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Climbing Mount Everest: Noble Adventure or Selfish Pursuit?

Adventure seekers are plunking down more than \$50,000 to climb Mount Everest, but a new study in the Journal of Consumer Research finds that people who pay for transformative experiences often lack the communitarian spirit that usually defines such activities.

"In order to escape the rules, contraptions, and stresses of daily life in the city, many people search for new and liberating experiences that transcend their normal bureaucratic and corporate existence," write authors Gülnur Tumbat (San Francisco State University) and Russell W. Belk (York University). However, it seems that competition and conflict rear their heads even on romanticized adventures like climbing to the top of the world.

The authors conducted an ethnographic study of commercialized climbing expeditions on Everest, which focused on paying clients. "Although we were initially guided by the expectation of more of a communitarian spirit, we came to realize that consumer behavior scholars had failed to appreciate and understand the competitive, individualistic, and status-seeking aspects of such activities," the authors write.

The research discovered a tendency for paying climbers to jostle for position rather than cooperating in a communal atmosphere. "What they have is a forced companionship for many, far from any real spirit of community?" the authors

write. "Money versus personal skill and experience compete as climbers argue that they deserve to summit the mountain while others there do not."

The authors found that climbers were focused on their individual accomplishments and with proclaiming unique positions (for example, being the first British woman to climb Everest). "What we found in the context of Mount Everest is individualism, competitiveness, contradiction, and power-seeking through extreme experiences purchased from what is now known as the experience economy," the authors write.

"Our study finds that extraordinary experiences, when bought in the marketplace, can be destructive of feelings of camaraderie and reinforce an individualistic and competitive ethos that I, the climber, am the only one who matters," the authors conclude.

Gülnur Tumbat, Russell W. Belk. Marketplace Tensions in Extraordinary Experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, June 2011