the presence of the close other(s) is often noted as contributing to the meaningfulness of the event. The following account, from a 48-year-old male about a family trip to an amusement park, epitomizes how sharing experiences with close others makes these experiences more meaningful and therefore special: *"...a family trip that we all took to Great America when I was just a lad. My family has a big spread in age, and I am the youngest ... so it was rare for all of us to be together. But during this one trip to the amusement park, every one of us was there and we had just a wonderful time. There were rides like the log flume that me and my father went on together, a trip up in the gondola with my mom and dad, getting food and cotton candy with my sisters ... The day ... seemed like the longest, happiest day of my life."*

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The finding that the perceived specialness of consumption experiences is driven in part by the meaningfulness of sharing it with close others is reminiscent of the previously noted finding that extraordinary experiences are often characterized by feelings of communitas. Still, there are subtle distinctions between the two sets of results. First, whereas in the case of extraordinary experiences, feelings of communitas often extend beyond close others to include strangers who share the same experience (Goulding et al. 2002), in our data our informants almost exclusively referred to reinforced connections with spouses, partners, close relatives, and long-time friends. Second, whereas the existing bonds that are reinforced through the sharing of special consumption experiences with close others would naturally extend beyond the shared experience itself, feelings of communitas tend to be more transitory and confined to the liminal space created by the extraordinary experience (Turner 1969).

Symbolic Meaningfulness. The meaningfulness of a consumption experience is not solely driven by the relational context in which the experience takes place; it can also be shaped by the cultural significance of the broader surrounding circumstances. Indeed, many informants' accounts of special consumption experiences refer to events such as birthday celebrations, wedding anniversaries, national holidays, and religious occasions. Such circumstances are typically perceived to be significant by consumers because they have *symbolic meaning*, that is, a representation that is broadly shared and socially respected within the culture (Hirschman 1981). Because meaning is often transferred from the culturally constituted world onto vehicles of consumption (McCracken 1986), the symbolic meaning of these notable circumstances elevates the consumption experience itself. Therefore, many consumption experiences become special because they are symbolically meaningful, even when the symbolism is largely personal. The following account from a 42-year-old male is a classic example: *"One of the very special*

experiences I have had is the day I proposed to my girlfriend, now wife. It doesn't have these modern twists to it but it was from my heart ... It was a sensual dinner that I planned on the rooftop of my mother's house ... I have had many childhood memories on that rooftop so I wanted that to crown it with an invitation to have a special someone permanently in my life as a partner. It wasn't a fancy restaurant, but it had all her sentimental artifacts there ... after that I posed the question."

Self-affirmation Meaningfulness. Some informants' accounts point to another source of meaningfulness contributing to a special experience. Consumption experiences in which the person's sense of self is affirmed seem to be particularly meaningful to people. This affirmation can take the form of personal achievements that the person is proud of. For example, a 31-year-old male described a celebratory graduation dinner with close friends and family at a Japanese steak house. This dinner was meaningful to him because *"I had a difficult time during the schooling so it was relieving to finally graduate and make something of my life with the hard earned degree."* Similarly, a 27-year-old interviewee who had recently graduated with a Master's degree shared how proud she was about planning a trip to Europe with her immigrant single mother: *"This is the first time in my life where I was finally the adult."*

Transformational Meaningfulness. In a small number of accounts, the meaningfulness of the consumption experience emanates from a sense of personal transformation. Through the experience itself, or in close connection with this experience, people feel that they have become a different and "better" person. These experiences tend to be very similar to ones studied in the extraordinary-experience literature reviewed above. For example, a 74-year-old female explained how she was *"irreversibly changed ... in positive ways"* by a trip to Nepal and India: *"I did a 30-day pilgrimage of Tibetan Buddhist holy sites ... where we spent significant time meditating*

and experiencing the energy of each place. Our teacher would also inform us about the site's long history and present status, which enriched the experience. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me." A 26-year-old male interviewee from New York shared having a similar transformative experience when, during the pandemic, he went on a solo backpacking trip in a remote area of India, where he traveled by horse and had a homestay with local villagers. Commenting on this experience, he observed, *"I think these experiences matter a lot, because they teach you so much."* The relative rarity of similar accounts of transformative consumption experiences in our qualitative data supports the view that extraordinary experiences are a subset of a broader class of experiences that consumers consider to be special. In addition, these accounts suggest that what separates extraordinary experiences from those that are merely "special" is largely the former's transformative character.

3. Specialness as Authenticity

Our conceptual analysis of numerous narratives and interviews uncovered a third major pillar of consumption experiences that are deemed special: the felt *authenticity* of the experience, which we define as the extent to which the experience feels genuine, real, and true (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Newman 2019). Unlike uniqueness, which most informants explicitly recognized as a major determinant of the specialness of their recalled consumption experiences, the role of authenticity tended to be more implicit, revealing itself upon deeper scrutiny of informants' accounts. Our analysis uncovered four different forms of authenticity that contribute to the perceived specialness of consumption experiences: (a) original authenticity, (b) representational authenticity, (c) human authenticity, and (d) natural authenticity—conceptual distinctions that are broadly consistent with those proposed by Gilmore and Pine (2007) and Newman (2019).

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Original Authenticity. A substantial number of informants ascribe the specialness of their experiences to a sense of proximity and connection to an essential source that is regarded as the "real thing." For example, a 30-year-old male informant recounted a visit to a museum dedicated to a legendary baseball player: *"My best friend … surprised me with a trip to the Roberto Clemente Museum, which one of his new friends in Pittsburgh happened to be in charge of. We had free rein of the museum, and I was in awe of all of the history that I was able to experience and view. There were MVP trophies, old uniforms, memorabilia…."* For this informant, being able to be figuratively close to one of his idols was a key part of what made this experience special. This form of authenticity, which we call *original authenticity,* is an important reason why most consumers would regard being able to see the Mona Lisa in person or attending a live concert of Adele as a special experience. Connecting this observation to the extraordinary-experience literature, we note that the appeal of original authenticity is also what makes experiences such as attending the Burning Man festival, ascending Mount Everest, or completing famous pilgrimages "extraordinary."

The concept of original authenticity is closely related to the notion of indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004). It rests heavily on the verifiability and strength of a spatiotemporal connection between the experience and a valued original source (e.g., a renowned author, a famous artist, an iconic place). Any weakening or invalidation of this connection reduces the felt authenticity of the experience and, thereby, its perceived specialness. This is well illustrated by a 46-year-old female informant's account of a concert that she expected to be special but fell short: *"My boyfriend is a Garth Brooks fan, so I bought tickets to a pandemic concert of his that was being shown at drive-in theaters … The concert ended up being prerecorded, so it was like watching a movie instead of a livestream of a concert. It was*

expensive and I felt a waste of both time and money." The fact that this concert was prerecorded rather than livestreamed weakened this informant's spatiotemporal connection with the artist's performance, thereby reducing the felt specialness of her experience.

Representational Authenticity. Some informants shared experiences that they found to be special not because of a genuine spatiotemporal connection with an original or essential source, but because the experience was emblematic or prototypical of a certain type of experience that is itself original. These informants' experiences underscore a second form of authenticity that we call *representational* and is sometimes referred to as "referential" (Gilmore and Pine 2007), "iconic" (Grayson and Martinec 2004), or "categorical" (Newman 2019) authenticity. A given consumption experience will feel representationally authentic if its features align with (or represent) the schema of a noteworthy type of experience. Consider the following account of watching a luau performance in Hawaii: *"Beautiful Hawaiian women walked gracefully to the stage, each in their designated spots for the performance. The drumbeats began, and with each one, it seemed the energy in the room was unified in celebration. We watched as the women danced and twirled in their traditional hula. This experience was special because it seemingly transported me to another place and time. I wanted to sit there holding that coconut water, watching the hula dancers forever"* (female, 43). What made this experience special for this informant is not that it was authentic in the original sense—it was just a performance, as she notes. Rather, it was that, to her, a luau with Hawaiian women dressed in traditional hula skirts felt like an iconic Hawaiian experience. By commenting that she felt "transported … to another place and time," she further attests to the representational authenticity of her experience.

More generally, for a tourist in Paris, the experience of purchasing a French baguette and eating it with pâté while sitting on a bench by the Seine River may feel special because this act

of consumption seems so stereotypically "French." Conversely, an experience that fails to match a consumer's stereotypical conception of what that experience should be like would not feel representationally authentic and would be less likely to be viewed as special. For example, a 33-year-old female interviewee explained that while she enjoyed staying at an all-inclusive resort in Mexico, she wished she had a more representative experience of what the country is like:

"...when I went to Mexico one time it was to a resort so that I knew that from the get-go I wasn't going to get what I was seeking ... a genuine [experience]... I definitely got other pleasures out of that but I knew that that was only because it was being in a resort has its perks and those perks are not necessarily reflected on the country it's just the resort ... but what made me a little disappointed was that I was hoping that when we were there we would have times to actually see the country as is ... Hoped to see a little bit of what the country or...the space represents."

Relating our analysis to the extraordinary-experience literature, we believe that representational authenticity is ostensibly a large contributor to the appeal of experiences such as LARPs, the Whitby Goth Weekend, and Mountain Men rendezvous that are primarily rooted in role-playing. Within the broader marketplace of interest in our research, conceptually, representational authenticity should moderate the perceived specialness of the many consumption experiences that are largely based on make-believe and verisimilitude (e.g., themed entertainment experiences, touristic attractions, cultural performances, escape rooms, historical reenactments, etc.).

Human Authenticity. Numerous informants attributed the specialness of their consumption experiences to a third form of authenticity that we call *human authenticity*, defined in this work as the extent to which the actions of key actors (such as service providers, fellow participants, or hosts) are perceived as sincere, emotionally veridical, and motivated by genuine

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personal care, rather than by instrumental, commercial, or self-serving motives. For example, a 22-year-old female informant related the following account of a weekend stay at a small-town inn with her boyfriend: *"It was a very intimately sized inn with five rooms in the main house and seven independent cottages surrounding it ... It was so different from all the other hotels we stayed at. The intimacy of the experience is also what made it special. The owners and their dogs personally greeted us, they checked up on us often and gave us suggestions about places to go. The dogs were also really sweet, and they definitely made the trip extra special to me."* What made this experience special for this informant is that the owners—and even their dogs!—genuinely seemed to care about their guests.

Generally, any acts by service providers that do not feel purely transactional have the potential to evoke perceptions of human authenticity. However, service providers are not the only sources of human authenticity in special consumption experiences, as illustrated by the following touching account: *"I went to a nice restaurant by myself on my 21st birthday. The waiter brought me a cake with a candle and a couple sitting across the dining room saw me alone. They had the waiter bring them my check and they paid for my meal. It was very special ... I was touched by the kindness of total strangers"* (female, 24).

Natural Authenticity. Finally, when asked to identify experiences that they found special, a number of informants singled out experiences of immersion into and connection with *nature,* as illustrated by following account: *"... in the Coconino forest in Arizona. We rented a cabana that ... the kitchen was outside, it was fun to see a fully fitted kitchen outdoors… what made this time so very different was the fact that we stayed outdoors from about 6:00 am until it was time to go to bed at around 11:00 pm. We didn't need to leave the place ... other than going to the grocery store. Everything that made us happy was right on our doorstep, we had a pond, trees,*

flowers and plenty of wildlife to keep us happy. There were so many truly special moments, watching the elk come down over the hill was amazing, even the squirrel that decided to wake us up in the morning by screaming through the open window … I visit this memory many many times and could probably say it was one of the best times of my life" (female, 53). What made this experience really special for this informant is being immersed in and connected with various aspects of nature, including the proximity of flowers and trees, occasional wild animal visits, having an outdoor kitchen, and being outside from early morning to late at night.

Such experiences draw on pervasive romantic perceptions of nature as pure, simple, unspoiled, and authentic, in contrast to industrial and urban environments and human interventions that are viewed as artificial and corruptive (Thoreau 1864; see also Cronon 1995). This phenomenon bears some parallels with some of the literature on extraordinary experiences showing natural authenticity at work in nature-based experiences such as Everest Mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011), extended whitewater rafting and canoeing trips (Arnould and Price 1993; Lindberg and Østegaard 2015), and passionate surfing (Canniford and Shankar 2013). Canniford and Shankar (2013), in particular, discuss extensively how passionate surfers negotiate the tension between their search for natural authenticity and the practicality of using modern technologies to support their passion. Our data indicate, however, that even experiences that are by no means extraordinary can be perceived as being special because of their natural authenticity. For example, one informant mentioned simply going to a park at the top of a mountain: *"…went by myself to enjoy myself. I went hiking and enjoyed the fresh air. There is also a beautiful outlook and I let myself recharge and enjoy the view"* (female, 36). Again, special consumption experiences need not be extraordinary.

Discussion

By definition, special consumption experiences are those that consumers perceive to have some unusual, elevated qualities that make them remarkable, memorable, and distinguishable from ordinary consumption experiences. What are these qualities? According to our grounded-theory analysis of more than 400 narratives and 26 interviews covering dozens of experience categories, these qualities emanate from at least three major sources of psychological value: (1) uniqueness, which refers to the degree to which consumers perceive a particular experience to be distinct from experiences that can be easily encountered and reproduced; (2) meaningfulness, which refers to the extent to which the experience is perceived to have personal significance beyond its immediate enjoyment; and (3) authenticity, which refers to the degree to which the experience feels genuine, real, and true. Although we do not exclude the possibility that other important pillars may be uncovered in future research, we propose that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are major pillars of the specialness of consumption experiences.

While we regard these three pillars as conceptually distinct, we do not mean to suggest that they are empirically orthogonal from one another. Some of our findings will show that, in real life, these three sources of value tend to be correlated. To illustrate, a 20th-anniversary dinner that is lovingly prepared by one's spouse is likely to feel special through a combination of symbolic meaning (this is an anniversary dinner), human authenticity (the spouse lovingly prepared the dinner), and uniqueness (major anniversaries are rare occasions).

Although the primary focus of our conceptualization is the role of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity as pillars of perceived specialness, our analysis additionally uncovered multiple facets of each pillar, that is, different ways each of the pillars arises in various consumption settings. Given the foundational intent of this research, most of the

remaining studies focus on testing the proposed conceptualization at the primary pillar level. However, we provide some preliminary empirical evidence that the identified facets can be leveraged for the engineering of special consumption experiences in the marketplace.

STUDY 2: A FIELD TEST OF THE CONCEPTUALIZATION ON BROADWAY

The purpose of study 2 was to carry out an initial field-level test of the proposed conceptualization of "special" experiences. A corollary objective was to verify that the hypothesized relationship of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity to perceived specialness is not generic, in that it does not necessarily hold with other positive experiential constructs such as felt pride. To this end, we asked theatergoers to evaluate their experience of a musical they just attended on Broadway in New York City. It was expected that these respondents' ratings of the specialness of their musical-watching experience would be reliably predicted by their perceptions of the uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity of this experience. However, respondents' ratings of felt pride would not be equally well explained by the same three predictors.

Method

Respondents were 127 theatergoers (M_{age} = 33.15, 63% female) who were recruited from November to December 2022 outside the Gershwin Theater in New York City, during six matinée live performances of the musical *Wicked*. At the end of each performance, patrons exiting the theater were approached by the researchers and asked to participate in a short survey in exchange for a small gift (see WA-2a for photos of the study setting). Those who accepted were given a brief questionnaire (reproduced in WA-2b). Three 7-point items assessed respondents' overall opinion of the musical: "How much did you enjoy watching *The Wicked* today?" which was a general introductory question; "How special was today's musical-watching

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experience for you?" which was the main dependent variable; and "How proud did you feel about watching this musical?." This last measure, assessing pride in the experience, was included to test the notion that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are predictors of specialness in particular, rather than generic predictors of positive experiences in general. Four items assessed respondents' perception of the uniqueness of the experience (e.g., "How unique did the experience of watching *The Wicked* feel to you?"). One item assessed respondents' perception of the meaningfulness of the experience ("Did attending this particular musical have a personal significance for you?"). Four items obtained respondents' perception of the authenticity of the experience (e.g., "How authentic did this overall experience feel to you?"). These three sets of measures were expected to predict respondents' perceptions of the specialness of the experience, but not be equally predictive of their feelings of pride. In addition, to evaluate expected downstream consequences of perceptions of specialness, respondents were asked whether they bought any souvenirs (e.g., CDs; Yes/No) and whether they intended to keep the playbill (Yes/No). Responses to these two questions were combined into an overall index of behavioral consequences, ranging from 0 to 2.

Results

The predictions were tested through two multiple regressions: one with perceived specialness as the dependent variable, and perceived uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity as predictors; the other with felt pride as the dependent variable and the same three predictors. As summarized in Table 1, uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity were significant predictors of the perceived specialness of the musical experience, accounting for 24% of the variance in this dependent measure. By contrast, the same set of predictors did not explain

equally well respondents' overall feeling of pride, accounting for only 11% of the variance in this measure.

TABLE 1

Broadway Study: Predicting Perceived Specialness and Felt Pride as a Function of Three Pillars

Dependent Variable	Model 1 Perceived Specialness	Model 2 Felt Pride
	$R^2 = .24$	$R^2 = .11$
Intercept	3.903[a] (0.525)	1.018 (1.272)
Uniqueness	0.236[a] (0.065)	0.331[c] (0.159)
Meaningfulness	0.051[c] (0.026)	-0.029 (0.062)
Authenticity	0.171[c] (0.078)	0.493[c] (0.190)

Note. [a] $p < .001$; [b] $p < .01$; [c] $p < .05$

To verify the assumption that the perceived specialness of an experience has meaningful downstream consequences on consumer behavior, we performed an ordinal logistic regression with the behavioral consequence index as the dependent variable, and perceived specialness and felt pride as predictors. The results show that perceived specialness was a significant predictor of the behavioral index ($\beta = 1.56$, $\chi^2(1) = 14.88$, $p < .001$), whereas felt pride was not ($\beta = 0.02$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$, NS).

Discussion

Consistent with the grounded conceptualization that emerged from study 1, the results of this study show that theatergoers' perceptions of the specialness of a Broadway musical can be explained by their perceptions of how unique, meaningful, and authentic the musical was to them. In contrast, these three hypothesized pillars of specialness do not predict theatergoers' overall feelings of pride equally well. This suggests that the proposed association of uniqueness,

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meaningfulness, and authenticity with perceived specialness is not a generic association that necessarily extends to other positive experiential constructs. In addition, the results show that ratings of "specialness" of the musical predict downstream consumption behaviors such as retaining memorabilia and purchasing souvenirs, thus confirming that perceived specialness is a material driver of marketplace value.

One could argue that it may have been awkward for respondents to rate how proud they were to have watched the musical, which would explain why the three pillars were not equally predictive of this comparison construct. To address this issue, in study 3 we offer additional evidence that the mapping between the three proposed pillars and perceived specialness is quite distinct and does not necessarily generalize to other hedonic constructs. Another limitation of this study is that two of the key constructs, specialness and meaningfulness, were assessed with single items. This limitation is addressed in study 3 as well.

STUDY 3: CONSTRUCT VALIDATION OF THE PILLARS OF SPECIALNESS

The purpose of this study was to test the conceptualization further while addressing some of the limitations of study 2. As detailed in WA-3a, study 3 was conducted in three stages. Following standard scale-development procedures, in the first stage (study 3A), we generated an initial list of 49 items to assess the specialness of a consumption experience (13 items) as well as its uniqueness (10 items), meaningfulness (11 items), and authenticity (15 items). We then asked 302 Prolific online participants to recall and describe either a special consumption experience or a recent consumption experience and rate it on 20 items randomly selected from the total list of 49 items. Based on an exploratory factor analysis of the responses, combined with conceptual discussions with research colleagues, we narrowed down the list of items to a final list of 16 items: four items for specialness and four items for each of the three pillars (see Table 3a in WA-

3a). As reported in WA-3a, an exploratory factor analysis with oblimin rotation shows that the four sets of items load onto four separate (correlated) factors accounting for 41% of the variance to be explained.
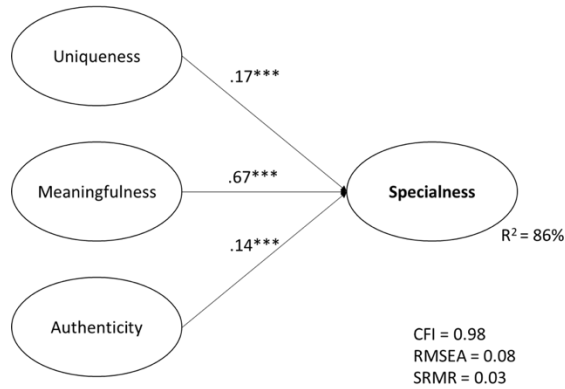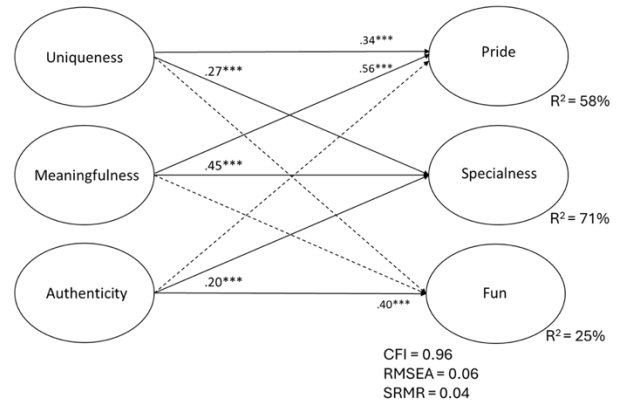
FIGURE 2A: PREDICTIVE VALIDITY   FIGURE 2B: DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

To further test the construct validity of these 16 items, in a second stage (study 3B), another set of 400 Prolific participants were asked to recall and describe either a special consumption experience or a recent consumption experience (as in study 3A) and rate it on the 16 items. We then fit the structural equation model (SEM) shown in figure 2A to the observed responses. The model exhibited an adequate fit with the data (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.03), with the three latent factors of uniqueness (β = .17, p < .001), meaningfulness (β = .67, p < .001), and authenticity (β = .14, p < .001) each contributing positively to the latent perceived specialness of the experience. The model explained 86% of the variance in specialness, suggesting that the three pillars we identified in this research account for much of the variability in the perceived specialness of consumption experiences.

In the third stage of the study (study 3C), we leveraged the scale items developed in the preceding stages to provide further evidence that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity

are distinctively associated with perceptions of specialness. Another 383 Prolific participants were asked to recall and describe a recent consumption experience that they enjoyed and rate it on the same 16 items as in the preceding studies. In addition, participants were asked to rate the experience on two other dimensions of overall hedonic quality for discriminant validity purposes: (a) how fun the experience was (3 items, $\alpha = .89$) and (b) how proud they were about this experience (3 items, $\alpha = .86$).

The SEM summarized in figure 2B exhibited an adequate fit to the data (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.04). Again, uniqueness ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), meaningfulness ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), and authenticity ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) all significantly predicted the specialness of the experience, explaining 71% of the variance. This again supports the view that these three factors are major pillars of what makes consumption experiences special. As expected, the three pillars did not have parallel effects on the two comparison measures of overall hedonic quality. Perceived fun was influenced only by the authenticity of the experience ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$), with 25% of the variance explained, whereas felt pride was influenced by its uniqueness ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$) and its meaningfulness ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$) but not by its authenticity, with 58% of the variance explained. This latter result replicates and extends that of study 2 in showing that the three proposed pillars are distinct predictors of the specialness of an experience rather than generic predictors of the overall hedonic quality of the experience.

STUDY 4: AN NLP TEST OF THE CONCEPTUALIZATION AND ITS GENERALIZABILITY ACROSS CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

To further test the proposed conceptualization and examine its generalizability across an even broader range of real-world consumption experiences, this study leverages a large-scale dataset, the Yelp Open Dataset, which includes almost seven million consumer reviews across

more than one thousand business categories. Using this massive corpus of consumer-generated text, we applied natural language processing (NLP) techniques to model the relations among the key constructs as reflected by a subset of more than three million consumer reviews deemed to be relevant to our analysis. Doing so enables a test of the conceptualization that generalizes and complements the tests reported thus far. Indeed, unlike in studies 2 and 3, Yelp reviewers are not explicitly asked to rate the specialness of their experiences or its three hypothesized pillars. Rather, they provide organic descriptions and evaluations of their consumption experiences, allowing a possibly more conservative test of the proposed conceptualization.

Preliminary analyses detailed in WA-4a show that the small subset of Yelp reviews that contained the word "special" (4.2% of the total number of reviews) were significantly more likely to also contain the words "unique," "meaningful," and "authentic" than the reviews that did not contain the word "special" (95.8% of the total). This simple descriptive result is consistent with the proposed conceptualization. As a more rigorous test, we developed a word-embedding model of more than three million reviews from the Yelp dataset to quantify the notions of specialness, uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity reflected in these reviews. We then tested the relationships among these constructs.

Method

The Yelp Open Dataset contains almost seven million reviews across 22 primary business categories (e.g., "restaurants," "shopping") and 1,031 second-order categories (e.g., "steakhouses," "souvenir shops"). To obtain a more precise NLP test of the propositions, we narrowed down the dataset to focus on the subset of reviews that are most relevant to the issue of what makes consumption experiences special. To this end, each of the 1,031 second-order categories (e.g., "sporting goods," "bed & breakfast," "dance clubs") was independently coded

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as primarily "consummatory/experiential," primarily "instrumental/functional," or "unclear," resulting in 576 categories deemed primarily "consummatory/experiential." Because individual listings could be recorded in more than one second-order category, we then selected all listings recorded in any "consummatory/experiential" category, excluding those that were also cross-listed in any "instrumental/functional" category. This process resulted in a final dataset of 3,034,457 reviews across 425 second-order categories (e.g., "Bowling," "Escape Games," "Hair Salons," "Massage"; see WA-4b).

Next, consistent with standard practices (e.g., Chung et al. 2022), we subjected the corpus of selected reviews to preprocessing steps such as tokenization, removal of common stopwords (e.g., articles, pronouns), controls for the use of negation (e.g., removing targeted bigrams such as "not special"), and stemming (collapsing similar words such as "running" and "run" into "run"). In addition, extremely rare words (those appearing five times or less) were filtered out to enhance the robustness and efficiency of the word-embedding model. Instances of the word "specials," which typically refer to promotions (e.g., "menu specials," "daily specials," "weekend specials") were also removed at this stage.

We then trained our word-embedding model using the skip-gram algorithm, which is well-suited for capturing semantic relationships between words. The word vectors were constructed with a vector length of 100 and a window size of 5 for each word or cluster of words, providing a reasonable balance between semantic richness and computational efficiency. Given that the model was trained for unigrams, three phrases that were expected to be relevant— "meant a lot," "real thing," and "one of a kind"—were converted to unigrams to refine the modeling of the semantic relationships among the focal constructs.

Next, we generated similarity scores between the average vector representation of each review and the vector representation of each of the four key constructs: specialness, uniqueness, authenticity, and meaningfulness. To obtain vector representations of the four constructs, we selected target words and phrases based on the scale-development findings of study 3 (see Table 3a in the Web Appendix). For specialness, we used the words "special," "exceptional," "remarkable," and "memorable." For uniqueness, we used the words "unique," "distinctive," and "one of a kind." For meaningfulness, we used the words "meaningful," "significant," and "meant a lot." And for authenticity, we used the words "authentic," "genuine," and "real thing." We then computed the cosine similarity between the vector representation of each review and the vector representation of each of the main constructs. This resulted in four scores for each review, each corresponding to the degree to which the review embodied the constructs of specialness, uniqueness, authenticity, or meaningfulness.

Results and Discussion

The similarity scores were submitted to a simple regression in which the specialness score was the dependent variable, and the uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity scores were the predictor variables. As expected, each of the three major pillars significantly and positively predicted the specialness score (β_{unique} = .447, t = 894.66, $p < .001$; $\beta_{meaningful}$ = .164, t = 368.43, $p < .001$; $\beta_{authentic}$ = .272, t = 491.40, $p < .001$), accounting for 58% of the variance. Hence, across the more than three million reviews analyzed, the presence of semantic markers of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity increased the likelihood that the review would exhibit semantic markers of specialness.

This study provides large-scale, real-world evidence of the fundamental association between the specialness of consumption experiences and their uniqueness, meaningfulness, and

authenticity. This association applies across more than 400 categories of experiences, from restaurant dining and spa treatments to fishing and skydiving, and it emerged organically even though consumers in this study were not explicitly asked to evaluate the specialness of their experiences, nor their perception of any of the proposed pillars. A limitation of the first four studies is that they provide only correlational evidence of the association between uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity and consumers' perceptions of the specialness of an experience. In the next study, we report evidence that these three proposed pillars do have a causal influence on the perceived specialness of a consumption experience.

STUDY 5: AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST OF THE CAUSAL STATUS
OF THE THREE PILLARS

This study was intended to provide more direct evidence that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are indeed causal drivers of the perceived specialness of consumption experiences. A related objective was to illustrate how various facets of the pillars can be used to enhance consumers' perceptions of specialness. To this end, we experimentally manipulated the presence of the three proposed pillars through some of their theoretical facets (see figure 1) in order to test their causal impact on the perceived specialness of the experience.
Method

In this preregistered study, 399 Prolific participants (M_{age} = 29.05, 49% female) were read a scenario about a dining experience and evaluated this experience on multiple dimensions. The description was varied in a 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects design that directly manipulated each of the proposed pillars at two levels: more versus less unique; more versus less meaningful; and more versus less authentic. As detailed in WA-5a the manipulations were based on operationalizations of different facets of the pillars. After reading the scenario, participants rated

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the dining experience on six 7-point items (counterbalanced): two measured the uniqueness of the experience ($\alpha = .86$), two measured its meaningfulness ($\alpha = .88$), and two measured its authenticity ($\alpha = .93$). These measures served as manipulation checks. Then, as the main dependent variable, participants rated the specialness of the experience on two 7-point items ($\alpha = .95$). Finally, to verify the general assumption that special experiences are perceived to be more valuable, we additionally asked participants to indicate their willingness to pay (WTP) for the described experience (see WA-5b for all measures and the link to the preregistration).

Results

Preliminary Analyses. As reported in WA-5c separate three-way ANOVAs of the measures of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity each revealed a large main effect of the corresponding factor. Participants perceived the dining experience to be more unique ($M_{more\ unique} = 5.93$ vs. $M_{less\ unique} = 4.43$, $F(1, 391) = 162.15$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .293$), more meaningful ($M_{more\ meaningful} = 5.34$ vs. $M_{less\ meaningful} = 4.43$, $F(1, 391) = 50.04$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .113$), and more authentic ($M_{more\ authentic} = 5.93$ vs. $M_{less\ authentic} = 4.38$, $F(1, 391) = 165.60$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .298$) in the conditions where the corresponding factor was meant to be elevated than in the conditions where it was meant to be lower. There were some unexpected "spillover" effects, whereby a given measure (e.g., uniqueness) would also be influenced by a nonfocal factor (e.g., authenticity). However, these spillover effects were smaller than the focal effects and are not totally surprising given that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are likely to be correlated constructs in real life.

Main Results. A three-way ANOVA of participants' ratings of the specialness of the dining experience revealed substantial main effects of each of the three manipulated factors. The dining experience was perceived to be more special (a) when it was more unique ($M = 5.55$) than

when it was less unique ($M = 4.78$, $F(1, 391) = 37.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .087$); (b) when it was more meaningful ($M = 5.48$) than when it was less meaningful ($M = 4.85$, $F(1, 391) = 24.90$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .060$); and (c) when it was more authentic ($M = 5.68$) than when it was less authentic ($M = 4.65$, $F(1, 391) = 66.20$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .145$). None of the interactions reached significance. These results confirm that uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity are not merely correlates of the specialness of an experience: they are causal determinants of the specialness of an experience. Interestingly, their effects appear to be additive.

We additionally tested, on an exploratory basis, the effects of the three manipulated pillars on participants' WTP for the dinner experience. In line with our preregistration, to mitigate the effects of outliers, the WTP measure was winsorized at 90% before being submitted to a three-way ANOVA. Paralleling the results observed for ratings of specialness, three main effects emerged whereby WTP for the dining experience was higher (a) when it was more unique ($M = \$40.96$) than when it was less unique ($M = \$29.61$, $F(1, 391) = 55.44$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .124$); (b) when it was more meaningful ($M = \$36.76$) than when it was less meaningful ($M = \$33.70$, $F(1, 391) = 3.95$, $p = .048$, partial $\eta2 = .010$); and (c) when it was more authentic ($M = \$36.88$) than when it was less authentic ($M = \$33.58$, $F(1, 391) = 4.49$, $p = .035$, partial $\eta2 = .011$). As detailed in WA 5d, a three-way ANCOVA of the WTP that controlled for the perceived specialness of the experience as a covariate ($F(1, 390) = 17.94$, $p < .001$) showed strong attenuation of these main effects, suggesting that the three pillars each increased participants' WTP largely because they each contributed to making the experience more special.

Discussion

The findings of study 5 provide clear causal support for our proposed theory. Specifically, increasing the uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity of a consumption

experience correspondingly increases its perceived specialness. These results also illustrate how different facets of the pillars identified in study 1 can be operationalized to engineer stronger perceptions of specialness. The finding that consumers are willing to pay more to have a special dining experience attests to the value that can be generated through the engineering of special consumption experiences. To address the possibility that the effects of the manipulated pillars may have been artificially inflated by the inclusion of manipulation checks for each pillar, we replicated this study in another preregistered experiment (n = 398), which was identical to study 5 except that the manipulation checks were excluded. As summarized in WA-5d, the results were almost identical to those reported here, but with weaker effects on WTP.

<h2 style="text-align:center">STUDY 6: AN INSTAGRAM TEST OF THE CONCEPTUALIZATION</h2>

To complement the previous studies—which all relied, in one way or another, on verbal reports about consumption experiences—this study tests the proposed conceptualization using a rich dataset of non-verbal representations of real-life experiences. Leveraging the ubiquitous social media platform Instagram, we assembled a structured dataset of photographs of personal experiences that were hashtagged as "special [X]" or "good [X]." Matched sets of these photographs were then shown to third-party observers who were asked to rate the photographs in terms of overall specialness, uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity, without any knowledge of the photographs' original hashtags. We anticipated that even pictorial representations of Instagram users' lived experiences would expose the roles of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity in special experiences. Specifically, compared to photographs originally tagged as "good [X]," those originally tagged as "special [X]" would be rated higher on all four dimensions of specialness, uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity. Moreover, ratings of specialness would be predicted by ratings of the latter three dimensions.

Method

To assemble a broadly representative set of Instagram posts depicting special experiences that could be compared to a matched set of generally positive experiences that are not necessarily special, we searched Instagram for popular hashtags containing the word "special" used in a manner that is applicable to the description of an experience. We identified five such hashtags: #specialmoments, #aspecialmoment, #specialmomentsinlife, #specialexperience, and #specialday. For each of these, we identified a matching hashtag in which the word "special" is replaced by "good" (e.g., "#goodmoments"). We then scraped the latest 100 publicly listed posts for each of the 10 hashtags, resulting in a collection of 1,025 publicly accessible Instagram posts. Next, based on independent codings from three research assistants, we removed all posts that originated from a business account or were promotional, resulting in a final dataset of 526 images that were nonpromotional and originated from everyday users. From these 526 images, a subset of 200, 20 per hashtag, were randomly selected for review and evaluation by participant observers. Within each hashtag (e.g., #specialmoments), each of the 20 selected images was randomly paired with one of the 20 selected images of the matching hashtag (e.g., #goodmoments), thus creating 20 matched pairs of pictures for each of the five pairs of hashtags, resulting in a total of 100 pairs of pictures (see WA-6b for a sample of the scraped photographs).

Subsequently, 1,501 MTurk participants (M_{age} = 42.26, 50% female) were randomly assigned one of the 100 pairs of pictures and asked to review and rate them, with the order of presentation within each pair randomized across participants. (Each pair of pictures was rated by an average of 15 participants.) For each picture, participants were asked to rate "To what extent do you think the person who posted this image had a special experience?" (1 = "not at all," 7 = "very much"), as a measure of perceived specialness. Next, participants were asked to rate the

post in terms of each of the three pillars with items phrased as "To what extent do you think the person who posted this image had a [unique/meaningful/authentic] experience?" (1 = "not at all," 7 = "very much"). Finally, all participants rated "To what extent do you think the person who posted this image had an enjoyable time?" (1 = "not at all," 7 = "very much"; see WA-6a for more details about the study procedure).

Results

Participants' ratings of the pictures were submitted to a mixed-model analysis with hashtag pairs (5 levels) as a between-subjects factor, condition (special vs. good pictures) as a repeated factor, a random intercept for participants nested within hashtag pairs, and a random effect for picture pairs nested within hashtag pairs. As expected, participants—who were independent observers blind to the pictures' original hashtags—perceived that the images that were originally hashtagged with the word "special" depicted experiences that were significantly more special ($M = 5.27$) than the images originally hashtagged with the word "good" ($M = 4.67$, $F(1, 1496) = 150.22$, $p < .001$). This effect held for all pairs of hashtag conditions (all p-values < .001), although the strength of the effect varied across conditions ($F(4, 1496) = 4.96$, $p < .001$).

Similar analyses of participants' ratings of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity uncovered parallel findings for each of the three pillars. Compared to images hashtagged as "good," images hashtagged as "special" were rated as significantly more unique ($M_{special} = 4.89$ vs. $M_{good} = 4.29$, $F(1, 1496) = 146.44$, $p < .001$), more meaningful ($M_{special} = 5.30$ vs. $M_{good} = 4.72$, $F(1, 1496) = 132.04$, $p < .001$), and more authentic ($M_{special} = 5.43$ vs. $M_{good} = 5.04$, $F(1, 1496) = 71.32$, $p < .001$). These effects were consistent across all hashtag conditions, although there was a theoretically nonrelevant interaction with hashtag for ratings of meaningfulness ($F(4, 1496) = 6.15$, $p < .001$; see WA-6c for correlations between the constructs).

TABLE 2
DEPENDENT MEASURES BY HASHTAG PAIRS AND CONDITION

Hashtag Pair	#a[special/good] moment		#[special/good] day		#[special/good] experience		#[special/good] moments		#[special/good] momentsinlife		Total	
Condition within Hashtag Pair	#special	#good	#special	#good	#special	#good	#special	#good	#special	#good	**#special**	**#good**
Specialness	5.11	4.72	5.23	4.42	5.20	4.76	5.40	4.95	5.42	4.50	**5.27**	**4.67**
Uniqueness	4.67	4.26	4.87	4.27	5.00	4.38	5.07	4.40	4.83	4.14	**4.89**	**4.29**
Meaningfulness	5.19	4.81	5.23	4.54	5.10	4.76	5.41	4.93	5.57	4.55	**5.30**	**4.72**
Authenticity	5.40	5.06	5.14	4.84	5.50	5.09	5.53	5.12	5.56	5.09	**5.43**	**5.04**

To test the notion that the comparatively elevated perceptions of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity observed for pictures originally tagged as "special" contributed to the depicted experiences being rated as more special, we computed, for each participant, the difference between the two pictures in terms of perceived specialness, uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity. These differences were analyzed in a mixed-model regression with the difference in specialness as the dependent variable, the differences in uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity as predictors, and a random intercept for the effect of picture pairs. As expected, participants' differential ratings of the specialness of the two pictures were jointly predicted by differences in the perceived uniqueness ($\beta = 0.306$, $t = 15.53$, $p < .001$), perceived meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.463$, $t = 21.32$, $p < .001$), and perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.060$, $t = 2.73$, $p < .01$) of the depicted experience.

Discussion

The results of this study show that even third-party observers can recognize the specialness of others' experiences when depicted visually, and intuit that these experiences are more unique, meaningful, and authentic compared to experiences that are hashtagged as merely "good." Therefore, the proposed conceptualization applies not just to verbal descriptions of consumption experiences. Instead, it characterizes consumers' experiences *in general*. In

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addition, the findings indicate that there is general agreement between *experiencers* and *observers* with respect to what constitutes a special experience. From a substantive standpoint, this concordance between experiencers and observers means that reasonably informed experience providers can leverage our framework to design experiences that consumers are likely to find special, as illustrated next.

STUDIES 7A-7D: ENGINEERING SPECIAL EXPERIENCES

Although the goals of this paper are primarily theoretical, we submit that the different facets of the pillars uncovered in study 1 (see figure 1) can serve as a substantive roadmap for the engineering of special experiences in the marketplace. We already observed some empirical evidence of the potential efficacy of the facets in the restaurant scenario study (S5), where different manipulations—involving symbolic meaning, relational meaning, uniqueness, rarity, novelty, original authenticity, and natural authenticity—were found to elevate the perceived specialness of this experience. To provide further empirical demonstrations of how different facets of the pillars can be operationalized to engineer higher perceptions of specialness in consumption experiences, we conducted four more studies—all preregistered—among a total of 796 Prolific online participants. Each study involved a two-cell design with a treatment condition and a control condition (see details in WA-7). In the treatment condition, specific aspects of a consumption scenario were modified in terms of one or more facets of the identified pillars to test their effects on the perceived specialness of the experience compared to the control condition. In each study, we elected to manipulate facets that (a) sampled different parts of our framework (see Figure 1); (b) were not a priori obvious; (c) were substantively relevant for the consumption context examined; and (d) could plausibly be operationalized through managerial

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practices. For example, in study 7C, we manipulated the original authenticity of a dining experience through the visibility of an open kitchen.

In study 7A, we tested the idea that introducing an element of synchronicity in an experience would make it feel more unique and, therefore, more special. This is because, conceptually, synchronicity should make an experience feel irreproducible and ephemeral, both facets of uniqueness. Participants read a scenario about attending a workout session at a spinning studio. In the treatment condition, the participants were told that during the workout, they would listen to music from a Taylor Swift concert livestreamed in real time. In the control condition, participants were told that they would listen to identical music played from the instructor's Spotify playlist. As expected, the participants perceived the workout session to be more unique ($M_{treatment} = 5.79$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.29$, $F(1, 197) = 50.42$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .204$) and thereby more special ($M_{treatment} = 5.19$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.43$, $F(1, 197) = 11.08$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta2 = .053$) when the music was livestreamed from a concert than when it was played from a Spotify playlist.

In study 7B, we tested the idea that going "off script" and adding an element of positive surprise would make an experience more unique by surpassing the consumer's expectations, thereby making it special. Participants read a scenario about bringing their car to a dealership for routine maintenance. In the treatment condition, participants were told that, after the service, they discovered a small, nicely wrapped box of chocolates with a handwritten note of thanks placed on the passenger seat. In the control condition, participants were told that the car service was completed as expected, and no such gift or note was mentioned. As predicted, the participants thought that the car maintenance service was more unique ($M_{treatment} = 5.66$ vs. $M_{control} = 2.99$, $F(1, 196) = 130.16$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .399$) and therefore more special

($M_{treatment}$ = 5.42 vs. $M_{control}$ = 3.39, $F(1, 195)$ = 77.45, p < .001, partial $\eta2$ = .284) in the unexpected-small-gift-and-personal-note condition than in the control condition.

In study 7C, we tested the idea that providing more transparency into the process underlying an experience would make it feel more original and authentic and, therefore, more special. Participants read a scenario about dining at an Italian restaurant where they enjoyed a meal of spaghetti. In the treatment condition, participants were seated near the open kitchen, where they could witness the chefs preparing their meals in real time. In the control condition, participants were seated in the regular dining area and did not observe the cooking process. As expected, participants found the dining experience to be more authentic ($M_{treatment}$ = 5.93 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.52, $F(1, 196)$ = 7.83, p = .005, partial $\eta2$ = .038) and more special ($M_{treatment}$ = 5.75 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.30, $F(1, 196)$ = 8.96, p = .003, partial $\eta2$ = .044) when the cooking process was visible to them than when it was not.

In study 7D, we tested the idea that a service provider taking the time to offer detailed information and explanations about the various steps involved in the production of a common experience could make the experience feel special for multiple reasons: feelings of personalization and exclusivity (uniqueness), feelings of personal growth (meaningfulness), and feelings of human and original authenticity. Participants read a scenario about visiting a coffee shop to order a to-go coffee. In the treatment condition, the barista explained each step of the coffee-making process in great detail, imparting an in-depth understanding of what makes a quality cup of coffee. In the control condition, the barista prepared the coffee without offering any explanations. As expected, the participants perceived the café experience to be more unique ($M_{treatment}$ = 5.53 vs. $M_{control}$ = 3.60, $F(1, 195)$ = 84.68, p < .001, partial $\eta2$ = .303), meaningful ($M_{treatment}$ = 5.02 vs. $M_{control}$ = 3.96, $F(1, 195)$ = 22.73, p < .001, partial $\eta2$ = .104), authentic

($M_{treatment}$ = 5.67 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.97, $F(1, 195)$ = 16.36, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2$ = .077), and therefore more special ($M_{treatment}$ = 5.32 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.14, $F(1, 195)$ = 36.79, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2$ = .159) in the detailed-explanation condition than in the no-explanation condition.

Although these are only hypothetical-scenario studies, their results illustrate the potential substantive value of the pillar facets identified in this research. We leave it to future research to provide stronger and more comprehensive tests of the various facets of specialness identified in this paper.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

What Makes Consumption Experiences Feel Special?

This research set out to answer a foundational question of high substantive and theoretical relevance: What makes a consumption experience special in a consumer's mind? On the surface, answering this question may seem impossible given the vast diversity of experiences that consumers encounter in the marketplace, the many elements at play in any one of these experiences, and the reality that specialness is a very personal judgment. Yet, across seven studies, covering numerous experience contexts and using a variety of methodologies, we consistently find that perceptions of specialness are largely driven by a basic trinity of psychological pillars: uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity. This was evident across numerous accounts of lived consumption experiences, several online and field surveys, millions of Yelp reviews across hundreds of business categories, multiple preregistered experiments, and hundreds of Instagram images.

These findings enrich our understanding of what "special experiences" mean to consumers beyond the mere definition of such experiences as those with *some unusual, elevated quality that makes them remarkable, memorable, and distinguishable from ordinary consumption*

experiences. Through this research, we now know that the specific qualities that most consumers recognize as worthy of elevating a given experience to the status of being "special" revolve around a combination of uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity. The emergence of this trinity of psychological values as primary sources of specialness was not self-evident before this research, as consumers' perceptions of specialness could plausibly have been driven by *other* values found to be important in other research—for instance, autonomy and freedom, pleasure and gratification, power and control, excitement and stimulation, or order and tradition (Schwartz et al. 2012). Although we cannot exclude the possibility that other factors also play a significant role in contributing to the specialness of consumption experiences, we found little evidence that this is the case in this research.

Besides the unearthing of three major pillars of specialness of consumption experience, another major contribution of our research is the identification of distinct ways that each pillar operates in common marketplace settings ("facets"; see figure 1). We found that the perceived uniqueness of an experience can arise from: (a) its overall rarity, (b) its novelty for the consumer, (c) its irreproducibility, (d) surpassing the consumer's expectations, (e) personalization, (f) exclusivity, and (g) perceived ephemerality. Similarly, the perceived meaningfulness of an experience can stem from: (a) a reinforcement of social bonds with close others, (b) associated symbols, (c) a sense of self-affirmation, and (d) a sense of transformation. Finally, the perceived authenticity of an experience accrues from: (a) connections to original sources, (b) the representation of iconic experiences, (c) feelings of sincerity and humanity, and (d) connections to nature. The documentation of these facets further enriches our theoretical understanding of what makes consumption experiences special. In addition, as discussed below, these facets have practical implications for the engineering of consumption experiences.

It is interesting to relate our findings to previous research on extraordinary experiences. Logically, extraordinary experiences constitute a subset of those that consumers would generally regard as special. Some of our findings in study 1 suggest that very few experiences that consumers consider "special" are actually "extraordinary." For instance, when asked to define what a special experience is, only 4% of our informants used the word "extraordinary." In our entire dataset of narratives, only 3.6% mention the word "extraordinary." This means that to understand what makes consumption experiences "special" for consumers, it is important not to restrict oneself to the literature on extraordinary experiences. For example, whereas this prior literature mostly focuses on experiences that are very unusual and uncommon, consistent with our concept of rarity as a facet of uniqueness, our findings reveal that most experiences deemed special are not actually rare. Instead, they often draw their uniqueness from other aspects, such as the novelty of the experience to the person or the surpassing of the consumer's expectations. Similarly, whereas extraordinary experiences tend to be genuinely transformative, most consumption experiences found to be special are not, often acquiring significance by virtue of being shared with close others (relational meaningfulness), by symbolic association (symbolic meaningfulness), and by affirming the person's self (self-affirmation meaningfulness). Likewise, whereas extraordinary experiences are typically highly immersive and emotionally intense, these characteristics need not be present for consumption experiences to feel special.

We see two additional interesting contrasts between our findings and the literature on extraordinary experiences. First, a recurring pattern in extraordinary experiences is a pervasive motivation among participants to evade the general mainstream marketplace (see Canniford and Shankar 2013; Husemann et al. 2016; Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2011). By comparison, we found little evidence of such a motivation in our data. Consumers seem to be perfectly able to

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find specialness in experiences that are grounded in the mainstream marketplace. From a business standpoint, this is good news for mainstream experience providers (e.g., restaurants, tourist destinations, amusement parks, etc.). Second, because extraordinary experiences are often motivated by a desire to temporarily evade the constraints of one's everyday reality (as mentioned earlier), participation in such experiences is decidedly intentional. People join extreme activities such as Burning Man, Mount Everest climbing expeditions, and Goth festivals with the express intent to experience something extraordinary. In contrast, consumption experiences that are deemed to be special are not necessarily engaged in with an explicit intent or expectation of experiencing something special, although they sometimes are. In many of our informants' accounts, the recognition of the experience being special was only *post hoc*. For example, one informant described a particular family dinner as meaningful and hence special because one of the dinner attendees had since passed away. An interesting avenue for future studies would be to further examine when specialness is anticipated *ex ante* versus recognized *ex post*, and whether this makes a difference from both a consumer and business standpoint.

Are the Pillars Independent, and Are Some More Important than Others?

Conceptually, the three identified pillars of specialness are distinct, but empirically, they tend to be correlated. In our studies, the average intercorrelation among the three pillars was .49. Practically, this means that interventions designed to impact one of the pillars (e.g., authenticity) will often have additional effects on other pillars (e.g., uniqueness), as we observed in some of our studies (studies 5 and 7D).

With respect to the relative contribution of each pillar in shaping the perceived specialness of experiences, there was no consistent pattern across studies. In the narratives and interviews of study 1, references to uniqueness and meaningfulness were considerably more

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frequent than references to authenticity. However, in the Broadway study (S2) and the Yelp

study (S4), uniqueness and authenticity were stronger predictors of specialness than

meaningfulness was. In the scale-development studies (S3B & S3C) and the Instagram study

(S6), meaningfulness was the strongest predictor, whereas in the dining scenario study (S5),

authenticity was the strongest predictor. The differences across studies could be due in part to

differences in methodology. For instance, in study 1, informants were asked to recount

experiences that they found to be special, which opens the possibility that experiences that were

more unique or meaningful were more likely to come to mind. In contrast, in the Yelp study,

where reviewers evaluated personal experiences with the ostensible objective of informing other

consumers, meaningfulness considerations may have been viewed as less critical to share.

We suspect, however, that the relative importance of the three pillars additionally varies

across categories of experience. To explore this hypothesis, in additional analyses, we estimated

the main regression model of the Yelp study for each of the 425 second-order categories of

experiences in the dataset. As illustrated in WA-4C, the results reveal interesting differences in

patterns across categories. For example, whereas for "amusement parks" and "train stations,"

specialness is jointly predicted by uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity, for "antiques"

and "art galleries," specialness is mostly predicted by authenticity, which makes intuitive sense.

Similarly, whereas meaningfulness and authenticity are important predictors of specialness for

"bubble tea" places, only uniqueness seems to predict the specialness of "steakhouses." Moving

forward, it would be useful to refine our findings with a systematic investigation of how the

category of experience moderates the effects of the three pillars. This could be done, for instance,

in a large cross-category survey using the scale items developed in study 3.

Can the Findings Be Leveraged to Engineer Special Experiences?

While the intended contribution of this research was primarily theoretical, we also aspired to develop implications and suggestions helpful to businesses, organizations, and consumers interested in the engineering of special consumption experiences. A previously noted, these different facets of the three main pillars can serve as an operational roadmap for the engineering of various consumption experiences. Studies 5 and 7A-7D provide initial evidence that manipulations of these facets can have a causal impact on perceptions of specialness.

Table 2 presents additional practical examples of how the various facets can be used to increase the perceived uniqueness, meaningfulness, and authenticity of consumption experiences, and hence their perceived specialness. Consider, for instance, the irreproducibility aspect of uniqueness: Experiences can be made irreproducible and, therefore, more unique and special by incorporating some elements of randomness and improvisation in the design and delivery of the experience. For example, certain interactive theater performances have multiple parallel storylines that theatergoers follow using their own paths. Similarly, consider the symbolic aspect of meaningfulness: Experiences can be made symbolically more meaningful by introducing new figurative milestones to be celebrated. For example, a consumer on a weight-loss journey could be praised for losing 5 lb., then 10 lb., then 20, and so on. As the table illustrates, numerous interventions can be conceived by leveraging any of the facets identified in this research.

Table 2: Substantive Applications

Uniqueness	
Rarity	• Experiences involving unique collaborations (e.g., having a special guest at a standup comedy show) • Reframing an experience to make it appear rarer (e.g., "First Taylor Swift Eras concert outside the US")
Novelty	• Providing a variety of experiences in single venues (e.g., cruises, theme parks, multi-themed escape room venues) • Framing experiences as "collectable" to increase illusions of novelty (e.g., Hard Rock Café-branded major locations such as Las Vegas, Chicago, London)

Irreproducibility	• Highlighting the irreproducible nature of live performances (e.g., improvised solos at jazz concerts; indeterminacy of live sports events; disallowing audio and video recording) • Incorporating some elements of randomness and improvisation in the design of the experience (e.g., loose itineraries in travel; choose-your-own-path, multiple-storyline interactive theater performance)
Surpassing Expectations	• Off-script positive surprises (e.g., surprise gifts; encore performances in unexpected settings such as comedy shows or classical music concerts) • Importing value-adding scripts from other industries (e.g., turning first-class airplane cabins into private hotel rooms; hosting art exhibits in high-end retail stores; incorporating clubbing experiences in fitness classes)
Personalization	• Creating more personalized experiences (e.g., allowing premium air travelers to select their menu in advance; personalized museum guides; allowing online gamers to select and customize their avatars) • Designing experiences to encourage co-creation (e.g., mixology classes; allowing piano bar patrons to submit song requests)
Exclusivity	• Limiting access (e.g., VIP-only pre-sale events; exclusive "behind-the-scenes" tours; private times for museum visits) • Decreasing the visibility of others who have access to the experience (e.g., private rooms in large restaurants; private suites in sports stadiums; separate entrances)
Ephemerality	• Limited-time performances or experiences (e.g., pop-up events; ephemeral digital content; temporary museum exhibits) • Tying the experience to seasonal or temporary events (e.g., Christmas markets; New Year's Eve concerts; Fourth of July fireworks)
Meaningfulness	
Relational Meaningfulness	• Structuring experiences to facilitate a co-experience with close others such as family members (e.g., family discounts at theme parks; cooking classes for couples; assigning friends to the same team in competition-based experiences) • Facilitating the reinforcement of social bonds (e.g., group selfies; post-experience group chats)
Symbolic Meaningfulness	• Leveraging or reinforcing significant cultural occasions (e.g., restaurants celebrating graduations; Super Bowl watch parties; Kentucky Derby cocktail parties) • Introducing new figurative milestones to be celebrated (e.g., 10-lb-weight-loss badges; 15-year anniversary of a church's renovation; recognition pin for 100 hours of community service)
Self-Affirmation Meaningfulness	• Facilitating the celebration, sharing, and memorialization of personal achievements (e.g., medals for completed marathons, graduation photos, listing the names of the players in school musical performances) • Designing experiences to balance the level of challenge with the chance of success (e.g., allowing escape room participants to select their own difficulty level; setting up separate age and gender divisions in tennis tournaments)
Transformational Meaningfulness	• Structuring experiences to make the learning journey more transparent (e.g., wine tastings that progress through major wine regions; organizing travel along historical routes as in pilgrimages; well-designed narrative structure in walking tours)

	• Giving consumers opportunities and time to reflect on their experiences (e.g., encouraging the keeping of diaries on cruises; periodic video recording of tennis lessons to document a player's progression)
Authenticity	
Original Authenticity	• Highlighting the historical roots and traditions of an experience (e.g., providing relevant background and backstories; Prince Albert II presenting the trophy at the Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix) • Displaying physical remnants of original figures, events, or sites (e.g., relics at various religious sites, original manual scoreboard at Fenway Stadium)
Human Authenticity	• Promoting more personal touches in experience delivery (e.g., remembering the consumer's name; personal handwritten notes; YouTube live streamers' shoutouts to select audience members) • Encouraging more spontaneity and empathy in experience delivery (e.g., tour guides sharing personal anecdotes; standup comedians' improvised dialogues with the audience; Pret A Manger employees having discretion to give free coffee to select patrons)
Representational Authenticity	• Accentuating thematic coherence in experience delivery (e.g., typical Parisian bistro décor to go along with a French bistro menu; Western saloon decor and cowboy-dressed servers in country music halls) • Designing experiences around iconic practices or sites (e.g., a drive-in movie theater with 1950s vintage cars; the Venetian resort in Las Vegas; Elvis impersonators in Nashville)
Natural Authenticity	• Nature-immersive experiences (e.g., remote spa facility with forest outdoor views; extended hikes in national parks; African safaris; natural hot springs) • Highlighting naturalness and minimal human or technological intervention (e.g., farm-to-table dining experiences; freediving; truffle foraging tours; manual woodworking classes)

Conclusion

This research is an initial step toward a more comprehensive understanding of what makes experiences special across consumption contexts. We present a framework consisting of three major pillars of specialness, each multifaceted. This framework builds on previous literature on extraordinary experiences yet provides theoretical insights that go well beyond this previous literature, recognizing that extraordinary experiences are a subset of a much larger set of experiences that consumers consider special. In addition, our framework offers a tentative roadmap for the engineering of special experiences. While this research is admittedly imperfect and necessarily incomplete, we hope that it will serve as a stepping stone for exciting future studies and applications aimed at elevating consumer experiences.

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