How do we explain that on the one hand consumers spend billions of dollars every year on analgesics and opioids, while on the other hand exhausting and painful experiences such as obstacle races and ultra-marathons are gaining in popularity? In the article Selling Pain to the Saturated Self, published by Oxford University Press on behalf of Journal of Consumer Research, researchers from Cardiff University, Nanyang Technological University and Kedge Business School set about trying to understand this conundrum: why do people pay for an experience that is deliberately marketed as painful?

Tough Mudder is an adventure challenge involving a series of approximately 25 military-style obstacles that participants have to overcome in half a day: running through torrents of mud, plunging into freezing water and even crawling through 10,000 volts of electric wires. Injuries have included spinal damage, strokes, heart attacks, and even death.

Yet as of 2016, over 2.5 million participants have entered the challenge since launching in 2010. Tough Mudder, created by Will Dean, employs 150 staff who will produce 120 events in 11 countries with 500,000 people taking part in 2016.

Through extensive ethnographic research, the research team discovered that pain helps individuals deal with the reduced physicality of office life. Through sensory intensification, pain brings the body into sharp focus, allowing participants who spend much of their time sitting in front of computers, to rediscover their corporeality.

In addition, pain facilitates escape. Pain provides a temporary relief from the burdens of self-awareness. Electric shocks and ice-cold water may be painful but they also allow participants to escape from the demands and anxieties of modern life.

Finally, by leaving marks and wounds, painful experience help us create the story of a fulfilled life spent exploring the limits of the body. The proliferation of GoPro and YouTube videos recording painful experience such as Tough Mudder happens at least partly because a fulfilled life also means exploring the body in its various possibilities.

According to Bernard Cova, professor of marketing at KEDGE Business School, “Tough Mudder revolutionizes experiential marketing by selling pain as a central dimension, where until now we were selling the opposite, pleasure. The great strength of Tough Mudder is also to have a perfect community approach. The community begins in the offer.”

In a recent interview, Jerome Hiquet, Chief Marketing Officer at Tough Mudder Inc. and KEDGE’s Alumni, declared “Tough Mudder has pivoted from an events-first company into a leading active lifestyle brand”.


About Journal of Consumer Research:
Founded in 1974, the Journal of Consumer Research publishes scholarly research that describes and explains
consumer behavior. Empirical, theoretical, and methodological articles spanning fields such as psychology, marketing, sociology, economics, communications, and anthropology are featured in this interdisciplinary journal. The primary thrust of JCR is academic, rather than managerial, with topics ranging from micro-level processes (such as brand choice) to more macro-level issues (such as the development of materialistic values). 2015 Impact Factor: 3.187

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Dr Bernard Cova holds a doctorate in management sciences, and is a research professor in marketing and consumer sociology at KEDGE Business School. Initiator of tribal approaches to marketing, he is the author of research articles that have strongly influenced the renewal of marketing theory and practice. Bernard Cova is member of The KEDGE Business School Marketing Center of Excellence which focuses on the one hand on organizations and markets (Business-to-Business Marketing, B2B), and on the other hand on consumers and consumption (Business to Consumer Marketing, B2C).

About KEDGE Business School:
KEDGE Business School is a French management school with 4 campuses in France (Paris, Bordeaux, Marseille, and Toulon), 2 in China (Shanghai, Suzhou) and 4 associated campuses (Avignon, Bastia, Bayonne, Dakar). The KEDGE BS community counts 12,000 students (including 25% foreign students), 196 full-time faculty members (44% of which are international), 300 international academic partners and 50,000 alumni across the world. With a portfolio of 31 programmes in management for students and executives, KEDGE Business School also develops customised educational programmes for specific corporate needs worldwide. #33 European Business Schools and #22 EMBA worldwide in Financial Times rankings, KEDGE Business School is AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA accredited and a member of the French Conférence des Grandes Ecoles. kedge.edu - @kedgebs - Facebook/kedgebs

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