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## **Consumers, Play and *Communitas*—an Anthropological View on Building Consumer Involvement on a Mass Scale**

*Abstract:* There is an increasing interest in effective methods for building consumer involvement on a mass scale. This paper offers an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for consumer involvement analysis and forwards an anthropological approach to this issue. It uses categories of play and *communitas* to examine cultural dynamics underlying consumer involvement. It summarizes and extends theoretical understanding of the topic and provides numerous examples from contemporary marketplace such as Heineken Open'er Festival and Volkswagen 'Fun Theory' initiative. Several research propositions are formulated for future empirical endeavors and implications for practice are defined.

*Keywords:* *Communitas*, consumer involvement, Heineken Open'er Festival, marketing events, play, the Fun Theory

### **Introduction**

In March 2013 Skittles brand page on Facebook attracted over 24,644,384 visitors, but only 0.83% of them were actually involved in the interaction with this brand as indicated by the People Talking About This index (a measure of fan involvement on Facebook). And such a proportion is not at all unusual for other brands. For years consumer researchers have been struggling to capture the problem of inducing involvement of mass number of people in a long-term perspective. How to encourage crowds of consumers to act upon certain marketing ideas? How to counteract their apathy and involve in specific branding actions? How to activate them in different marketing communication channels and situations e.g. on Facebook, in a store, or while on vacations? Not only is this a marketing dilemma, but also a predicament to the general economic and cultural discussion. Tax evasion, traffic rules ignorance, unsafe driving, encouraging to recycle, increasing the turnout at the elections, participating in branding events and occasions—these are contemporary issues often confronted by companies, but also governments, ecological organizations, non-profit institutions and other entities. By and large, it is hard to involve mass number of people in certain activities, encourage them to follow certain rules and regulations, and make them act upon specific ideas.

To explain the phenomena of mass non-involvement one might use the arguments about the downfall of social capital, lowering levels of public participation, overwhelming laziness of consumers and their cynicism, skepticism, lack of interest, or

simply apathy to the most of marketing efforts. From the academic point of view, another explanation might be found in the free riding theory or public choice theory which offers a concept of rational ignorance. It states that people (could be citizens or consumers) mostly behave as utility maximizers and decide to ignore acting upon such situations that require more effort input than the benefits obtained (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Gunning 2002). The free riding theory describes selected crowd members as free-riders who decide to take a free ride on the actions of others, rather than act themselves (Albanese and Van Fleet 1985). Both concepts, however, assume rationality of crowds, which has been—to certain extent—disclaimed (Banerjee 2011; Le Bon 1980). Neither theory helps fully address the problem of how to overcome mass abstention, and unwillingness to involve on consumers' part.

In order to find a practical solution to the above problem, this paper submits an interdisciplinary framework to discuss the possibilities of involving people in certain activities and events on a large scale. It does not search for the origins of consumers' decisions but looks at involvement mechanisms from an anthropological viewpoint. While much attention has been devoted to consumer involvement from cognitive perspective (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983; Zaichkowsky 1986; Celsi and Olson 1988), and to the impacts of cognitive, behavioral and social factors on consumer communities (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten *et al.* 2007), there is less investigation into cultural aspects of this phenomenon. One may find many examples of academic work devoted to conceptualization and measurement of involvement, however, little scholarly effort is dedicated to the development of culturally based strategies which might moderate the level of involvement among mass number of individuals. In order to address this issue, it is necessary first to briefly review how involvement is currently explained by social psychology theorists and consumer researchers, and then to think how cultural mechanisms of play might moderate this phenomenon. An idea of play is therefore considered here as the moderator of mass involvement, and Turner's concept of *communitas* is introduced as the ultimate form of mass involvement. In light of these conceptualizations the paper intends to meet another goal i.e. to suggest a few research propositions for further empirical testing. Taking an anthropological perspective might help find new meanings and relationships and might extend the existing understanding of consumer behavior dynamics.

### **Involvement**

The concept of involvement originates from social psychology, where the construct of 'ego involvement' is used to explain the role of different social issues in individual's life and behaviors (Allport 1943). It has been applied to marketing and consumer behavior domain with its all diverse conceptualizations and classifications (Michaelidou and Dibb 2008). As a consequence, consumer researchers theorize it from a variety of viewpoints. The most frequently adapted theoretical approach is offered by Mitchell (1979) who describes involvement as 'an individual level, internal state variable that indicates

the amount of arousal, interest, or drive evoked by a particular stimulus or situation' (Mitchell 1979: 194). One might therefore conclude that involvement essentially relates to one's motivational state to perceive something (an object, a situation or other stimuli) as important and personally relevant. It is the degree of personal connection between an individual and a stimulus object. Within this framework, inducing involvement would mean increasing perceived importance of a stimulus for an individual and building individual's motivation towards this stimulus. According to Zaichkowsky (1986, 1994), such a perspective allows for distinguishing between two basic components of involvement: cognitive and affective one. The first dimension reflects dynamics of informational processing related to the object of involvement, while the second one describes emotions, feelings and moods evoked by an object of involvement.

As it is described in consumer behavior literature, a person can be involved with many different types of stimuli i.e. with products and services (e.g. McGrath and Mahood 2004), brands (e.g. Mittal and Lee 1987), advertisements (e.g. Krugman 1967), programs (e.g. Park and McClung 1986; Moorman and Neijens 2007), or situations like purchase occasions (e.g. Clarke and Belk 1978; Mittal, 1989; Smith and Bristor 1994), tasks, activities and events (e.g. Neelamegham and Jain 1999; Speed and Thompson 2000). Some scholars admit that involvement with different objects and situations might produce different responses on individual's part (Zaichkowsky 1985) and this statement provides the impetus for further development of diverse approaches to this phenomenon. For example, in their search for a precise conceptualization of involvement Rothschild and Houston (1978, 1980) suggested 3 forms of involvement: situational, enduring and response involvement. Situational involvement deals with occasional inflow of concern about certain stimuli that motivates individuals to further behavior, while enduring involvement reflects constant personal concern with a stimulus. Response involvement is a resulting combination of both other forms. Involvement, therefore, is a time-reliant phenomenon eliciting different long and short-term effects, and—most importantly—it may have many sources. According to Celsi and Olson (1988), it largely depends on the perceived significance of a particular stimulus in terms of its ability to express one's status, personality, and/or identity—on either group or individual level. It might also stem from one's interest, the rewarding nature of the stimulus, and subjective risk (probability and importance) connected to the stimulus (Kapferer and Laurent 1986). In this respect, involvement is a multidimensional construct and accrues as a result of many different antecedents.

Involvement plays a significant role in explaining various relationships. It determines individual's perception, knowledge, and memory structures. A good deal of literature is devoted to understanding of this phenomenon and its impact on subsequent consumption activities, cognitive processing, and affective responses towards particular objects and situations. Consumer involvement influences elicitation of counterarguments to advertising messages (Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Petty and Cacioppo 1981; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983), brand and product choices (Tye-bjee 1979), consideration of product and purchase alternatives (DeBruicker 1978), information search patterns (Clarke and Belk 1978; Belk 1982) etc. From cognitive perspective, high involvement might lower attention capacity to irrelevant informa-

tion, not related to the object of involvement. As indicated by Pham (1992), highly involved football spectators are less likely to process stimuli unrelated directly to the game, e.g. billboards and sponsorship advertisements. Involvement also becomes an important factor in driving consumer affective responses. As a consequence, an attitude, which accrues as a result of high involvement, has substantial effect on the processing of incoming stimuli and on subsequent beliefs, opinions and behaviors.

Involvement also serves as an important mediator to individual and group behaviors. In other words, we are likely to exhibit different behaviors towards certain stimuli, depending on our involvement. For example, participation might be regarded as a behavioral response to involvement, and highly involved citizens are more likely to participate in elections; highly involved football fans are more likely to buy season tickets and participate regularly in subsequent games; highly involved music fans are more likely to participate frequently in music concerts and festivals; highly involved music fans are more likely to behave differently when compared to less involved music enthusiasts e.g. they actively express their feelings and attitudes at the concerts and on other music occasions.

Intense involvement might also mitigate perceived costs of action and lead to certain sacrifices. Consider the example of highly involved music fans: mostly, they feel motivated to undertake long and expensive trips in order to attend a concert or festival; they buy ridiculously overpriced products associated with their favorite band; they follow every piece of information related to this band and include relatives and friends in activities resulting from involvement. In this particular context, it is hard to acknowledge the validity of rational ignorance concept, as there are masses of non-rational music enthusiasts spending lots of time, money and effort in order to participate in very specific music events. This discussion leads to the conclusion, that personal involvement, as a construct combining cognitive and affective dimensions, lowers individuals' rationality in assessing the object of involvement and makes consumer decisions subjective to personal emotions, feelings, and instincts.

### **Play as the Moderator of Mass Involvement**

From the anthropological perspective, play is the socio-cultural category that refers to a free and voluntary activity. Play stays in opposition to work, responsibilities, and against real life. According to the statements forwarded by Johan Huizinga (1985), play creates a very specific awareness of a second reality; it is a variation of everyday life, as it temporarily suspends ordinary rules. Play is always limited to its own boundaries of time (e.g. a football game ends and begins on the prearranged signal of a whistle) and space (e.g. on a pitch, in a sports hall, in a park, on a chessboard). It develops its own (either formal or informal) rules, regulations and codes of behavior e.g. a requirement for players to wear special t-shirts and to respect supreme decisions of a referee. In summary, a classical play constitutes a 'magic circle of play', a socio-cultural contract that designates spatial, temporal and social boundaries isolating play from the rest of life (Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Play responds to different needs and motivations, e.g.: competitiveness and determination to win, the urge to solve the mystery, the need for self-expression, reward, achievement, and status. In its essence, however, play is usually undertaken and pursued for pleasure and entertainment value, which is developed by suspense, secrecy, surprise, confidentiality, inexplicable puzzle, pageantry, unique dress code, uncertainty of an outcome etc. As noted by Roger Caillois:

All that is mysterious or make-believe by nature approaches play: moreover, it must be that the function of fiction or diversion is to remove the mystery; i.e. the mystery may no longer be awesome, and the counterfeit may not be a beginning or symptom of metamorphosis and possession (Caillois 2001: 4–5).

In other words, play is not serious and it is not an object of worship, but it is accompanied by vivid and intense experiences and expectations.

Play is hardly ever taken in isolation, and it is usually carried out in a group. It promotes the formation of social groupings and interaction among players. It, therefore, plays an important social role, because it becomes a factor in establishing contact and collective involvement (Caillois 2001). Individuals feel motivated to take part in play because they can build collective experiences, share emotions, or compare their skills to others.

Play combines competition, rewards, fun and collaboration. Such combination seems to create a very motivational and involving environment that inspires masses of participants to immerse into the play. As a result, playing attracts many people at a non-rational level, and as such it can potentially address the issue of rational ignorance. When playing, people do not rationalize their actions, and they perceive play as the opportunity to act ludicrously or humorously against social conventions, norms and codes of everyday life. Play—especially, when undertaken in a larger group—alleviates social pressure, and embarrassment. It provides a feeling of multiplayer presence, which is central for mitigating awkwardness (Montola 2011). Football players do not feel weird when kicking the ball, instead of catching it with their hands; football fans do not feel embarrassed or uncomfortable wearing heavy make-up and colorful costumes at the stadium; football spectators do not feel uneasy or ashamed to scream out their approval or disagreement with the referee's decisions, as many people are actually behaving the same. The play serves as an alibi for acting against social frame, routine and ordinariness. This discussion leads to the first research proposition: *P1: play moderates involvement in a way it decreases rationality in assessing the object of involvement.*

### **Building Mass Involvement with Play**

Being an attractive platform for consumer activation, play has been integrated into business contexts and used as a trigger for favorable on-brand consumer behaviors for years. As a consequence, this situation has perpetuated the development of the phenomenon called '*gamification*' i.e. combining game elements and dynamics into non-game activities. Gamification has overwhelmed business and non-business world

in a way that it has become a powerful tool to drive any kind of participation on individual's part, including: working, learning, recruiting, promoting, answering questions, shopping, losing weight, reading or even filling out application forms. It uses a wide variety of mechanics: from simple points, badges, levels, leaderboards to more complex challenges (e.g. those used in alternate reality gaming). There is a growing enthusiasm over gamification as it is believed to sustain consumer involvement over considerable period of time (Swan 2012). For this reason, play and games are increasingly incorporated into marketing strategies of many commercial brands, as it is depicted in the following examples.

Heineken uses play and surprise to involve and integrate mass numbers of consumers worldwide. In 2010, as the part of their UEFA Champions League sponsorship program, Heineken prepared a branding prank. The company organized a fake cultural event combining classical music and poetry in Milan at the same time as the Real Madrid vs. AC Milan football match. 100 Italian accomplices persuaded their partners, students, husbands, and employees (1,136 AC Milan fans in total) to sacrifice the game on TV and attend the recital instead. The victims were then rewarded for their devotion with a great surprise: after 15 minutes the concert was interrupted and everybody could have watched the game live on the big screen above the stage. Heineken managed to turn an already spectacular game into even more collective and involving experience. The effects, however, widespread even further: the fake recital was broadcast live on Sky Sports channel and over 1.5 million viewers watched the prank; 10 million people were exposed to this event the next day on local news channels and MTV news; the footage from this campaign had millions of unique views, likes, enthusiastic comments and sharings across blogs, forums, and social networks.

In 2009 Volkswagen Sweden announced an initiative called 'The Fun Theory' and started to sponsor the projects which would positively encourage people to undertake actions originally unpleasant. By promoting the idea that fun can change behavior for the better, Volkswagen ran a series of experiments allowing people to experience the entertainment value of acting responsibly or with much effort. In one of their tests, they converted the subway staircase into gigantic piano keyboards. The masses of commuters engaged in playing with piano-stairs i.e. jumping, and thus producing different musical notes, instead of using effortless (but boring) escalator situated just next to them. Another test involved a large rubbish container transformed into a bottle-bank arcade machine which made recycling a casino-like experience: players were supposed to press start, wait for the light above one out of many holes, put a bottle into the right hole, and collect points for the correct action. According to Volkswagen executives, over one evening this bottle bank arcade was used by nearly one hundred citizens, while the nearby conventional bottle bank was approached by only two people.

In summary, most of the experiments carried out as The Fun Theory initiative used the positive reinforcement to induce originally unpleasant or strenuous behaviors e.g. fastening the seatbelts ('the play belt' project—fastening the seatbelts, allows passengers to use an in-car entertainment system), driving safely ('the speed camera lottery' project—awarding drivers for keeping the speed limit), and throwing the

rubbish properly to the bin, rather than onto the ground ('the world deepest bin' project—awarding people for throwing rubbish into the bin with a cartoon-like experience made by funny sound effects). Such an approach of encouraging playful public involvement is also exploited by local governments. In the Philippines, for example, the city of Pasig came up with an extraordinary idea to create unusual pedestrian lane designs and make crossing the streets fun and visible to the oncoming traffic. The lanes involved non-zebra styles and were prepared as startling, black-and-white road arts: a gigantic giraffe, a snake, an enormous zipper or railway tracks. In Taiwan, New Taipei City organized a lottery as an inducement for dog owners to involve them into cleaning up after their pets. According to the city announcements, this initiative allowed to reduce fecal pollution by 50% (Thaler 2012).

Based on the above examples, it is worth defining fundamental play mechanisms that allow for mass consumer involvement from an anthropological point of view. Among the magnitude of solutions, few deserve some more detailed comments. Firstly, *reversing the social order*, *suspending* and/or *ridiculing the rules of everydayness* appears as the most effective method for activating playful involvement as in the case of quirky pedestrian lanes, flashing and flickering bottle bank, or musical, black-and-white stairs. Providing consumers with unordinary and somehow artificial experience thus creates an *unserious*, *unabsorbing*, *make-believe* but *safe* environment for interaction and further involvement into the play. The resulting involvement could be further magnified by *surprise* elements. Consider for example the Heineken football prank, where the seriousness of a fake concert was kept and it eventually extended the total fun effect after the disclosure of the event's fictional status. As a consequence, an involving play should create an atmosphere of *uncertainty* (Caillois 2001), which might include uncertainty about an outcome or uncertainty about the total structure of the play. It builds suspense and contributes to the final surprise.

Secondly, a clearly stated *goal* and/or a properly defined set of *challenges* would be another element motivating players to immerse deeper into the play. A challenge should be attractive but attainable; it should promote effort and achievements. In some cultures cleaning up after one's dog might seem a disgusting activity (e.g. in Poland), in others—an act of responsibility (e.g. in Sweden). In both cases, however, it becomes a challenge, when included appropriately into a game or play. Challenges do not have to be highly elaborated. Simplicity attracts more players, as in the case of bottle bank arcade, where players were supposed to prove their agility in reacting quickly to the flash of a light. Interestingly, there was not any final *reward* for collecting the highest number of points. Simply, some forms of play involve, despite the rewarding nature of an outcome, and play is often unproductive and not associated with material gains (Suits 1990). This is a very important statement, frequently ignored by many marketing managers. They believe that the most effective involvement mechanism refers to providing consumers with a prize, which, however, do not always prove to be a successful long-term solution.

Thirdly, one should mention few additional play mechanisms which may considerably increase involvement, such as: introducing *competition*, *collaboration* and/or *conflict* by means of tasks that stimulate social interaction (Bjork and Holopainen

2005); asserting *voluntary attendance* because coercion generates resistance among players and eventually ceases play to develop. In summary, all the aspects mentioned above have the potential to create a compelling and engaging consumer experience. They address a series of fundamental human needs, such as: desire for achievement, status, reward, self-expression, competition, and altruism. An appropriate blend of play mechanisms can allow for deeper involvement of players and their further immersion into the play. Further research, however, should focus on evaluating how these mechanisms interrelate under certain conditions, and which of them have greater potential to involve mass number of consumers in specific market-related situations.

### ***Communitas* as the Ultimate Form of Mass Involvement**

As discussed above, play suspends the rules of ordinary life—it provides an excellent environment for liminal experiences and unusual (i.e. un-ordinary) social inter-relatedness. From anthropological perspective, play perpetuates liminal forms of emotionally-based collective groupings, e.g. *communitas* (Turner 1969) or neo-tribes (Maffesoli 2008).

The concept of neo-tribalism was first forwarded by Maffesoli (2008) and it is now commonly used to explain contemporary desires of individuals (including consumers) to emotionally and empathetically connect, share, belong and interact with like-minded others (Cova and Cova 2002). Hetherington (1998) describes neo-tribes as modern '*communities of feeling*' which provide individuals with an opportunity for self-expression, self-fulfillment and almost religious-like experiences. Contrary to traditional forms of tribes that members were born into, neo-tribes are voluntary to such an extent that tribal membership fluctuates depending on the involvement of each individual (Maffesoli 2007; Mitchell and Imrie 2011). Maffesoli (2008) distinguishes several characteristics of neo-tribes e.g. sense of community, secrecy, emotional connection, sustenance of collective. Marketing scholars, additionally, claim that tribal groupings (especially those devoted to brands and products) develop also a hierarchy of their own, a new social order (Cova and Cova 2002), and value systems (Cova and Pace 2006; Taute and Sierra 2014).

The term '*neo-tribes*' seems interconnected with the term '*communitas*'. Victor Turner (1969) conceptualized *communitas* as an informal relationship between individuals and a temporary retreat from what he called 'structure', which is the essence of everyday life. The structure, as the reflection of everyday life, is based on a hierarchy of positions, status, distinction of ranks and social roles (a mother vs. a child, an employer vs. an employee, a student vs. a professor). *Communitas*, conversely, provides a liminal experience and implicates: getting rid of the hierarchy in favor of direct relationships; creating a homogeneous and spontaneous anti-social structure; developing common rituals and other symbolic actions to strengthen the community. *Communitas* stays in opposition to the structure and becomes a kind of contestation of everyday laws, institutions and constraints. Turner (1969) derives *communitas* from the concept of *rites de passage*, which are regarded as liminal areas of time and space.



For this reason, what characterizes *communitas* is a sense of liminality, temporality, loss of borders, conventions and formalities.

The concepts of *communitas* and neo-tribes have been examined in the sociology literature for many years and they provide relevant framework for the understanding of consumer behavior in the marketing context (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005; Cooper *et al.* 2005; Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2001). As brand tribalism has received extensive attention of marketing scholars (Goulding *et al.* 2013; Mitchell and Imrie 2011; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009), this paper includes *communitas* into subsequent theoretical discourse. *Communitas*, unlike neo-tribes, seems more relevant to describe unintended social groupings with no hierarchical order. For this reason and due to conceptual discipline, further analysis will examine the relationship between *communitas*, involvement and play.

Turner and other researchers suggest that *communitas* can be found in contemporary forms of social life e.g.: at festivals, carnivals, street parades, concerts (Karpinska 2002; Maisonneuve 1995; Turner 1969), elections (Banerjee 2011), and sport occasions like rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi *et al.* 1993), baseball viewership (Holt 1995), motorcycle riding (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). People participate in these events to express their relatedness to the event, to present the importance of such an occasion, to emphasise their commitment to a community of music fans, 'culture vultures', active citizens, or sport enthusiasts, and simultaneously, to demonstrate their separation from the outside world or opponent groupings. This leads to another research proposition:

*P2: the higher involvement, the higher sense of communitas.*

The sense of *communitas* is not based on solid normative and formal grounds, as, on everyday basis, participants play different roles in the society: they are doctors, lawyers, students, wives, husbands, economists, teachers etc. *Communitas*, therefore, remains spontaneous and always in transition (a liminal state); it exists 'here and now', i.e. at the concert, at the football game, at the festival or the parade. After the event, everybody would return to the conventions and hierarchies of everyday life.

### ***Communitas of Consumers at Marketing Events***

In contemporary marketplace masses of consumers can be generally encountered on one type of occasions i.e. at life, brand-sponsored marketing events held in an urban space (e.g. at festivals, concerts, sport games, picnics etc.). Marketing events provide a very useful framework for analysis of *communitas*. Such events collect large groups of consumers (actual and potential ones) and for this reason become important pillars of marketing communication strategies, event sponsorship and public relations programs. They provide an excellent environment for people to experience the sense of *communitas*, as it is discussed in the following example of Heineken beer brand in Poland.

The branding strategy of Heineken in Poland has been mostly based on musical events. By the threshold of the new century Heineken had concentrated its efforts

on exposing its brand at important, albeit minor, club events. In 2003 it decided to create a large festival of its own—Heineken Open'er Festival, which would function as the *spiritus movens* of Heineken branding communications. The most important objective for Open'er Festival was to strengthen the brand image as being international, high-quality, innovative and involved in the most interesting music trends. This event was supposed to increase Heineken brand perception as modern, caring about its consumers, and open to building cross-international relationships. Heineken Open'er Festival has been growing ever since, and now it offers the highest quality music experience in Europe for over 60,000 participants annually. It successfully competes with other European hallmark events, such as Glastonbury Festival and Roskilde Rockwerchter, superseding them with logistical excellence (i.e. in terms of safety, transportation, sanitarian standards, and technological solutions). Due to high attendance barriers (i.e. admission to all festival concerts costs app. 470 PLN [appr. Euro 120]), the audience consists mainly of urban youth, well-off students and young professionals.

Every year Heineken Open'er Festival is held in the beginning of July. Thousands of people commute then to Gdynia Babie Doły-Kosakowo airport, an enormous plot of land transformed temporarily into a gigantic concert and lodging venue with its own boundaries, pedestrian traffic (no vehicles are allowed in), safety standards, rituals and even currency (paper coupons are equivalent to certain amount of Polish zlotys). From the very first day, the festival offers intense musical experiences that take participants away from their ordinary existences and create the feeling of separation from the outside world. Everyday hierarchy, social order and conventions become suspended: nobody is obliged to follow the etiquette; it is not frowned upon (as it would be in ordinary day) to scream out loud after 10 pm, dance in the mud, lie on the ground, walk barefoot, talk to the strangers or wear a ridiculous Superman costume. Everybody seems deprived of their regular social roles: there are no managers, lawyers, doctors, business executives, professors; there are just equal music fans who can be identified by green bracelets providing them with equal access to most festival attractions. This extraordinary event time thus forms a period of liminality during which the ordinary rules are suspended and replaced by another world, devoid of judgmentality and comprising direct, non-rational bonds. The overwhelming sense of unusual, 'out of ordinary' and egalitarianism supports the notion of *communitas*; it sustains conditions necessary to form the special comradeship between participants and opens them up for further involvement into the event.

Open'er festival is a very crowded place. The crowd makes it impossible to move freely between the stages. Participants are forming long queues to the gates, bars, cafeterias, changing rooms, toilets, exits and entrances. Occasional friendships are made when standing in the lines; the commonalty of interests and complaints integrates and brings people together. The crowd mingles further itself by performing collective activities such as singing and dancing to the most popular songs, walking and running between the stages, clapping their hands, lifting up their smartphones, and lighting their lighters. The mass number of festival goers multiplies a feeling of 'being a small part in a bigger whole' and simultaneously insures anonymity, which

is further perpetuated by tremendous noise, uproar, clatter, and a blinding flash of stage lights.

The sense of *communitas* is particularly disseminated by regular festival attenders. They are the most involved Open'er participants who do not take off their green bracelets even months after the event. They attend every Open'er festival, regardless of the concert agenda, and demonstrate their commitment on every occasion e.g. at the beach wearing Heineken hats or sponsor umbrellas, commenting and sharing the content on Facebook prior to the festival, writing their blogs and involving friends and relatives in this event. They address the sponsor affectionately with a diminutive name: Heniek. They express their attitude towards this festival using passionate and sometimes extreme metaphors: '*The world is a rag, but I don't care because my Open'er begins right now*', '*I made it to the concert of my life* [about Crystal Castles concert at Open'er in 2013—ed. M.K-K.], *Even if I'd died here, it would be a beautiful death*'.<sup>1</sup> For them the festival has developed into a time of celebration; it has possessed a sacred character and become a very special occasion; an axis of their leisure time planning. They can be described as 'ritual elders' who pass on their wisdom about the event to the newcomers, and other participants of *communitas* can submit to their informal authority.

In summary, Open'er festival provides a framework for people with different social backgrounds to communicate impartially and bond with one another. Every year *communitas* establishes itself and evaporates after the event is finished. It results from involvement and playful public participation in this festival. Even though *communitas* seems to be a very interesting phenomenon, little consideration has been given so far to this category in consumer research. As a very dynamic and temporal experience, *communitas* requires closer inquiry in terms of its formation, lifespan, influences on branding possibilities and potential actions of the marketing institution or company that may sustain or damage *communitas* itself. One might only suspect that highly involved individuals will be acting upon *communitas* just at the event. As the example of Open'er 'ritual elders' showed, only limited (if any) responses to the sponsoring brand are expected after returning to the ordinary life. This leads to the following research proposition:

*P3: the effect of communitas will be visible only at the duration of the event.*

Inspiring a sense of *communitas* is no easy task to do, as it depends strongly on a variety of cultural and environmental factors. Based on the above example, there can be, however, distinguished several *communitas* drivers:

- *mass number of people* i.e. physical presence of crowds in a particular location (at the stadium, at the concert, in the street) and/or the *feeling of multi-participant presence*.
- *actions performed collectively* (e.g. dancing, jumping, clapping hands, singing, chanting, roaring, yelling, writing, clicking etc.) and *noise*.
- *the sense of 'out of ordinary'*. It can be created by unusual setting i.e. untypical location (a temple, a stadium, a factory—places that remain inaccessible for reg-

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<sup>1</sup> Sentences cited from the festival 'wall-like' installation serving as the 'Hyde Park corner' to freely express one's opinions in writing.

ular people on everyday basis); extraordinary outfit, a very specific dress code and accessories expressing community identity (e.g. flags, scarves, whistles, hats, make-up etc.); unusual visitors and participants (e.g. celebrities, popular figures, and famous personages); unique occasion and time (e.g. once a year).

Such conditions allow for fading the distance, help individuals to gain self-confidence, facilitate unusual behaviour and promote expressing greater courage or bravery. Crowds provide anonymity. People are more talkative when in crowds, and they feel no awkwardness in breaking social conventions. Sense of 'unusual' leads to excitement, triggers emotions and stimulates pleasure, joy and involvement. The outfit identifies participants of the same group (such as green bracelets at the Heineken Open'er Festival, black t-shirts at Iron Maiden concert, wellingtons at the Glastonbury Festival, red and yellow colors on the faces of Spanish football fans). The special setting allows the audience to enter into a state of excitement, enthusiasm, delight, thrill, and higher echelons of involvement. Actions performed collectively bring people together, promote freedom, equality, spontaneity and a creation of informal ties. Collective actions are usually accompanied by noise which integrates the community to the further extent. Noise in its essence is non-semantic. It is the denial of the language and the meaning. The enormity of a crowd noise, however, may have a very specific context, and express very specific emotions such as gratitude, contempt, approval, derision, disagreement (Karpinska 2002). Noise releases cheerfulness, collective joy and pleasure. It rips off the boundaries and social limits.

Based on the above discussion, the following research propositions are thus suggested:

*P4: noise will moderate the effect of *communitas**

*P5: crowd will moderate the effect of *communitas**

*P6: actions performed collectively will moderate the effect of *communitas**

*P7: sense of unusual will moderate the effect of *communitas*.*

### **Implications for Practice and Further Research**

This paper represents another step in the discussion on the significance of anthropology in consumer research. From an anthropological viewpoint, this article suggests a theoretical concept of how play actually drives involvement in consumer-related situations. A number of research propositions is set forward, and even though they are in need of empirical validation, there can be drawn several practical implications. Firstly, companies should consider introducing play into their marketing actions in a way that is consistent with cultural contexts of consumer behavior, as this might become an effective solution to achieve better consumer involvement indicators. Even though this conclusion may be regarded as too simplistic, many managers exploit a very limited number of play mechanisms (mainly 'competition' and 'rewards') which does not result in enduring involvement on players' part. Secondly, applying a category of *communitas* provides some interesting insights on community building mechanisms. Inferring from the theoretical explanations discussed in this paper, one

might conclude that durability of communities created at the events or other playful occasions has been long overestimated by marketing managers. Heavy investments in building groups of loyal attenders might prove irrelevant, if the effect of *communitas* is expected only at the duration of a marketing event.

This article unfolds a wide spectrum of possibilities and contexts for research. While no predications were made with regard to the relative strength of particular play mechanisms and *communitas* moderators, the subsequent research might offer relevant studies which would cover these areas. There are also certain play aspects that so far has not been fully examined, and thus a number of questions exists regarding the effect of play on consumer involvement, for example: how durable the play effect is? How long it takes for consumers to feel attracted to play? How many successful vs. unsuccessful attempts it takes to feel bored with play? What constitutes a long-term playful experience? With growing importance of internet and social media, it is the applicability of *communitas* to online environments that would constitute another interesting research area. Finally, the effect of *communitas* on subsequent consumer behavior may also be assessed in future empirical works regarding diverse categories of events i.e. sports, cultural, social, political and charitable events e.g. political elections, Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy) or the Noble Gift charitable action (Szlachetna Paczka) in Poland.

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