



A tonic for the highly stressed: Memories of extraordinary group experiences lead to greater cohesion and well-being

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ABSTRACT

We investigate extraordinary group experiences to better understand how highly stressed consumers gain and preserve long-term well-being from their associated memories. We report the results of three studies that use experiments, a survey, and organizational data from Make-A-Wish. We find that groups who are profoundly stressed and share an extraordinary experience (e.g., families with a critically ill child) create memories that improve their well-being via enhanced cohesion, the perception that the group is stable, bonded, and enduring. We show that highly stressed consumers recharge basic psychological needs through extraordinary experiences and the benefits of these experiences are prolonged by collectively rehearsing the associated memories, a process that causes consumers to come together and experience increased well-being even years after the experience. Through our investigation of special memories, cohesion, and well-being, our results suggest that investments in extraordinary group experiences by the charitable wish sector and stressed consumers is money well spent with long-term benefits.

1. Introduction

Modern life is stressful. Stress regularly emerges from an array of routine (e.g., work) and unexpected life events (e.g., death of a family member; Spurgeon et al., 2001). In some places, stress is the norm. For example, about half of Americans report elevated anger, anxiety, and worry, making the United States one of the most stressed countries in the world (American Psychological Association, 2020). One consumer response has been to spend billions of dollars on experiences like trips, cultural entertainment, role-playing and adventure activities (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Jong, 2017; Mainofli & Marino, 2020; Orazi & Van Laer, 2022), which companies market as ‘extraordinary’ amid promises that participation will help consumers decompress (Rita et al., 2019). In parallel, by providing extraordinary experiences, organizations in the charitable sector aim to assist people dealing with profound stress such as abused children (e.g., Sunshine Foundation) and adults facing life-threatening medical conditions (e.g., Fairy Foundation). While the belief that extraordinary experiences can serve as a tonic for stress is widespread, little is known about their effectiveness as a means of improving well-being in the long term. Does the time and money invested by charities and consumers into extraordinary experiences

provide enduring returns? If so, how can we promote these lasting benefits?

Despite the prevalence of stress and the abundance of market offerings designed to help consumers, marketing research on stress is limited and focuses on understanding where stress comes from and how consumers cope in the near-term (Duhachek, 2005; Durante & Laran, 2016; Moschis, 2007). We are unaware of research on extraordinary experiences that examines the long-term effects of using such experiences as a means of alleviating stress. This omission is surprising given that participants in extraordinary experiences routinely report enhanced well-being afterwards (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993), suggesting that such experiences can help stressed people both immediately and over the longer term.

We focus our investigation on experiences undertaken by groups, identified as collections of people who enjoy close ties, such as friends and family. An array of extraordinary experiences implicate participants with close ties, including special occasions like weddings and graduations (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014) and riskier adventures like river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993) and skydiving trips (Celsi et al., 1993). Still, in the extraordinary domain, the role of close ties in generating and maintaining experience benefits has not received adequate attention.

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For example, it is standard practice to ask participants to imagine or recall an extraordinary experience, but while these experiences may sometimes involve family or friends, this aspect tends not to be a focal point of the research (e.g., Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Zauberman et al., 2009). The consideration of close ties remains largely incidental, despite the broader experiential consumption literature acknowledging that the advantage of experiences compared to material goods is rooted in their social nature (Weingarten & Goodman, 2021) and that shared experiences are superior to solo ones (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Therefore, we compare extraordinary and ordinary experiences undertaken by groups in an effort to distill the unique benefits of extraordinary experiences shared with close others, which, we argue, comes from the collective memories they create.

In the following sections, we outline our conceptualization with respect to the emergence of *special memories* from extraordinary experiences, the impact that these memories have on perceptions of groups as cohesive, and the role of stress in moderating the well-being benefits of these memories. Then, in Study 1, we use a survey and data from a wish-granting organization, Make-A-Wish, to show that special memories of shared extraordinary experiences are associated with greater well-being for families with a critically ill child. We explain this effect using cohesion, a construct that we introduce to the marketing literature from the family-functioning literature. In Study 2, we show that the stress consumers carry into their extraordinary experience moderates these effects: compared to those who are less stressed, more stressed participants report greater gains in cohesion and well-being. Finally, we conclude with a post-test showing that compared to those that are ordinary, extraordinary experiences are associated with memories that groups revisit more often and that stress itself alters the content of these memories. As a whole, these studies reinforce the efficacy of memories of extraordinary group experiences as a means of promoting long-term well-being.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Memories of extraordinary experiences

The term ‘extraordinary experience’ entered the marketing lexicon through research on river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993) and refers to an experience that is emotionally intense, meaningful, and potentially transformational (Celsi et al., 1993). Extraordinary experiences ‘bleed’ into the ordinary, coloring consumers’ everyday lives long after concluding (Orazi & Van Laer, 2023) by virtue of the memories they create: after an experience, consumers mentally relive it—a pleasurable process thought to amplify one’s sense of self and well-being (Zauberman et al., 2009).

We are similarly interested in memories and their link to well-being, which we conceptualize as living a meaningful and fulfilling life (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gaston-Breton et al., 2020). We expect that as memories of experiences are perceived as more special, they will be associated with increased well-being. We are not the first to propose this link: memories of extraordinary experiences are associated with greater happiness by younger participants (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014) and descriptions of participants’ special memories are coded as reflecting greater happiness (Zauberman et al., 2009). We build on this research by showing that extraordinary experiences create special memories, which can impact well-being even years after the experience. We examine a particular type of experience: those undertaken by groups of people with existing close ties, such as friends and family. In our theorizing, the group plays a critical role, as its propensity to revisit special memories of extraordinary experiences contributes to their lasting impact on well-being. Our focus on group experiences invites investigation of a mediator that is novel to the marketing literature: cohesion.

2.2. Cohesion

Early research on cohesion, “the resultant of all the forces acting on the members to remain in the group” (Festinger, 1950, p. 7), aimed to conceptualize the ‘bonds of intimacy’ or sense of ‘we-ness’ that exists in groups (Mudrack, 1989; West & Merriam, 2009). Since then, the construct has undergone considerable evolution, particularly in the family functioning literature. Initially, research proposed that cohesion is how close and connected a family is and how accepting its members are towards each other (Cooper et al., 1983). Later, it was suggested that cohesion is also the extent to which family members are interdependent and loyal to each other, in essence capturing a family ethos of warmth and stability (Harris & Molock, 2000; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Olson, 2000). A more recent conceptual inflection argues that cohesion is the “shared values and support in the family and the family’s ability to keep a positive outlook” (Hjemdal et al., 2006, p. 92). Across their instantiations, these conceptualizations converge on the notion that cohesion can be viewed operationally as the extent to which a person perceives a group to be stable, bonded, and enduring.

It may be instructive to discuss how cohesion differs from other constructs in the experiential literature where there is ample research proposing that experiences connect people, a general effect documented with a range of essentially synonymous terms such as belonging, closeness, and sense of community (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Gilovich & Kumar, 2015; Howell & Hill, 2009; Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007; Sohler et al., 2023; Weingarten & Goodman, 2021). Most of this research deals with comparing material purchases to experiences or with the benefits of undertaking experiences alone vs. with other people, neither of which speak to our present focus, which is restricted to memories of group experiences (for a review, see Supplementary Material I). However, these constructs denote a generalized sense of connection, usually measured with a single item (e.g., Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006, Study 1) or with a set of focused items (e.g., closeness, connection; Chan & Mogilner, 2017, p. 917).

In comparison to these previously studied social constructs, cohesion has three major differences. First, it is a broader and more holistic construct. Cohesion is certainly a social construct in which the idea of connectedness is embedded, but it also captures the group’s sense of loyalty, support, mutual attraction, and stability over time. Cohesion involves “emotional connectedness” but also “the degree of commitment, help and support” group members provide one another and a “strong sense of unity” (Harris & Molock, 2000, p. 343). Therefore, cohesion is more complex than other social constructs, which allows it to better reflect the impact of shared memories on groups of individuals who are connected prior to the focal experience. Second, cohesion is a characteristic of the group as a unit (e.g., family; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988) and encompasses perceptions of the relationships within the group, including an individual’s perception of their relationships with others in the group as well as perceptions of other group members’ relationships with each other. In contrast, variables broadly interpretable as social connection normally focus on an individual’s feelings toward other group members (e.g., “I feel a strong sense of intimacy with the people I spend time with”; Deci & Ryan, 2000), ignoring other group members’ feelings. An example is group identification, which is meaningful at the individual level (e.g., “In general I’m glad to be a [group member]”; Obst & White, 2005, p. 75), whereas cohesion “exists at the group and interpersonal levels” (Henry et al., 1999, p. 565).¹ Thus,

¹ In addition, Henry and colleagues (1999) suggest that cohesion is a *source* of group identification, such that the intra-group attraction and willingness for group members to help each other drives the extent to which an individual identifies with that group. Thus, cohesion and identification are “not interchangeable” (p. 564); rather, the former should be thought of as influencing the latter.

cohesion is a more fitting construct to capture the group-level impact of shared experiences. Third, research examining cohesion in contexts such as suicide, depression, and anxiety (Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018; Dillon et al., 2013; Harris & Molock, 2000) suggests that it is a construct well-suited to investigations of highly stressed consumers.

Research on family cohesion has produced two insights that highlight its importance to well-being. First, cohesion is a precondition for families to perform two key functions (Hutchinson et al., 2007; Patterson, 2002): membership (e.g., meaning and direction for its members) and nurturance (e.g., social norms, social development, psychological support). For example, more cohesion is associated with greater cooperation and support within a family and the likelihood that its members will emphasize collective identity over individual identities (Friborg et al., 2003; Patterson, 2002). Less cohesive families are unlikely to fulfill these functions, negatively impacting well-being. Second, there is extensive evidence linking increased cohesion with elevated self-esteem, well-being, and quality of life within families (Cooper et al., 1983; Lightsey & Sweeney, 2008; McCubbin et al., 1998) and other groups such as nurses (Li et al., 2014), soldiers (Williams et al., 2016), and adolescents (Harris & Molock, 2000). In short, cohesion is a reliable predictor of well-being.

In our examination of experiences, cohesion is likely to be impacted by two sources. First is the extraordinariness of the experience, though in this regard the evidence is mixed. On one hand, a positive relationship may be expected: families that share “out of the ordinary” experiences such as special events or family vacations report more cohesion afterwards (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 284). Similarly, extraordinary experiences are described as affording heightened community, bonding, or connection with others (Arnould & Price, 1993; Jefferies & Lepp, 2012; Jaremka et al., 2011). On the other hand, there is evidence that ordinary experiences improve cohesion too. For example, sharing ‘core family leisure’, such as watching TV or playing board games, can make a family more cohesive (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), and groups that share enjoyable experiences feel more bonded afterwards, regardless of whether that experience is mundane or exceptional (Hornberger et al., 2010; Lehto et al., 2009). Similarly, in a study comparing ordinary to extraordinary experiences undertaken by friends, Min et al., (2018; Study 2) report no difference in resulting closeness, casting doubt on the intuition that extraordinary experiences are comparatively better than ordinary experiences at improving connections between people. Instead, it seems likely that sharing a pleasurable experience, not the extraordinariness of the experience per se, is what brings people together.

Second, and central to our theorizing, cohesion is strengthened through memories of experiences. Although ordinary shared experiences may immediately increase cohesion, most experiences in a person's life will be forgotten (Elster & Loewenstein, 1992). Because they are unusual and emotionally intense, extraordinary group experiences are likely to be preserved through the creation of special memories (Duerden et al., 2018; Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). These memories are socially shared (Luminet et al., 2000) and become a mutual point of attention (Haj-Mohamadi et al., 2018), forming the foundation of a “generalized shared reality” (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021, p. 3) whereby those who shared an interaction develop feelings of connection and possess overlapping memory systems that are propped up via routinely communicating about that interaction (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). In such a way, the mental records of events where people literally and symbolically come together are preserved and later become the focus of communal reminiscence (Chen et al., 2018). With extraordinary experiences, both the exceptional content of the memory and the act of rehearsing it will be associated with improved cohesion, making it more likely that they will become part of the group's narrative and provide a continuous sense of unity and meaning to its members (Fiese et al., 2002). These communal rehearsals may even rise to the level of a ritual, preserving a vivid and accurate view of the experience and leading to a “durable sense of psychological kinship with other group members” (Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014, p. 681). The act of

reliving group memories provides a fulcrum through which meaning is extracted (Wildschut et al., 2006), thus forming the basis of enhanced cohesion. As such, we expect that as memories of extraordinary group experiences become more special, they will reinforce cohesion and, in turn, group well-being.

H1: As memories of group experiences become more special, they will increase cohesion, which in turn improves group well-being.

2.3. Stress leading up to the extraordinary experience

Here, we outline how stress leading up to the time of the experience affects the creation of special memories and highlight their role in translating consumers' past stress into observable differences in current group cohesion and well-being. To understand why extraordinary group experiences may be particularly impactful for stressed consumers, and why experiences that do not ‘solve’ the stress directly can nevertheless help (e.g., a vacation will not ‘cure’ an ill child), we must consider the building blocks of stress. Stress arises out of combinations of demands, appraisals, and resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moschis, 2007), but events that are universally recognized as stressful are rooted in violations of the three basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000): social deprivation, which is a violation of relatedness (e.g., loss of a loved one; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), loss of control, which is a violation of competence (e.g., loss of a job; Miller, 1979), and coercion or loss of freedom, which is a violation of autonomy (e.g., debilitating illness; Skinner & Edge, 2002).

Stressful events can involve any combination of these violations—for example, having a terminally ill parent can strain family relationships, force the family to face the loss of control signified by an incurable disease, and devastate plans and expectations. Similarly, divorce can negatively affect relationships among family members and friends and make the parties involved feel out of control, socially isolated, and financially restricted. Even a broken leg can result in feeling less in control and less able to connect with others because one's physical freedom is restricted. When these stressful violations of basic needs accumulate, one's sense of relatedness, competence, and autonomy becomes deficient and requires replenishment (Gaston-Breton et al., 2020; Shoham et al., 2000).

Deficits in basic needs may be compensated in certain environments (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011): compared to ordinary experiences, extraordinary experiences are often characterized by novelty, challenge, and risk (Arnould & Price, 1993; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014) and are well-suited to replenishing basic needs. While not all extraordinary experiences involve skydiving or river rafting, they usually involve a degree of the unexpected, which allows individuals to exercise their abilities, volition, and cooperation, thereby improving their sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Consider, for instance, a family dinner out versus a family trip abroad: the former is ordinary, familiar, and undemanding, perhaps enabling social connection but providing few opportunities to exercise competence or autonomy. Conversely, the latter, while not high risk, is more likely to be perceived as extraordinary and requires skillful planning and execution, involves important decisions about how to use limited time and how to react to unplanned events, and focuses the family's attention on itself. Because of their unique situational demands, extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experiences should replenish basic needs to a greater extent for participants who are deficient in these needs. Already having basic needs satisfied is unlikely to deter a group from enjoying an experience that reinforces these needs (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009), but stressed consumers will be able to reap *both* enjoyment and replenishment of basic needs through an extraordinary experience. In other words, stressed consumers will get more out of the experience.

Besides taking place during the experience, this replenishment of basic needs will also be evident in highly stressed consumers' memory of the extraordinary group experience (Conway, 2008; Wheeler et al.,

1997). This evidence of basic needs replenishment in memory is critical, because memories that associate basic needs replenishment with specific relationships improve the functioning of those relationships in the present (Philippe et al., 2011; Philippe et al., 2013; Pillemer, 2003). In other words, looking back on the experience means revisiting a memory that provides evidence of that group of people being a part of the replenishment of basic needs when that replenishment was needed (i.e., during times of high stress), which we hypothesize will impact the perception of the group as stable, bonded, and enduring in the present.

To summarize, we expect that highly stressed consumers, who were at a basic needs deficit and undergo a basic need replenishment during the extraordinary group experience—and whose special memories associate that replenishment with the group—will exhibit greater cohesion as a result of those memories. For consumers who were less stressed, extraordinary group experiences may still result in special memories but not ones linked to replenishment of basic needs, meaning cohesion may not be increased. Therefore, we expect stress leading up to the experience will positively influence the relationship between special memories and cohesion, which will, in turn, increase the group's well-being. This relationship, depicting moderated mediation, is formally stated as:

H2: The indirect effect of special memories on well-being through cohesion will be stronger for consumers higher (vs. lower) in stress leading up to the experience.

3. Study 1

Through a collaboration with Make-A-Wish (MAW), we conduct a study with profoundly stressed groups: families with a critically ill child. Because of the uniformly high stress in this sample, this study only examines H1, which focuses on the effect of memories tied to extraordinary experiences through cohesion. In study 2, participant stress levels are more varied as a result of our manipulation, thus, enabling a test of H2.

3.1. Stage 1

We received organizational files ($n = 427$) for wishes granted between 2012 and 2017 by a MAW chapter in an English-speaking location. Most files contained personal information about wish recipients and their family, medical information, legal forms, wish proposals (authored by a child and/or a family member), itineraries, and post-wish missives. For each file, we recorded the duration of the experience, whether the wish was expedited (i.e., provided to a severely ill child), whether it was the child's first wish, and whether the child was a ward of the state. Additionally, to account for the severity of the child's medical condition at the time of the experience, we created a list of the children's medical conditions and provided this list to a professor of medicine who categorized each condition from less severe ($=1$; unlikely to cause death within 6 months) to more severe ($=3$; likely to cause death within 6 months).

3.2. Stage 2

We created a survey that was emailed to wish families and sent a reminder email one month later. We received 125 responses. Then, we mailed a hardcopy of the survey to families who did not respond to our email and received 31 more. The directions requested that the survey be completed by an adult who had taken part in the child's wish. Usually, a parent completed the survey but in several cases the participant was an adult sibling or the wish recipient who had become an adult. Our approach, common in the family functioning literature (Antonovsky, 1998), resembles the key informant technique: one person who has extensive knowledge of the focal phenomenon is recruited to provide feedback on behalf of the group.

First, participants completed a measure of current well-being (Hills & Argyle, 2002; $\alpha = 0.91$). We adapted the wording to assess family well-being ("thinking about your family's life now..."). While the original scale contains 29 items, we were concerned a long instrument would harm response rates, so we used seven items ("we are very happy", "our life is good", "We often experience joy and elation", "our life is very rewarding", "We laugh a lot", "We feel able to take anything on", and "We think that the world is a good place"). A pretest ($n = 375$, $M_{age} = 36$, 57 % male) confirmed that this reduced measure is highly correlated with the full measure ($r = 0.96$, $p < .01$). This was a seven-point Likert scale, consistent with all the scales used in this paper.

Next, participants completed a six-item measure of cohesion (e.g., "In this group, we have a common understanding of what's important in life"; Friberg et al., 2003; $\alpha = 0.83$) and provided the year of the wish, which we used to calculate a time covariate (range of 1 to 5 years past) to account for the possibility of fading memories. Then, we adapted a memory elicitation technique to obtain detailed written descriptions of the wishes (Bryant et al., 2005). Participants also completed a measure of the extent to which they perceived their memory of the experience to be special. Because we are not aware of any such measure in the literature, we developed three items asking the extent to which the experience provided (a) an important group memory, (b) something positive to look back on, and (c) something to smile about ($\alpha = 0.94$). A principal components analysis confirmed that the measures of well-being, cohesion, and memory specialness represent separate constructs with items loading primarily (>0.5) on their appropriate factor with no cross-loadings over 0.3 (see Supplementary Material II).

3.3. Written responses

Participants reported on a range of wishes including cruises (e.g., Mediterranean Sea), trips (e.g., Italy), shopping sprees (e.g., in New York), receiving large gifts (e.g., video game systems), attending events (e.g., San Diego Comic-Con), meeting celebrities (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo), visiting specific places (e.g., Lego factory in Denmark), and interacting with animals (e.g., swimming with dolphins). Most wishes also involved special transportation (e.g., limousine rides), small memento gifts, and VIP treatment by those helping to fulfill the wishes (e.g., line skipping privileges at Disney or with airlines).

Of the 156 surveys received, 76 % contained written descriptions of the wish ($M_{length} = 118$ words, $SD = 44$). It may seem problematic that almost a quarter of participants wrote nothing, perhaps suggesting inattention to the survey task. However, we were grateful to obtain this level of feedback: our survey asked participants to revisit a time when their families were severely stressed, struggling with the prospect of a child's mortality and their own psychological pain. To illustrate, one participant declined to provide feedback beyond "too difficult to write about." About 15 % of participants ($n = 24$) only completed the survey up to and including the wish description question. This reduced the size of the dataset available for statistical analysis ($n = 132$). We speculate that this question overwhelmed participants and caused them to stop.

3.3.1. Stressed consumers

Participants uniformly reported elevated stress, evident in descriptions of feeling anxious, overwhelmed, desperate, helpless, exhausted, and "forever scarred" (see also Supplementary Material III). By the time their wishes took place, many families were drained and experiencing lives of "constant chaos". For example, one mother wrote that her family endured "a year of divide and conquer" while another parent described how it was "hard to focus on the future: at times we only had the ability to focus on the day, afternoon or hour otherwise it became entirely too overwhelming". Most were also dealing with ancillary stresses such as financial strain (e.g., "a huge financial burden"), employment pressure (e.g., "we took leaves from our jobs"), social isolation (e.g., "years of isolation and confinement" and "lost many friends"), and marital and family discord (e.g., "shattered my

family, put a strain on my relationship with my husband”), which seemed to have a compounding effect and brought additional challenges in the form of guilt, depression, and fear. These are also readily interpretable as challenges to the families’ basic psychological needs in the form of lost freedom, diminished control, and social deprivation. Overall, it is difficult to overstate the level of stress and depleted psychological needs these families were experiencing going into their wish.

3.3.2. Special memories

Participants portrayed their wishes as providing a special memory for the family. One wrote “there are not enough words to describe how meaningful and wonderful experience we had...Gave us lifetime of memories.” Many memories are enjoyed by families who escaped a child’s sickness as an intact unit, but others take on additional meaning when the child passes away. One participant wrote “sadly, 4 years later, we lost our little girl during her second relapse with cancer. We will forever have the pictures and memories of that vacation with our entire family of 5.” Participants often described their memories in superlative and sacred terms.

3.3.3. Cohesion

The written evidence suggests wishes increase cohesion both during an extraordinary experience and while revisiting the memories. One parent said “It has almost been 3 years since my son’s wish has been granted and we still think of it as yesterday. Make-A-Wish Foundation helped not just my son, but our family, get back on track. Our spirits were lifted from that point on, and we feel like we could handle anything.” It was common for participants to describe the family feeling re-energized, bonded, stronger, and more stable after the wish and for these feelings to be maintained through the family’s continued rehearsal of these memories.

3.3.4. Well-being

Participants discussed how the experience affected their family’s well-being. One wrote “I have never seen Eric so happy... As I wrote this I still remember the amazing times we had as a family. It has absolutely changed the way I feel sometimes.” The benefits of the wish seem to accrue to all participants and the effect on well-being endures, likely because the family relives the events together in a process that many described as bestowing joy, elation, laughter, and happiness. One participant wrote about the wish as the “trip that made us smile again” while another said “we will never ever forget what Make A Wish did for our family...I can’t explain but a feeling of total love. I have never been happier and in love with my little fam.”.

3.4. Statistical evidence

We commence discussion of our statistical results by examining H1. We initially included five covariates (online vs. print survey, ward of state, expedited wish, medical severity, time since wish), but none were significant and were thus dropped. To test the mediated effect hypothesized in H1, we employ Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS Model 4 (95 % CI, 5000 draws). The indirect effect of special memories on current well-being through cohesion is significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.13$, $CI = 0.02, 0.54$): the more special the wish memory is, the more it is associated with greater cohesion ($\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.08$, $CI = 0.10, 0.43$), which in turn predicts well-being ($\beta = 0.46$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI = 0.25, 0.68$). The direct effect is not significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI = -0.06, 0.37$). To entertain the possibility that well-being leads to cohesion (i.e., akin to reversing the causal argument), we also examine a model that swaps their positions. The resulting indirect effect is not significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.07$, $CI = -0.01, 0.28$). These results support the idea that the link between more special memories and well-being is mediated by cohesion and supports H1.

3.5. Discussion

Written feedback from the families who took part in extraordinary experiences through Make-A-Wish provides support for the relevance of our constructs. Results from the surveys show that cohesion mediates the path from special memories to well-being—consistent with the notion that memories of extraordinary experiences with close others reinforce the perception of the group as stable, bonded, and enduring. Still, these results are based on correlational data and due to the uniformly high levels of participant stress, we were unable to explore H2, which investigates stress as a moderator. We do so in Study 2, which adopts an experimental design.

4. Study 2

In Study 2, we examine stress as a moderator and focus on H2. Participants ($n = 449$) were recruited from a Prolific Academic online panel. We omitted 37 (8.2 %) for failing one or both of two attention checks or for failing to provide descriptions of an experience, as per the instructions below, leaving a final sample of 412 ($M_{age} = 34$, 50.5 % female).

To elicit memories and to create variability in the specialness of these memories, we used an approach common in the experiential literature. Participants were randomly assigned to recall an ordinary or extraordinary experience with close others. The instructions (adapted from Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Supplementary Material IV) described an ordinary experience as one that is “usual and within the realm of your regular everyday life” and an extraordinary experience as one that is “unusual, going beyond the realm of your regular everyday life, and that involved powerful feelings and was personally meaningful”. After providing written details about the experience, participants completed a manipulation check composed of six items (e.g., unique, emotionally intense; $\alpha = 0.88$) to assess the extent to which the focal experience was extraordinary. They also completed the same measure used in Study 1 to assess the extent to which a memory of the experience is perceived as special ($\alpha = 0.86$) as well as the same measure of cohesion ($\alpha = 0.89$). Next, we assessed well-being with four items adapted from a widely used measure (e.g., This experience: “made us more satisfied with our lives”; $\alpha = 0.89$; Diener et al., 1985). In its original form, this scale contains a fifth item (“if I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) that was not readily adaptable to the current group context and therefore was excluded. We also included the same measure of well-being assessed in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.95$) but with the items rephrased to reflect a person instead of a group (e.g., “I am very happy” vs. “We are very happy”).

Last, using a single item, we measured stress: “Stress means a situation in which a person feels tense, restless, nervous or anxious, or is unable to sleep at night because their mind is troubled all the time. In your daily life during the days and weeks before the experience you described above, did you feel this kind of stress?” (Elo et al., 2003). This measure (Study 2: $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.70$, $min = 1$, $max = 7$) converges well with longer measures of stress (e.g., Littman et al., 2006). For example, in a pretest ($n = 288$, $M_{age} = 35$, 54 % male), this measure correlated reasonably with measures of anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006; $r = 0.66$, $p < .01$) and depression (Kroenke et al., 2001; $r = 0.57$, $p < .01$). We concluded with questions about age and gender.

4.1. Results

Participants in the ordinary condition listed experiences with friends and family, such as eating meals, going shopping, or watching movie. Those in the extraordinary condition described group experiences like trips with friends and family (e.g., Senegal, Disneyland), concerts and festivals (e.g., Electric Daisy Carnival, Minneapolis Beer Festival), and thrilling activities (e.g., hunting, skydiving). The manipulation was successful: compared to participants in the extraordinary condition,

those in the ordinary condition indicated that their memories were less special ($M_{ORD} = 5.76$ vs. $M_{EXT} = 6.39$, $SE = 0.06$, $F(1, 411) = 47.59$, $p < .001$) and the experiences were less extraordinary ($M_{ORD} = 3.44$ vs. $M_{EXT} = 5.59$, $SE = 0.08$, $F(1, 411) = 407.90$, $p < .001$). As in Study 1, we conducted a factor analysis of the cohesion and well-being items. The results suggest each is a separate construct (primary loadings > 0.5 , all cross-loadings < 0.3 ; see Supplementary Material V).

We expect that, compared to memories of ordinary experiences, memories of extraordinary group experiences will boost cohesion and well-being (H1) and that this effect will be pronounced for participants who were highly stressed at the time (H2). We started by investigating mediation using PROCESS Model 4.² The results show marginally significant indirect effects through cohesion for both measures of well-being ($\beta_{group} = .07$, 90 % CI = 0.005 0.14; $\beta_{individual} = 0.08$, 90 % CI = 0.003, 0.15). In neither analysis is the direct effect significant (e.g., $\beta_{group} = -0.16$, 90 % CI = -0.32, 0.01). Next, we examine H2, a moderated mediation hypothesis (PROCESS Model 7, 95 % CI, 5000 draws) with stress as a moderator (Fig. 1). The results show no direct effect ($\beta = -0.16$, CI = -0.3550, 0.0426), no effect of the manipulation directly on cohesion ($\beta = -0.29$, $SE = 0.25$, CI = -0.77, 0.20), cohesion predicts well-being ($\beta = 0.42$, $SE = 0.05$, CI = 0.32, 0.52) and a significant two-way interaction predicts cohesion ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, CI = 0.002, 0.23; Index of Moderated Mediation [IMM] = 0.05, CI = 0.001, 0.10): for less stressed participants, focusing on memories of extraordinary (vs. ordinary) group experiences produces no difference in well-being through cohesion (indirect effect = -0.02, $SE = 0.07$, CI = -0.16, 0.10). However, for more stressed participants, memories of extraordinary (vs. ordinary) group experiences had a positive impact on well-being through cohesion (indirect effect = 0.17, $SE = 0.03$, CI = 0.05, 0.31). Floodlight analysis indicates that the effect was significant for participants reporting 0.24 or higher on the standardized stress scale (i.e., 4.16/7 on the unstandardized scale; 42.7 % of participants; Supplementary Material VII). That is, when people are more stressed in the time leading up to an experience, the resulting memory increases cohesion. This result supports H2.Fig 2.

We also found the same pattern of effects with the revised measure of well-being carried over from Study 1. Specifically, cohesion impacts individual well-being ($\beta = 0.44$, $SE = 0.06$, CI = 0.33, 0.56) and cohesion is predicted by a two-way interaction (IMM = 0.05, CI = 0.002, 0.12): for less stressed participants, recalling memories of extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experiences produces no difference in well-being through cohesion (indirect effect = -0.02, $SE = 0.07$, CI = -0.17, 0.10), but the effect was positive and significant for more stressed participants (indirect effect = 0.18, $SE = 0.08$, CI = 0.04, 0.35). This supports H2.³

4.2. Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that recollecting extraordinary (vs. ordinary) group experiences predicts more cohesion and well-being for highly stressed participants. In Supplementary Material VIII, we present additional analysis that supports the unique role of memories (vs. the

² We report simple tests of moderation in Supplementary Material VI. For all spotlight analyses of stress in Study 2 and the post-test, we operationalize low stress as 16th percentile and high stress as 84th percentile.

³ On an exploratory basis, we examined whether stress moderates both mediated pathways (i.e., the a -path from the IV to cohesion, as theorized, and the b -path from cohesion to well-being). Using Hayes' (2018) Model 58, we did not find moderation of the b -path when examining group well-being (M^*W interaction = 0.01, CI = -0.05, 0.07), but we did with the measure of individual well-being (M^*W interaction = -0.07, CI = -0.14, -0.01), such that at low levels of stress the impact of cohesion on individual well-being was stronger ($\beta = 0.58$, CI = 0.43, 0.74) than at high levels of stress ($\beta = 0.28$, CI = 0.10, 0.46). In this analysis, the overall indirect effects were consistent with the results in our main analysis (low stress: $\beta = -0.03$, CI = -0.23, 0.13; high stress: $\beta = 0.12$, CI = 0.02, 0.27), but the moderation of the b -path remains an intriguing yet unexplained result. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

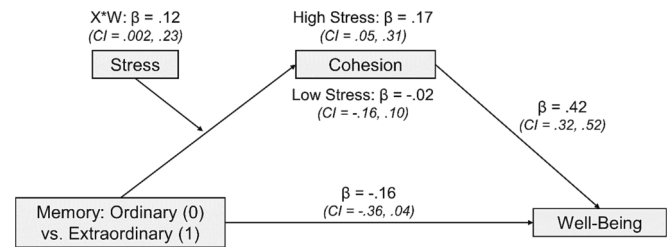


Fig. 1. Study 2 results. PROCESS Model 7 (95 % CI, 5000 draws). Index of Moderated Mediation [IMM] = 0.05, CI = 0.001, 0.10. The Johnson-Neyman region of significance is where stress > 0.24 (see Supplementary Materials VII).

experience itself) in explaining this effect. Still, there remain two aspects of our theoretical argument for which we have offered no evidence. We follow up with a post-test to offer evidence that compared to ordinary experiences, extraordinary experiences are associated with memories that are revisited more (Zauberman et al., 2009). Also, we suggested that people who are more stressed have basic needs deficits (i.e., in autonomy, relatedness, competence; Deci & Ryan, 2000) that extraordinary experiences replenish. Thus, we wanted to verify that the memories of consumers who were more (vs. less) stressed prior to an experience show evidence of greater replenishment of basic needs by extraordinary experiences.

4.3. Post-Test

We conducted a short study modelled after Study 2 using a different Prolific Academic panel. We received 400 responses but removed 23 for failing one or both attention checks (e.g., “please select *not true at all*”), leaving a sample of 377 ($M_{age} = 30.1$, 54 % female). After describing either an ordinary or extraordinary experience, participants did not complete a measure of well-being but instead completed three items to detect differences in memory rehearsal (e.g., “How often do you have conversations about the experience with others in this group?”; $\alpha = 0.94$). In addition to the stress measure from Study 2, participants also completed a measure of the extent to which the focal experience replenished basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; autonomy, $\alpha = 0.87$; relatedness, $\alpha = 0.86$; competence, $\alpha = 0.87$), which we combined into a composite measure of basic psychological needs (see Supplementary Material IX for measures and Supplementary Material X for Principal Component Analysis results).

4.3.1. Special memory

We find that extraordinary experiences, compared to ordinary experiences, are associated with memories that are more special ($M_{EXT} = 6.35$ vs. $M_{ORD} = 5.53$, $F(1, 375) = 56.02$, $p < .001$).

4.3.2. Memory rehearsal

We find that participants revisit and rehearse memories more in the extraordinary condition ($M_{EXT} = 4.46$ vs. $M_{ORD} = 3.60$, $F(1, 375) = 21.13$, $p < .001$). Though not hypothesized, we also found that stress in the time leading up to the experience moderates this link (PROCESS Model 1, 95 % CI, 5000 draws; IV*stress: $\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, CI = 0.03, 0.43). When comparing memories of ordinary and extraordinary experiences, there is no difference in rehearsal among participants who were less stressed (16th percentile; $\beta = 0.44$, $SE = 0.27$, CI = -0.10, 0.98) but significantly more rehearsal among participants who were more stressed (84th percentile; $\beta = 1.36$, $SE = 0.28$, CI = 0.80, 1.92). Our results imply that participants who are more stressed at the time of the extraordinary group experience come back to these memories more often, which is consistent with prior characterizations of special memories as assets to be protected and savored (Zauberman et al., 2009).

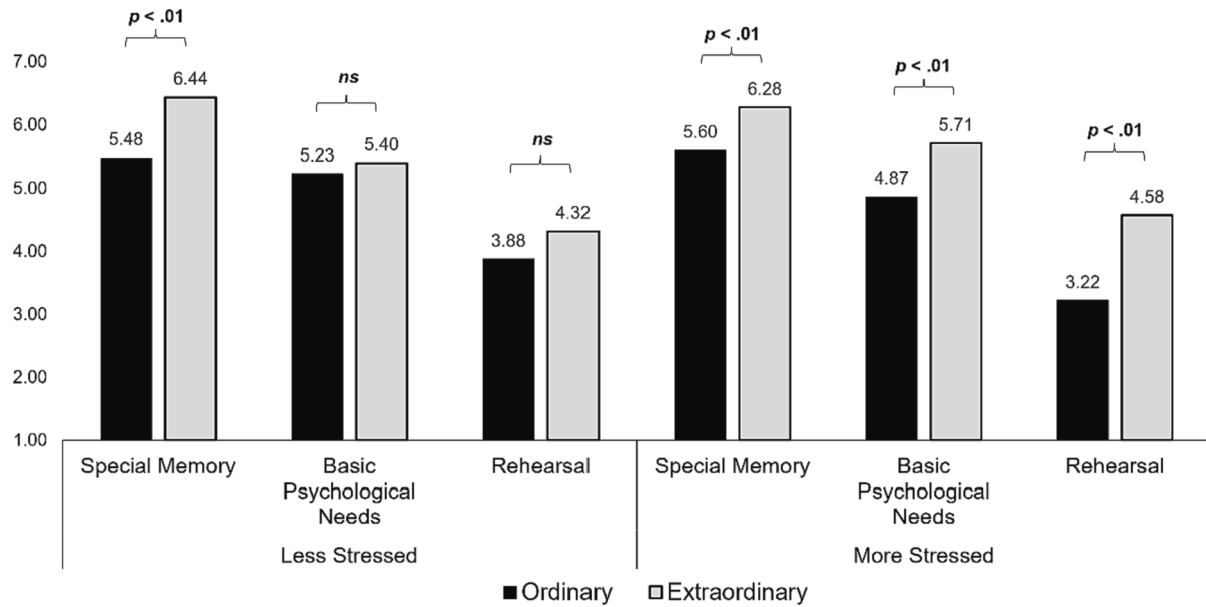


Fig. 2. Post-test results. This figure shows the significant main effect of experience type on special memories, rehearsal of memories, and satisfaction of basic needs and a significant interaction between experience type and stress on rehearsal and satisfaction of basic needs.

4.3.3. Basic psychological needs replenishment

We find that extraordinary experiences, compared to ordinary experiences, are associated with greater replenishment of basic needs ($M_{EXT} = 5.57$ vs. $M_{ORD} = 5.08$, $F(1, 375) = 27.75$, $p < .001$). We also discovered that stress moderates the link between the experience type and basic needs (PROCESS Model 1, 95 % CI, 5000 draws; IV*stress: $\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI = 0.07, 0.27$). When comparing ordinary and extraordinary experiences, there is no difference in basic needs replenishment among participants who were less stressed ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.13$, $CI = -0.10, 0.43$) but significantly more among those who were more stressed ($\beta = 0.83$, $SE = 0.14$, $CI = 0.56, 1.11$).

We also explored how basic needs replenishment contributes to special memories of stressed consumers using moderated mediation (PROCESS Model 7, 95 % CI, 5000 draws): compared to those in the ordinary condition, participants in the extraordinary condition who were more (vs. less) stressed in the time leading up to the experience should report greater replenishment of basic needs (mediator) leading to memories that are more special. The direct effect of experience type on basic needs replenishment is significant ($\beta = 0.49$, $SE = 0.09$, $CI = 0.31, 0.67$) and qualified by an interaction with stress ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI = 0.07, 0.27$; IMM = 0.08, $CI = 0.03, 0.13$). Specifically, a spotlight analysis shows the mediated pathway is not significant for participants who were less stressed in the time leading up to the experience (16th percentile: $\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.07$, $CI = -0.05, 0.23$) but is significant for participants who were more stressed (84th percentile: $\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.09$, $CI = 0.22, 0.56$).

The results of the post-test provide evidence for several ideas central to our theorizing. First, we show that stress leading up to an experience exerts lasting effects through changes to the content and rehearsal of a memory. Specifically, we demonstrate that stress at the time impacts the content of a memory now: for consumers who were more stressed leading up to the experience, the memory of the extraordinary group experience reflects greater replenishment of basic needs. We also show that stress moderates the rehearsal of memories, with more stressed consumers more frequently revisiting their memories with other group members.

5. General discussion

5.1. Overview of findings

Motivated in part by the many organizations that create extraordinary experiences for families facing profound life challenges, we provide evidence of how stress in the days and weeks before an extraordinary group experience exerts lasting effects on well-being through changes to the memories of that experience (see Fig. 3). In Study 1, we find that participants who were highly stressed prior to an extraordinary group experience report greater cohesion—the perception that the group is stable, bonded, and enduring—and group well-being when later revisiting these special memories. In Study 2, we find that boosts to cohesion tied to the special memories of extraordinary group experiences are only apparent among more stressed groups. Among those who were less stressed, memories tied to ordinary vs. extraordinary experiences are associated with similar levels of cohesion and group well-being. Finally, in a post-test, we demonstrate that while memories of extraordinary experiences are more special than those of ordinary experiences, stress in the time leading up to the experience changes the content and rehearsal of these memories, with more (vs. less) stressed consumers' memories of extraordinary group experiences reflecting greater replenishment of basic psychological needs during the experience and more frequent re-visiting of the memory by the group.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

In the domain of extraordinary experiences, our work makes two contributions. First, we provide one of the few direct comparisons of extraordinary and ordinary experiences, allowing us to capture the relative impact of their memory on well-being. While our work is based on data from a group context, it parallels that of [Bhattacharjee and Mogilner \(2014\)](#) who find that extraordinary experiences were no different from ordinary experiences in the happiness they generate for older individuals, with greater happiness from extraordinary experiences reported only by younger individuals. We also find that under normal circumstances (low stress), ordinary and extraordinary group experiences provide similar benefits. However, our findings add an important qualification: under conditions of high stress preceding the

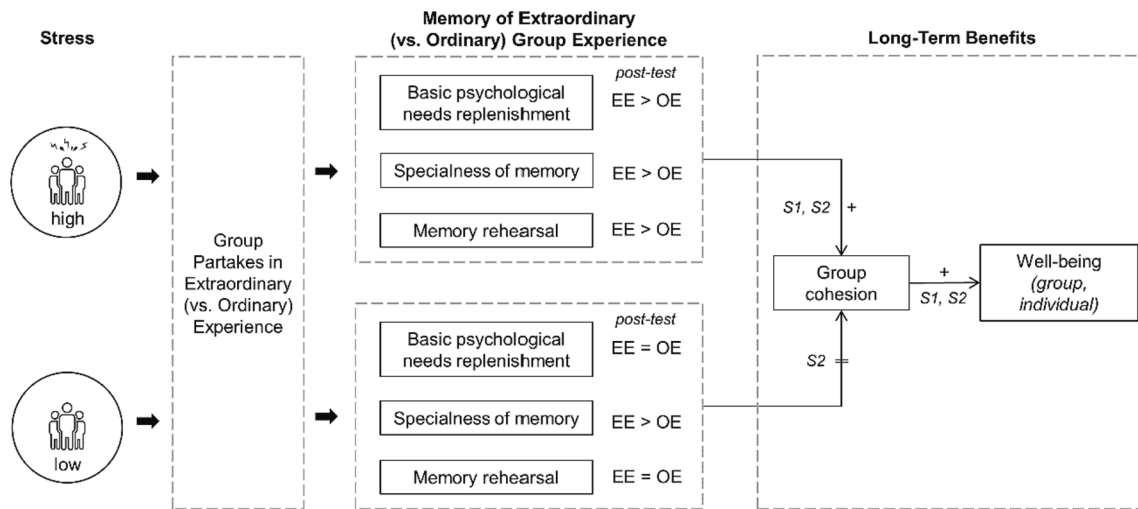


Fig. 3. Overview of Findings.

experience, extraordinary group experiences provide greater group well-being than ordinary experiences.

Second, we provide evidence that the well-being benefits of extraordinary experiences are sustained by the special memories shared by the groups that partake in those experiences. By surveying Make-A-Wish families in Study 1, we show that these positive effects are long-lasting: the memories described by those participants pertain to experiences between one and five years in the past, yet they still contribute to current well-being. Previously, [Zauberman et al. \(2009\)](#) proposed that memories are assets that consumers endeavor to protect, but most research in the experiential domain has not explicitly examined the unique role of memory. We do so and identify memory specialness, a characteristic of experiential memories, as a determinant of group well-being.⁴ Additional analyses using data from Study 2 (Supplementary Material VIII) allow us to distinguish between the effects of extraordinary experiences and those of special memories. We find that it is only through special memories that extraordinary experiences impact cohesion and group well-being. Extending [Zauberman et al.'s \(2009\)](#) proposal that memories should be protected, our results suggest they should also be revisited regularly, as they bring people together and increase well-being. Overall, our findings highlight that memories are the driving force behind lasting benefits of extraordinary group experiences, particularly for stressed consumers, and act as the lens through which members continue to view their group as cohesive.

The perception that the group is stable, bonded, and enduring—group cohesion—reflects a construct that we introduce into the marketing literature to capture the mechanism through which special memories contribute to well-being. By adopting a group-level perspective, we are able to document how existing relationships are transformed by shared extraordinary experiences. Previous studies that examined the impact of experiences on relationships have focused primarily on forging new relationships (e.g., [Arnould & Price, 1993](#); [Min et al., 2018](#)) or on how characteristics of the relationship impact experiential vs. material consumption (e.g., [Goodman & Lim, 2018](#)). We, on the other hand, aim to understand how sharing experiences impacts an existing social group, given that social experiences are considered superior to solo experiences ([Caprariello & Reis, 2013](#)) and that many extraordinary experiences are pursued by pre-existing groups (e.g., family, friends; [Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014](#)). Therefore, our research differs from previous work in that we examine close-tie groups.

⁴ We also examine memory content (basic needs satisfaction) and rehearsal in our post-test, providing further nuance to our understanding of the role that memories play in sustaining the benefits of extraordinary experiences.

This focus reflects the widespread practice among providers of extraordinary experiences to market to groups (e.g., National Geographic Expeditions' *Tanzania Family Safari* or G-Adventures' *Family Adventures*). With this approach, we are also able to highlight the role that social others play in generating and maintaining the lasting benefits of extraordinary experiences. The conversational value of experiences is one of the drivers of their happiness advantage over material purchases ([Bastos & Brucks, 2017](#)). We expand on this notion by examining what types of memories consumers revisit. We find that the memories of extraordinary and ordinary group experiences are revisited with similar frequency when undertaken at a time of low stress, but that groups tend to revisit extraordinary experiences from times of high stress more than ordinary ones.

Additionally, we wondered about the role of group composition and whether we would observe similar effects on cohesion if extraordinary experiences were undertaken with people that participants did not know. To examine this possibility, we replicated Study 2 with new panel members. The only change was we instructed participants to recall ordinary or extraordinary experiences with strangers ($n = 134$, $M_{age} = 42$, 62 % female). The results showed no mediation by cohesion, suggesting the benefits of extraordinary group experiences for stressed consumers require the presence of close others.⁵ In other words, to maximize utility, stressed consumers are advised to seek close others when investing time and money in an extraordinary experience.

Finally, perhaps our most notable contribution is that our work is among a relatively small number of studies in marketing to explicitly examine the impact of stress on consumption. While previous research has acknowledged that extraordinary experiences can be objectively unpleasant or stressful in themselves (e.g., [Arnould & Price, 1993](#); [Celsi et al., 1993](#); [Tumbat & Belk, 2011](#)), to our knowledge no previous research has examined the consequences of using extraordinary experiences as a tonic for unrelated stresses. Importantly, while pursuing shared extraordinary experiences in times of high stress could be viewed as an instance of coping with life-event induced stress through consumption ([Duhachek, 2005](#); [Moschis, 2007](#)), our concern is not with the immediate effectiveness of this approach but with its far-downstream consequences for the group's well-being. We demonstrate that the benefits gained from extraordinary group experiences differ for groups who go into them with diverging stress levels, and that these differences are evident in the memories of those experiences long after the

⁵ We acknowledge that there may be other benefits emerging from extraordinary experiences with strangers but they are likely to be individual benefits rather than group benefits.

experience has concluded. In other words, the stress that consumers bring into an experience impacts what they take out of the experience. While we hypothesized that stress would make the effect of special memories on cohesion stronger (H2), the results of Study 2 are consistent with the idea that stress may be a pre-condition for groups to develop shared memories that have lasting effects on group well-being through cohesion. Given our focus on memories, we are unable to conclude that stress brought into an extraordinary experience affects the experience itself, but our post-test suggests that it does affect what consumers remember of the experience, raising an important caveat for experiential consumption studies relying on recall methods.

Table 1
Theoretical and Substantive Contributions.

THEORETICAL
Experiential Consumption
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We provide direct evidence of the empirical link between extraordinary group experiences/special memories and well-being, which has often been supported with indirect evidence in prior literature (e.g., Zauberman et al. [2009] use post-hoc coding of happiness from prior experiences).• We introduce the cohesion construct into the marketing literature, demonstrate its usefulness in investigating outcomes of group-based experiential consumption and suggest that there is value in examining the group as a unit (vs. focusing on the reactions of individuals within the group).• We establish that the well-being benefits of shared extraordinary experiences can endure, lasting years beyond the experience, by virtue of participants' collectively rehearsing associated special memories, an act that improves cohesion.
Stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We increase general understanding of the effect of stress in the marketing literature, noted by Durante and Laran (2016) as a persistent gap.• We establish stress as an important factor moderating the effects of extraordinary experiences. Just as research examines how age impacts the link between experiences and happiness (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014), we document that the stress consumers bring to an experience alters resulting memories, sense of cohesion, and well-being.• We show that the effects of group-based experiences are not uniform: in the long run, highly stressed consumers benefit more from extraordinary experiences than less stressed consumers.
SUBSTANTIVE
Managerial Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We validate the foundational view among wish-granting organizations that extraordinary experiences help groups under stress. Our results show that special memories based on experiences years in the past predict current well-being (Study 1) and are associated with elevated cohesion among highly stressed consumers (Study 2).• When engaging with potential consumers of extraordinary experiences, managers should encourage the inclusion of close others and the creation of special memories via photographs/mementos.• Ideal extraordinary experiences provide opportunities for stressed consumers to connect but also to exercise autonomy and competence. Memories of experiences that fulfill an array of basic needs endure and provide value to consumers for long periods afterwards.• Highly stressed people are not typical consumers; they are not interacting in the market from a position of strength. Managers should simplify the shopping/ planning process in order to generate value for them. In catering to them, employees are reminded to be especially patient and sincere.
Consumer Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• With heightened stress, people often isolate themselves and seek the safety of routine. However, stepping outside the norms of regular life and embarking on extraordinary experiences with friends and family is a worthwhile investment.• If consumers are stressed and have opportunities to spend time with friends and family, try to spend that time in unusual ways, especially those that offer a degree of risk, novelty, and challenge. Time away (i.e., removed from one's regular daily routines, perhaps involving travel) provides an effective distraction and sets up ideal conditions for basic needs to be recharged.• During extraordinary group experiences, consumers should collect photos and mementos that will facilitate rehearsal of special memories, the major source of boosts to cohesion and well-being.

5.3. Recommendations for Managers

Our findings validate the many efforts of organizations that endeavor to improve the lives of people experiencing hardship by offering once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Given the impact that memories of these experiences have on well-being, we substantiate the premise on which organizations like Make-A-Wish are founded: that extraordinary experiences *do* help groups under duress in the long run. To harness the power of extraordinary experiences, providers should strongly encourage experience-seekers to include close others in the experience. Doing so will provide more opportunities to revisit and enjoy the associated memory in the future, foster cohesion, and generate the superior long-term effects on group well-being. Relatedly, because these enduring benefits depend on memories, experience providers must encourage their preservation (Zauberman et al., 2009). Some organizations already recognize this fact and routinely hand out cameras during wish delivery. Similarly, providing mementos or souvenirs that can be displayed in participants' homes would help keep special memories top of mind.

Marketers should also recognize that highly stressed groups may be experiencing deficits in not only their sense of relatedness but also with respect to their autonomy and competence. While undertaking a group experience is likely to improve a person's sense of connection, it also it a good idea to integrate various choices and challenges into the extraordinary experience so that stressed groups' other needs (i.e., autonomy and competence) may be addressed. However, we offer this recommendation with caution. Because the consumers who benefit most from extraordinary experiences are those who enter it with higher stress, they may require additional accommodations during experience delivery, because they are not starting from a position of strength. Experience providers should operate with greater patience and sincerity than they might with less stressed groups, balancing helpful accommodations with wariness about undermining basic needs through excessive hand-holding.

Additionally, across both studies, we noted a pattern in the qualitative results that is suggestive of a feature that marketers may benefit from incorporating into their experience-design activities. Many of the extraordinary experiences described by respondents involved some form of travel away from home, not necessarily for a long time but for at least a day. A benefit of these extraordinary experiences seems to be in allowing groups to temporarily step away from the routine ways in which the group experiences stress in their lives, perhaps by physically removing them from at least some of the sources of their stress. This result is consistent with prior research suggesting that experiences may provide a form of escapism (e.g., Holmqvist et al., 2020; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). From a practical point of view, there may be a benefit to incorporating a literal departure from stressed consumers' lives. While an amazing night out is good and a weekend away is better, longer, more psychologically and physically distant experiences may be best. See Table 1 for an overview of practical recommendations.

5.4. Recommendations for Consumers

We worry that highly stressed consumers may not appreciate the benefits associated with undertaking extraordinary group experiences, because their stress may interfere with making choices that are beneficial in the long run. For example, Durante and Laran (2016) show that, under stress, consumers reduce spending on non-essentials as a means to regain control. Similarly, spending on extraordinary experiences may not be top of mind depending on the level of their stress. If stress is moderate and routinized (e.g., work), we suspect that consumers would willingly choose typical travel or entertainment-based experiences. However, if stress is very high or emerges from less predictable, more severe, or chronic sources (e.g., severe illness, serious relationship discord), consumers may be less inclined to take advantage of extraordinary group experiences as a way to cope. Moreover, under severe

stress, many people will try to preserve psychological resources through withdrawal and isolation (Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018; Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). This approach may be self-defeating, however, because it provides few opportunities to address underserved psychological needs. Rather, consumers should resist the temptation to isolate, remain open to undertaking group experiences, and give themselves permission to temporarily escape their 'negative normal' by spending on special experiences.

Importantly, we do not think that our results imply such spending needs to be exorbitant. The key seems to be spending a significant amount of time with family and friends outside of regular routines and life structures. For example, if travel is involved, it does not need to be exotic or expensive. Close-knit groups can benefit from costly trips to Disneyland but also from more economical alternatives, like camping or day trips together to watch fireworks, laser light shows, or sunrises (all experiences mentioned by participants in Study 2).

Finally, because memories are conduits of enhanced group well-being, we encourage consumers to frequently take time to reminisce with loved ones about shared extraordinary experiences. Revisiting photographs or mementos and talking about the experience and the larger life context in which it occurred (e.g., major life changes, stressful events) will ensure that the positive impact of those experiences endures through the years.

6. Future research and limitations

There are several areas worthy of future investigation. First, with exceptions (e.g., Alcantra et al., 2014), we lack a good understanding of which features or dimensions of extraordinary experiences are systematically related to superior memories, especially in a group context. For example, some experiences are relatively risky (e.g., skydiving), while others are not (e.g., Disney vacation). In the post-test, we provided evidence that extraordinary (vs. ordinary) group experiences replenish basic psychological needs to a greater extent for highly stressed groups. Nevertheless, we do not know enough about how various experience qualities impact what experience-goers subsequently cherish. For example, for stressed groups, are highly pleasant extraordinary experiences better than those that are highly arousing? Both are emotionally intense, but we wonder if there is something about the nature of stress that is better matched with certain types of group experiences. Therefore, understanding experiences systematically may lead to more effective ways of improving stressed consumers' well-being.

In this vein, future research should examine social context as an experience characteristic, particularly its impact on the long-term benefits. Our investigation of group experiences centers on a group-level mechanism (cohesion) that depends on the group for its maintenance (rehearsing special memories)—but what about individual experiences? While some research suggests that solitary experiences provide less happiness than social ones (Caprariello & Reis, 2013), other scholars find that they are comparable (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014, Study 1C). Nevertheless, consumers seek out extraordinary solo experiences, suggesting that these experiences are beneficial. Recently, for example, providers have been responding to the growing number of solo travelers (Nath, 2023) with experiences designed for individual consumption, like the “Alonemoon” package offered by Hôtel Barrière Le Carl Gustaf (“Hôtel Barrière”, 2022). Considerations of the social context of experiences raise many questions: do solo and group experiences offer similar long-term well-being benefits? If so, what mechanism sustains them? If not, are there different benefits, unique to solo experiences?

Moreover, our findings suggest that consumers who undertake an extraordinary group experience form memories that strengthen a group's cohesion. Research suggests that heightened cohesion can provide people with a psychological buffer to help them cope with novel challenges (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007) and improve their resilience

(Fossion et al., 2014; Walsh, 2003). Future research should investigate if and for how long the improved cohesion sustained by special memories may inoculate group members against future challenges, and what experience characteristics (e.g., basic needs replenishment) reinforce and extend this protective function.

Our work has several limitations. First, we relied on self-report measures. One alternative is to adopt a more immersive approach, as did the pioneers of research on extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993), to collect data using more contemporaneous and observation-based methods. This would provide additional sources of evidence and have the advantage of capturing qualities of the memories while they are forming. We point out, however, that while retrospective reporting may present issues with recall bias for studies interested in accurately characterizing experiences, our focus is on the impact of the memories of experiences. Because it is how an experience is remembered that impacts current cohesion and well-being, the content of the memory is more important than the accuracy of the memory. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that recalled, not actual, affective experiences impact future choice (Wirtz et al., 2003). Second, while the key informant approach to data collection is common in group research (Antonovsky, 1998) as a reaction to the long-standing challenges of measuring group-level phenomena (Beal et al., 2003; Hogg, 1993), it may also be useful to examine the impact of memories on all group members. This would help researchers to understand just how shared and uniform special memories are, whether all members reap similar psychological benefits or for the same duration, and other related issues.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zuzanna Jurewicz.: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Miranda R. Goode**: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Matthew Thomson**: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Due to its sensitive nature, Study 1 data cannot be shared. Study 2 and post-test data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114426>.

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