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Love Affair With Thin Air: Mortality, Mastery, and the Consumerism of Mountaineering

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ABSTRACT

Mountaineering is arguably one of the most dangerous recreational challenges an individual may ever choose to undertake, yet millions of people annually venture above 8000 feet to challenge themselves in pursuit of personal goals, ideals, and support of individual values. But, why are consumers motivated to participate in such demanding and hazardous pursuits? This paper evaluates the psychological complexities surrounding adventure tourism as an act of consumerism, uncovering the pursuit of values, ideals, and identity transformation that is guided by one's own mortality salience. The present study seeks to examine consumer satisfaction beyond the simple pleasures of adventure and adrenaline to develop a theoretical explanation for the deep-residing fulfillment that can emerge from a demanding and inherently dangerous endeavor. Employing a qualitative methodology and a Terror Management Theory framework, we illustrate how mountaineers find meaning, derive satisfaction, and reform their identities from their pursuits. Findings support both our theoretical understanding of mortality salient experiences and support managerial implications for those practitioners seeking to enhance the value consumers in this domain will receive.

1 | Introduction

Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my compadres dallied to memorialize their arrival at the apex of the planet, unfurling flags and snapping photos, using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. Nobody suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter.– Krakauer 1997.

In his book *Into Thin Air* (1997), adventure journalist Jon Krakauer chronicles the events of a May 10, 1996 ascent of Mt. Everest and its catastrophic conclusion leading to the demise of eight climbers trapped within a massive storm. Krakauer's story of adventure and chaos produced a non-fiction best seller and a film adaptation, but the story is far from a novel experience. Mountain climbers (mountaineers) experience extreme changes in temperature, humidity, and barometric pressure, in addition to hurricane-force winds and solar radiation. Given the level of technical proficiency and fitness required from the participants, mountaineering has often been referred to as one of the most difficult physical and mental human challenges on the planet (Windsor et al. 2009). Despite these perilous conditions found at the world's highest elevations, adventurists continue to flock to the world's most dangerous mountain regions.

Mountaineering is an adventure sport that involves a combination of hiking, backpacking, ice climbing, and rock climbing to reach the summit of a mountain peak; it is arguably one of the most dangerous recreational challenges an individual may ever choose to undertake. Mount Everest, for example, has claimed one life out of every 13 successful climbs to its summit,

with the death toll climbing in percentage in recent years (Arnette 2023). It is not difficult to comprehend the extent of potential dangers facing mountaineers.

This paper introduces a new lens for understanding consumer outcomes from extreme recreation and adventure tourism activities: mountaineering as a form of mortality-buffered identity construction. Prior research has focused largely on thrill-seeking, peak performance, or momentary emotional rewards (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Buckley 2012; Celsi et al. 1993), yet these frameworks may overlook deeper, more enduring psychological drivers that draw individuals to mountaineering again and again. Using Terror Management Theory (TMT), we examine how climbers derive long-term satisfaction and self-worth not through adrenaline highs or symbolic conquest, but through preparation, cultural assimilation, and strategic risk mitigation. In this view, the climb becomes a symbolic proving ground where individuals affirm values, identity, and self-worth in the face of death.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we extend the adventure tourism literature by shifting the focus from short-term thrill to long-term identity transformation, revealing how climbers reconstruct meaning across the full arc of the mountaineering experience—before, during, and after the ascent. Second, we offer a qualitative, applied extension of TMT within a consumer context, showing how mortality salience is not only episodic, but sustained throughout the entire recreational practice. Third, we identify a subcultural value system that governs mountaineering, wherein success is reframed away from reaching the summit to acting with discipline, preparedness, and humility. We offer new insight into symbolic consumption and extraordinary experiences.

In the sections that follow, we review relevant literature on peak experience, transcendent consumption, and TMT. We then describe our ethnographic approach and present four core themes that trace the psychological and symbolic development of the mountaineer. Our findings culminate in a model of identity transformation that sheds light on how consumers find meaning, manage existential fear, and reaffirm who they are in the face of profound danger.

2 | Conceptual Foundation

2.1 | Adventure Tourism in the Literature

Adventure tourism is defined within the literature as an activity that "takes place in unusual, exotic, remote or wild places and usually involves a lot of activity for the participants, mainly outdoors" (Ritpanitchajchaval 2023, pg. 1). To be considered "adventure tourism," the activity must encompass two out of the three elements: physical activity, the natural environment, and cultural immersion (Rantala et al. 2018). Notably, adventure tourism both challenges the participant and often results in unexpected self-realization (Weber 2001), with adventures often including elements such as uncertain outcomes, dangerous and risky situations, escapism and separation from routine, exploration and discovery of new places, and contrasting emotions (Mu and Nepal 2016).

Scholarship on mountaineering and adventure tourism highlights the concepts of rush and edgework as key motivators that initially draw individuals to high-risk recreational activities. Rush refers to a rare, intense, and often addictive form of excitement distinct from general sensation seeking. It is characterized as "a particular kind of excitement associated with the physical performance of a specific adventure activity, at the limits of individual capability, under highly favorable circumstances, by a person who is already skilled and trained in the activity concerned" (Buckley 2012, p. 963). While not inherently linked to life-threatening situations, rush frequently arises in contexts where the stakes are high and danger is present. Closely related is edgework, a psychological phenomenon often also discussed within recreational drug use, in which individuals intentionally approach the boundary between control and chaos, balancing on the edge of death while striving to maintain mastery over the situation (Lyng and Snow 1986; Lyng 1990).

Within the marketing literature, adventure tourism can be classified as an extraordinary consumption experience. These experiences are characterized as significant events that trigger an elevated level of emotional intensity and involve high states of interpersonal interaction (Arnould and Price 1993; Orazi and van Laer 2023; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Extraordinary experiences are a special case of hedonic consumption where spontaneous, unrehearsed activities are typical, and the felt experiences are deemed to be authentic by participants. These types of experiences are often seen to be an escape or liberation from the structure of everyday life (Hosany et al. 2022). They stimulate an opportunity for spiritual awakening, personal growth, and renewal, and ultimately, they offer the potential of a life-altering transformation (Maslow 1962; Schouten et al. 2007).

Extraordinary experiences—distinct from ordinary customer encounters (Heinonen and Lipkin 2023)—are often defined by intense emotional states, deep absorption, and enduring personal impact. These experiences align closely with the constructs of flow (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2014) and peak experience (Maslow 1962). Flow occurs when individuals are fully immersed in an activity, losing track of time and self-consciousness, while peak experiences evoke joy, awe, and a sense of transcendence (Boudreau et al. 2020; Privette 1983). In adventure contexts like skydiving or mountaineering, participants describe moments where "nothing else exists in the world but that moment itself" (Celsi et al. 1993, p. 11), reinforcing the sense of spiritual and emotional significance.

Importantly, the impact of these experiences extends beyond the individual. Extraordinary experiences are frequently shaped by the communal and symbolic environment in which they unfold. As Orazi and van Laer (2023) suggest, what often distinguishes these moments is the camaraderie and shared meaning among participants. The sense of collective escape and identity transformation, seen in contexts like Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) or wilderness retreats (Giddy and Webb 2018), highlights how extraordinary experiences are constructed through both internal emotional states and external social dynamics. The bonds formed within these immersive settings contribute to the lasting personal significance of the experience.

What's more, these heightened moments are classified as transcendent customer experiences (TCEs) (Schouten et al. 2007), which elicit transformation, self-awareness, and a deep sense of meaning. Our findings suggest that in mountaineering, TCEs are not merely about the thrill of the climb or the spectacle of nature. Instead, they reflect a commitment to a worldview that values preparation, risk management, and symbolic goal pursuit. Fulfillment in this domain arises not from adrenaline or conquest alone, but from identity formation through disciplined practice, shared purpose, and existential reflection in the face of mortality.

2.2 | Symbolic Immortality and Terror Management Theory

All living species have an instinct for self-preservation, yet humans alone have the cognitive capacity to conceptually understand both life and death (Becker 1973; Pyszczynski et al. 1997). It seems paradoxical that a culture would pursue risk for leisure, but at the same time purchase health insurance, require the use of seat belts, and emphasize the importance of safe sex. However, Becker (1973) explains that humans' insistence on survival is embedded in a cognitive, symbolic defense against death.

Becker posits that people seek to deliver meaning from personal existence and that the only way to conquer the undeniable end to our physical self is to create a lasting and significant symbolic self to transcend our natural lives. In this sense, humans can see the validity in bravery, heroism, and willingness to fight and die for one's beliefs. While it is not possible to reach physical immortality, an individual may be able to achieve symbolic immortality by leading an existence filled with meaning and purpose. For a mountaineer, meaning is often found through the understanding and acceptance of the activity's values and dangers. These challenges and jeopardies associated with the sport are simply part of the process of forming identity, finding a purpose, and ultimately reaching significance.

Building on Becker (1973) work, TMT (Pyszczynski et al. 1997) explains the human pursuit of purpose and significance as a response to mortality awareness. TMT posits that cultural worldviews help manage existential fear by providing meaning, order, and psychological defense against death reminders (Becker 1973; Das et al. 2014; Pyszczynski et al. 1997). Solomon et al. (1991) describe worldviews as symbolic constructs that offer a shared reality, allowing individuals to find self-esteem and a sense of permanence beyond the self.

TMT comprises two primary components (Greenberg et al. 2003). The mortality salience hypothesis explores how reminders of death influence behavior by activating cultural worldview defenses, prompting individuals to align with their accepted values to derive meaning (Jin and Ryu 2022). The anxiety buffer hypothesis posits that self-esteem, derived from adherence to cultural norms, mitigates anxiety triggered by mortality salience. By reinforcing their worldview, individuals strengthen their self-worth, reducing death-related distress. Empirical studies demonstrate that those with high self-esteem or recent self-esteem boosts report lower anxiety in response to mortality cues (Lifshin et al. 2021; Rossi et al. 2020).

TMT studies support the view that mortality salience pushes individuals toward cultural structure and leads to greater self-esteem. As behaviors become consistent with an established worldview and self-esteem increases, an individual's ability to mitigate the anxiety felt toward mortality salient stimuli increases as well. Death is a realistic consequence of participation in a dangerous activity such as mountaineering. While many steps are taken to mitigate the associated risks and make it as safe as possible, the potential for death is well understood by participants; mortality salience is constantly present, and the worldview defense mechanism is continually active throughout the experience.

Within the context of mountaineering, self-esteem should increase as climbers' behaviors converge upon the mountaineering culture. Preparation for - and proper execution of – learned mountaineering skills confirm a participant's worth within the community, and the experience of increased self-esteem will alleviate some of the anxiety felt as a consequence to awareness of the potential hazards in the activity. The pervasive danger involved in a pursuit such as mountaineering continually activates mortality salience and stimulates the need for cultural structure; mountaineers feel an intrinsic desire to fit in with the subculture's accepted principles and practices such as risk mitigation and proper preparation. As a mountaineer's behaviors begin to exemplify the cultural worldview, we expect the apprehension and anxiety experienced due to dangers within the activity to decrease and allow the individual to take on greater challenges (see Figure 1 below).

3 | Methods

3.1 | Context: Mountaineering on Mount Rainier

The present study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach using both ethnographic observations and depth interviews, with one of the authors completing the trek to the summit. This methodology allows for the identification of themes and the advancement of a model to be used for future studies (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). The informants for this study participated in a climbing expedition as clients of Rainier Mountaineering Inc. (RMI), a guide company headquartered outside of Mount Rainier National Park in Ashford, Washington. The mountain guiding industry is both highly competitive and expensive (Krakauer 1997), where clients will pay anywhere between $3000 for a mountain such as Rainier (Alpine Ascents International 2024) and an average of $60,000 to participate in an expedition to Mount Everest (Expedreview 2024). These expenditures comprise guiding services only, and do not include other expenses such as gear, food, or transportation to the mountain, which can add an additional $30,000 to the required expenses (Arnette 2024).

Mount Rainier is an active stratovolcano about 54 miles southeast of Seattle. Rainier is the highest peak of the Cascade Mountain Range (14,411 ft.) and is considered by the

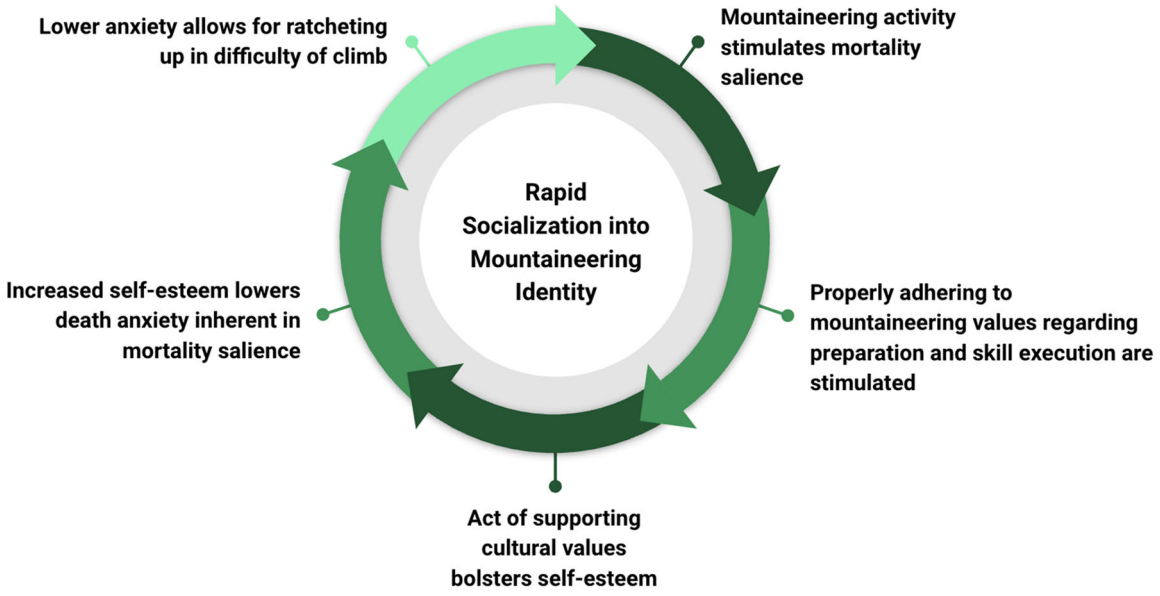

FIGURE 1 | Identity development in adventure tourism activity.

mountaineering community to be the most strenuous physical test within the contiguous United States. It is a heavily glaciated and challenging trek that has claimed numerous lives since the park was established in 1899, with the worst accident occurring in 1981 when a massive ice fall swept 11 climbers to their death in a 70 foot deep crevasse (Hatcher 2000). The dangers of this type of trek are very real and were well understood by the author and all other participants in the expedition.

On the day before the expedition, all participants met at RMI headquarters. After preliminary introductions, RMI representatives led a series of brief meetings to go over the details of the expedition and to perform equipment checks. At this time participants were given an opportunity to rent or purchase any additional items needed for the climb.

On Day One of the climb, 21 mountaineers (17 clients and four guides) began the expedition with a 4.5-mile climb up to Camp Muir, a snowy tent village nestled into the side of the mountain at 10,080 feet. Most of the clients had undertaken many months of physical and cardiovascular training to prepare for the climb, but there were still many essential mountaineering skills that could be taught only while on the mountain. This training lasted 3 days and included the use of all necessary equipment, knot tying, and skills necessary to self-arrest (stopping oneself with an ice ax) in the event of a fall. The primary purposes of the training were to provide the clients with the skills to maximize safety and efficiency, while also allowing the clients' bodies to acclimate to the unusually high altitude.

On the fourth day, the entire team made an attempt on the summit, and the mountaineers used their technical training to successfully ascend the 14,410 ft. peak of Mount Rainier. Because of the ever changing and unpredictable weather conditions at the world's highest elevations—coupled with lower oxygen levels and increased fatigue—it was imperative that the climbers began their descent soon after the summit was reached. Furthermore, climbing becomes increasingly more dangerous as the day wears on due to the melting of icy surfaces; thus, the climbers were allowed only a short period of time on the summit to take photographs and reflect upon their accomplishment before beginning the trek back down to Camp Muir.

3.2 | Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnography has been used in previous explorations into sport subcultures (Celsi et al. 1993; Ferguson et al. 2020; Orazi and van Laer 2023; Schneider et al. 2007); one critical advantage of this approach is the ability for an interviewer to engage respondents with context-specific questions. The interviewer can empathize with the experiences, build relationships with respondents, and thus elicit more vivid and candid responses from the informants. Specifically, one author traveled to Mount Rainier where he spent 5 days with 21 other adventurists before ultimately reaching the summit. Through this participation, the researcher was able to utilize notes, experiences, and personal relationships to develop and gather unique, rich contextual data. Data for this study was collected via digital sources from community blogs and mainstream press outlets, field notes, photographs, videotapes, participant observation, casual conversations, and ultimately, through formal depth interviews (see Table 1).

The depth interviews were conducted approximately 5 months after the climbing expedition. A total of eight depth interviews (all males) were audio-taped and then transcribed by a third party. Several of the original participants did not complete the full excursion and were not included in the final set of interviews, including (1) a climber who fell down the icy surface, badly injuring his knee and was subsequently airlifted via helicopter to a hospital, (2) a climber who began hallucinating and experiencing altitude sickness as a result of insufficient hydration, and (3) a climber who was unable to reach the summit as a consequence of a lack of conditioning and was forced to retreat back to Camp Muir. The study participants were from a variety of backgrounds and had a range of climbing

TABLE 1 | Summary of data sources.

Description	Source	Dataset	Purpose	General findings
Nonparticipant netnography	Consumer forums & message boards for mountaineering (e.g., Reddit)	10 community forums totaling 189 pages of content	Broad and collective understanding of cultural values and norms across a broader context of mountaineering. Expansive communities beyond experiences on Mount Rainier	Five prominent themes emerge across both public outlets, to include: 1. Importance of nutrition and packing for sustenance 2. Gradual progression, skill development, & preparedness 3. Community knowledge and terminology 4. Equipment recommendations 5. Safety and knowing limits
Mainstream press	Popular press articles on mountaineering, including advice, instructional resources, and general information stores	12 articles, guides, or blog posts totaling 191 pages of content	Mainstream communications of extreme sporting experience to general population audiences; Understanding mainstream guides for all levels and experiences of mountaineering	
Ethnographic interviews & field notes	8 participants on Mount Rainier climbing expedition	See Table 2—117 pages of transcribed interviews	Understanding lived experiences, development and understanding of values and behaviors related to specific mountaineering experience	3 prominent themes emerge within the experience and subsequent interviews, to include: 1. Adequate preparation for the excursion physically and mentally, as well as with knowledge and equipment 2. Calculation and mitigation of risk 3. Accomplishing a long term goal
Lived ethnography	1 author on Mount Rainier climbing expedition	Personal experience		

experience (see Table 2). Each respondent was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and consent was received via IRB protocol. All the mountaineers in this trek survived problems they encountered and successfully made it off the mountain.

The semi-structured interviews were informal, conversational in nature, and conducted by the author that successfully completed the expedition. We used narrative interviewing to understand how our participants experienced the total journey of mountaineering following Richardson (1990, p. 126) reasoning: "When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations, not logical-scientific categorical ones. It is the way individuals understand their own lives and best understand the lives of others." Narrative-based interviews give scholars a window into both the intersection of identity formation via personal experiences (McAdams and McLean 2013) and breaks through assumptions about how the world works and should work (McCracken 1988). The intent was to uncover the motivating factors behind risky recreation, to better understand where fulfillment is derived within the sport of mountaineering, and to better understand identity formation within niche consumer subgroups.

Following long interview techniques (McCracken 1988), we first asked participants "Why do you climb?" The interviews were then guided along five main queries: values, self-esteem, experience, danger, and satisfaction. Questions were designed to be open-ended and served as talking points for the respondents (Interview guide provided as Supporting Information S1). Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their descriptions and feelings about the climbing experience.

We analyzed the 117 single-spaced transcript pages using an interpretive approach, through which the one author who participated in the climbing expedition critically analyzed his own experiences alongside the narrative responses of the eight additional participants. The additional members on the research team critically analyzed the transcripts, as well, identifying emergent themes. After reviewing independently, the research team met to discuss identified themes in relation to the research objectives, comparing overlapping interpretations. Throughout our analysis, we referred to the interdisciplinary literature on extreme recreational sports, as well as triangulated our data through netnography techniques (Kozinets 2015). Observing and analyzing public sources of consumer discourse and engagement provided enriched perspectives on our own ethnographic experiences, as well as offered greater validity within our findings.

Leveraging both online community forums, such as Reddit and specific mountaineering message boards, as well as mainstream articles and blog posts from thought leaders in the mountaineering space, we added 380 pages of information across 22 unique sources to our dataset. Similar to the work conducted by Ferguson et al. (2020), this further allowed the nonparticipating members of the research team to more fully immerse themselves into the context of mountaineering.

4 | Findings

Analysis of interviews and digital sources revealed how deeply embedded mountaineering values are within the climbing subculture, aligning with the TMT framework. Individuals are driven to adopt the values and customs of their identified cultural subgroup, especially when mortality is salient. This alignment enhances self-esteem and fosters a sense of meaning and fulfillment. Contrary to initial assumptions, participants derived identity not from the completion of the climb (i.e., summiting), but from navigating its inherent challenges.

As participants progressed through the mountaineering experience, their narratives revealed four distinct, yet interconnected, themes that illuminate how personal fulfillment and identity transformation unfold in this high-risk pursuit. Viewed through the lens of TMT, these themes chart a psychological journey shaped by mortality salience, cultural assimilation, and self-esteem enhancement. From initial motivations to a redefinition of success, each theme reflects a deeper integration into the mountaineering worldview. The following sections explore these themes in turn, tracing how climbers construct meaning and reshape their sense of self through the demands of the climb. See Figure 2.

4.1 | Foundational Motivations: Constructing Meaning Before the Experience

Undeniably, the motivations for pursuing the given mountaineering experiences differed across participants. Across all

TABLE 2 | Participants' demographic information.

Participants' given pseudonyms	Age	Geographical location	Occupation	Years of climbing experience
Paul	60	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	Pathologist	35 Years
Joe	21	Bloomington, Indiana	Student	4 Years
Rick	39	Houston, Texas	Chief financial officer	Less than 1 Year
Robert	60	Bonita, California	Part-time commercial fisherman	5 Years
Edgar	38	Seattle, Washington	Software design engineer and tester	Less than 1 Year
Eli	24	Las Vegas, Nevada	Mountain guide	6 Years
Alan	26	Tempe, Arizona	Solar panel installer	2 Years
Jeremy	39	Houston, Texas	attorney	Less than 1 Year

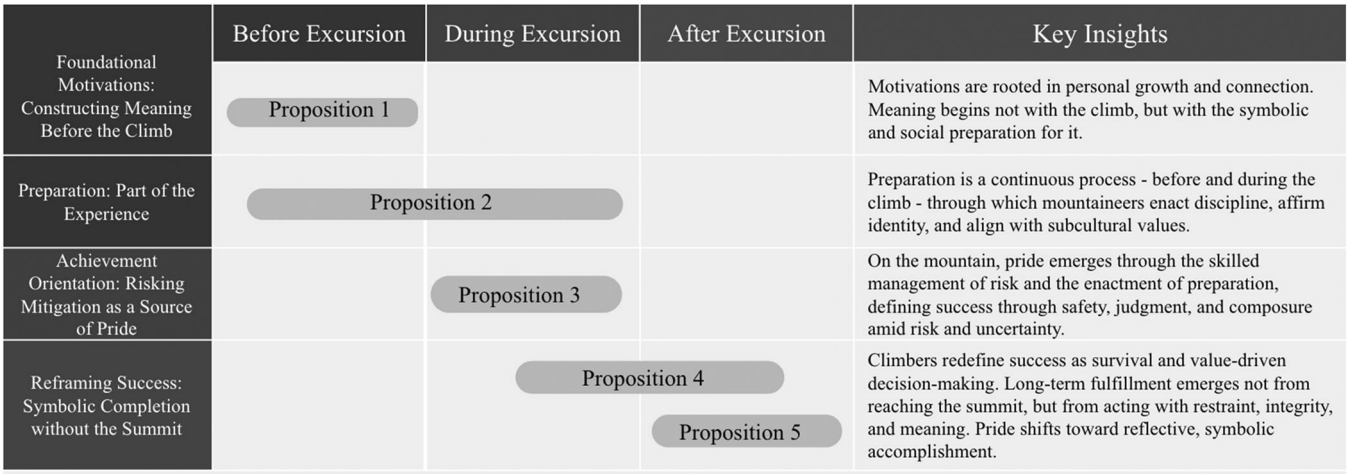

FIGURE 2 | Mountaineering as a mortality-salient identity journey.

participants, motivations to pursue mountaineering were deeply personal, yet consistently anchored in a symbolic pursuit of meaning. One participant embarked to gain a closer relationship with his father-in-law (Joe), another for the development of camaraderie with like-minded others (Jeremy), and, of course, many were eager for the physical challenge. These were not thrill-seekers chasing adrenaline; rather, they were individuals confronting mortality through purpose-driven goals that affirmed identity, fostered connection, and restored control—all central tenets of TMT (Becker 1973; Pyszczynski et al. 1997).

Many participants used the climb as a structured vehicle for personal change. Jeremy, for instance, spoke of shedding 50 pounds in preparation for the expedition. This transformation wasn't cosmetic, it was existential. His desire "not to be a burden" speaks to a deeper need to reclaim agency in the face of aging, complacency, or perceived inadequacy:

> *This trip served a dual purpose as a goal knowing that I was going to have a lot of time, effort, money and expense involved in this trip and I wanted to go and enjoy myself and be a meaningful participating member of the group, as well as not kind of be a burden, so I knew that I needed to get into shape. So kind of getting up and getting down was the culmination of 6 months' worth of hard work and effort on my behalf to even be there in the first place.*

This aligns with Becker's concept of symbolic self-preservation; through rigorous preparation, Jeremy enacted a narrative of self-discipline that affirmed his value in the eyes of others and himself. In this way, the mountain served as a confrontation with mortality, mediated through physical mastery.

For others, the climb was a means of affirming and developing personal relationships. Joe described his most meaningful experience not as reaching the summit, but sharing the moment with his father-in-law, noting "to accomplish something with someone you're close to and care about—it means a lot more." Climbing thus became a site of legacy building and a shared challenge that created lasting memories. Participants like Paul and Rick similarly spoke about mountaineering as a vehicle for familial connection, passing down values, and creating stories that would outlast the moment itself. This reflects a core TMT principle in that humans manage existential anxiety by embedding themselves in enduring relationships and cultural narratives (Solomon et al. 2015).

Several climbers, especially those newer to the sport, expressed a desire to "prove themselves," not to others, but to a higher personal standard. Alan, for example, spoke passionately about pushing his body "to see what it can do." For him, Rainier was not a destination, but rather a proving ground, stating: "I like the process... the skill, the hobby, the fun, the people... It's not about adrenaline. I like the work that goes into it." His emphasis on doing it right, with skill, caution, and intentionality, reveals a powerful moral orientation. Success was not about reaching the summit, but about being the kind of person who is worthy of doing so. This aligns with the anxiety-buffer hypothesis in TMT, as self-worth is derived from adherence to cultural ideals, such as preparation, humility, and mastery (Pyszczynski et al. 1997).

Proposition 1. *Mountaineering is a meaning-making pursuit where climbers' motivations are driven by personal growth, relational bonds, and alignment with a disciplined worldview.*

While the motivations for mountaineering were deeply personal and varied, participants came together on a shared belief that success on the mountain is earned long before the climb begins. The aspiration to summit, often merely symbolic, was preceded by a period of intense, multi-dimensional preparation. This preparatory phase emerged not just as a prerequisite for participation, but as a meaningful and fulfilling part of the journey. We turn next to the ways in which climbers derived satisfaction, identity, and self-esteem from the act of preparing itself.

4.2 | Preparation: Part of Experience

For mountaineers, the journey begins long before stepping onto the glacier. Preparation is not simply a prerequisite to the climb; it is an intentional and identity-affirming process shaped by the ever-present awareness of mortality. Participants spoke of preparation in terms that mirrored ritual, discipline, and duty, reflecting a profound symbolic response to death salience. Rather than thrill-seeking or escapism, climbers described their preparation as a way of constructing self-worth, reducing existential uncertainty, and asserting alignment with the values of the mountaineering subculture.

Preparation was multifaceted, encompassing physical training, education, equipment selection, and mental conditioning. Each dimension functioned as a tangible expression of cultural assimilation. As Edgar explained, "It took a lot of planning, it took a lot of work... I'd planned that trip for about 8, 9 months... That was the bigger, the more satisfying part. It's not something you can just get up and go do one morning." For Edgar and others, preparation was not a burden, but rather part of the experience. By investing months in training, research, and gear readiness, participants began to inhabit the identity of a mountaineer before ever setting foot on the mountain.

This preparatory process was described not only as necessary, but as enjoyable. Robert noted that much of the preparation he undertakes in his professional and personal life carried over to the preparation for his summit attempt on Rainier:

> *The preparation for me is fun. Like when I prepare for [trips], just kind of getting things organized, getting things ready, making sure we've got all our transfers and all this stuff. That's part of the fun part of the trip anyway, too. Or if I'm going on a major fishing trip out in the ocean on my boat, I gotta make sure everything's ready and that the boat's running properly and radios are all working and everything. And the same thing with the mountaineering stuff, making sure your gear is all right, you have the right clothes and that everything's good.*

In this sense, preparation served as a form of anxiety buffering—a way to assert control, competence, and order in the face of uncertainty. In line with TMT's anxiety buffer hypothesis, preparation became a symbolic defense mechanism through which climbers could construct and affirm their value (Pyszczynski et al. 1997).

Just as strongly, participants expressed frustration for those who violated this ethos. Edgar recounted his frustration with a friend who approached Rainier with inferior gear and an overconfident attitude:

> *I had a friend who tried climbing Rainier back in July and he was the kind of mountaineer that I will never be. He was trying to go cheap on gear. We had the ski goggles up there that were, they would fit pretty snug to keep wind out of your eyes. Well he just had a pair of regular glacier glasses that had some foam padding around the sides, he's like "those are good enough." I'm like, "well, I don't know, why don't you go drive 50 miles an hour in a rain storm and stick your head out the window, let's see how they feel." You know, he just kept, he was so excited about the climb and I was like, "you know, you've got a wife and a couple of kids, including a newborn."*

Through Edgar's comment, we see preparation reframed not as a matter of competence alone, but of morality. Many of the climbers spent months—some more than a year—to train, research, and study for their challenge. This process fostered excitement and motivation, especially as the expedition time drew nearer. However, an unprepared individual endangers himself, as well as the lives of others who have properly trained and equipped themselves. Within the mountaineering worldview, being underprepared is not just risky, but it is ethically wrong. A lack of preparation was perceived as a violation of the communal code, endangering not only the self, but others.

For many, satisfaction came not from needing to use their skills, but from knowing they could. As Robert reflected:

> *I've got these skills and continue to practice them if something happens, (but) I don't need it to happen to be fulfilling. I've been, like I said, I've always been dealing with stuff in the ocean and I've been in some real nasty things that you wouldn't want to, actually never want to be in. But because I've practiced or I've read and I've been with guys who have done some of these things and managed to maneuver around it or get through it, that was very fulfilling that you could do that, that you could get through something like that. Like whether it was a rock fall or a crevasse opening, heck yeah, that would be something that you actually did it rather than just practiced it. But I wouldn't want to wish for it to happen. If it happened, hopefully I could recall the skills and weather through that.*

Preparedness itself became a source of pride that represented symbolic immortality achieved through mastery, discipline, readiness, and even enjoyment. Our participants spoke openly about the enjoyment of the learning and preparation process, including

joining subcommunities, collecting and reading books on the experience, and gaining physical and mental strength in anticipation of achieving a goal that felt bigger than oneself. Importantly, the desire was not to engage in danger, but to be ready for it. Climbers recognized that certain risks, such as avalanches, rock falls, and crevasse openings, could not be eliminated, but as Paul put it, "Your response and reaction to the forces are controllable."

This ethos was mirrored in our netnographic data. Across online forums and instructional materials, guidance was overwhelmingly focused on proper planning, equipment, nutrition, and skill development. Novices were encouraged to integrate into the mountaineering community by adopting its practices, language, and preparation rituals. In these spaces, cultural assimilation begins long before the ascent. Learning the rules, training the body, and selecting the right gear were all seen as steps toward symbolic membership.

Proposition 2. *Preparation and execution—physical, mental, educational, and logistical—is not just about readiness, but a ritualized expression of identity, values, and control over mortality.*

Preparation, then, was not merely a task to be completed, it was an expression of identity and a moral obligation within the climbing subculture. However, preparation alone does not eliminate risk. Once on the mountain, climbers must translate training into real-time decision-making, often under conditions of fatigue, uncertainty, and danger. It is when risk meets response that participants expressed a distinct source of pride: the ability to mitigate danger through competent action. In the next theme, we explore how climbers framed achievement not as the avoidance of danger, but as mastery over it through calculated, skillful engagement.

4.3 | Achievement Orientation: Risk Mitigation as a Source of Pride

The third theme of identity formation highlights mountaineers' pride in their ability to assess, prepare for, and mitigate risk. As discussed previously, climbers devote extensive time to training to reduce their vulnerability to danger, signaling an achievement orientation among the group. But, unlike thrill-seeking pursuits where danger is embraced for its own sake (Carter 2019), mountaineering values control over danger, confronting risk only to the extent that it can be anticipated and managed. Mountaineers invest in a considerable amount of training to properly mitigate unforeseen dangers and ensure safety; at times, execution of their preparedness is necessary.

Mountaineering is distinct from thrill-based activities where danger is the reward. Here, risk is neither avoided nor embraced, but rather strategically engaged. Participants described a deeply internalized ethic of risk mitigation as both achievement and obligation. Joe, for instance, recounted falling down a slope after misjudging a crevasse jump. The incident could have ended in catastrophe, but he was able to self-arrest, executing a technique practiced days earlier:

> *There were points on the descent... I felt physically out of control... I think the fall was a combination of physical ineptness as well as freak circumstances... I think that fall really made me want to go back and climb some more. It gives me a desire to go back and do it the right way.*

Joe's experience was terrifying, but he exuded pride in his behavior in this situation. He was happy with his mental preparation and execution of the learned skills, but also expressed his desire to return and further perfect his climbing skills. By aligning with culturally prescribed ideals (in this case, preparedness and control), individuals restore symbolic self-worth and mitigate the existential anxiety triggered by mortality salience. Though he temporarily lost physical control, the ability to recover through skillful action reaffirmed his alignment with mountaineering values.

Participants' satisfaction was not tied to the absence of danger, but rather to their ability to manage it. Jeremy reflected on this paradox: "A little bit of adversity and a little bit of danger makes it kind of all the more fun... but there's no mountain or no achievement in the world that's worth not coming home for." Here, danger is not glamorized. While its presence is necessary to feel tested, risk is meaningful only when it is managed and not recklessly pursued. A shift begins to emerge in the mountaineer's goal structure; success becomes less synonymous with summit attainment and, rather, defined by surviving the test of one's preparedness. As an achievement orientation takes hold, it becomes ever more present that the collective goal of the group is simply getting off the mountain alive.

Indeed, mountaineers often spoke of uncontrolled moments, such as slips, storms, and miscalculations, not as failures, but as crucibles of transformation and mandates of the mountain. These incidents complicate the linear logic of the anxiety-buffer hypothesis. For example, Joe's fall was both a failure (loss of control) and a triumph (proof of readiness). In such cases, esteem is bolstered by demonstrating resilience in the face of failure, a nuanced defense against existential fear.

This achievement orientation emerged strongly in both interview and digital data. Online communities consistently discourage impulsive risk-taking and elevate stories of calculated perseverance. The collective ethos values excellence through discipline, not bravado; mountaineers only push boundaries within the safe limits defined by training, community norms, and self-awareness. Moreover, climbers accepted that certain dangers are unavoidable. While anxiety could emerge from confronting those uncontrollables, our participants mitigated that anxiety through controlled actions of preparation, awareness, and response. As Paul explained, "Some risks are not controllable, but your response and reaction to the forces are controllable." This shift from fear to agency, exercised through skill, is central to the worldview that buffers death anxiety.

Finally, participants contextualized climbing risk within broader societal risks. Rick, a CFO, integrated his knowledge of statistics and the probability-adjusting mindset molded by his profession to calculate the controllable risks on the mountain:

> *We're very comfortable with driving... but what, some 40-something 1000 people die per year of car wrecks... I*

felt like it was a somewhat of a risk-adjusted risk by climbing.

Rick's comments suggest a rationalization strategy, reframing mountaineering as a more conscious and prepared form of risk-taking than everyday life. This reframing reinforces the notion that acknowledging and managing danger becomes an arena for self-enhancement, a mechanism through which climbers defend against mortality salience by demonstrating mastery, preparedness, and control. Aligning with TMT, self-esteem is derived from being able to implement the efforts put into proper preparation, and thus it becomes part of one's value system as a mountaineer to put safety ("respecting the mountain") at the forefront of their cultural identity.

Proposition 3. *Fulfillment is derived not from avoiding danger, but from demonstrating competence in mitigating risk, affirming alignment with mountaineering cultural values.*

While the ability to manage risk and execute learned skills offered climbers a powerful sense of competence and control, this achievement was not framed as an end in itself. Rather, it became part of a broader process of identity formation, where being a mountaineer meant embodying the values of preparation, discernment, and resilience. As participants reflected on their experiences—especially in the aftermath of exertion, near-misses, or unanticipated obstacles—they often re-evaluated what it meant to "succeed" in mountaineering. The final theme captures a philosophical reorientation: one in which summiting the mountain is decentered, and fulfillment is found in reformulation of one's identity and the values enacted along the way.

4.4 | Reframing Success: Symbolic Completion Without Obtaining the Goal

At the conclusion of their expeditions—whether they reached the summit or not—participants consistently described a profound redefinition of what it means to "succeed." While summiting initially appeared to be the goal, post-climb reflections revealed a deeper truth: success in mountaineering is not found at the peak, but in the enactment of values that precede and often preclude it. Climbers found meaning in preparation, humility, and discernment. The summit, in this worldview, becomes symbolic rather than essential.

This redefinition of success reflects a deeper philosophical shift among participants, one in which the summit becomes symbolic rather than essential. As Jeremy explained, "If the summit is your only goal, then you're not—you're just not going to succeed," highlighting the broader mindset of preparedness, adaptability, and humility required for mountaineering. Edgar echoed this reframing when he reflected, "The failure would be if you don't come back," positioning survival as the true metric of achievement. Success is defined by the choices made to preserve life, apply training, and act with sound judgment, not by altitude gained.

This shift represents a cognitive and emotional maturity that often only emerges in retrospect, underscoring mountaineering as a profound exercise in value alignment and existential reflection. Thus, in accordance with TMT, the worldview of mountaineering provides a symbolic system through which individuals buffer death anxiety.

Paradoxically, this reframing is not absolute. While many climbers voiced indifference to summiting, those who failed to reach the top often expressed lingering disappointment. Paul, for instance, downplayed his non-summit, but admitted to feeling incomplete stating, "There is an element of disappointment that I didn't get to the top. It wasn't the primary objective for me, but it's certainly, I wanted to be there." This suggests a symbolic contradiction where the subculture teaches detachment, yet climbers internalize the summit as a marker of completion, remaining tethered to culturally ingrained narratives of goal fulfillment. Paul later reiterated this disappointment when asked if he would climb again saying, "Yes. I don't want to have my last mountain climb end with a failure to summit."

This tension between cultural detachment and personal desire suggests that identity in mountaineering is often negotiated. Success becomes a moving target, reframed to align with one's actions, yet never entirely free of symbolic closure. Edgar, who did summit, conveyed this when he shared his most memorable experience of the expedition:

> *Probably the most emotional experience was when we got back down to base camp. I remember I was sitting there outside the cabin where we had tied off all of our backpacks and there were four or five people there, and I turned around and just gave Casey [the head guide] a handshake and thanked him and just realized, yeah, you know, I've been looking at this mountain for 14 years now and I just reached the top of it. I've got friends who have tried to climb it and they didn't make the top, and just realizing, I just did something that is hard and not everybody can do. And, yeah, [I] kinda teared up a little bit right there.*

For Edgar, the summit was not just a peak; it was the culmination of 14 years of dreaming, sacrifice, and readiness. His emotion reveals that while subcultural values may decenter the summit, the symbolic resonance of that moment can still mark a profound personal transformation.

Some participants translated this transformation into an expanded orientation toward future challenges. While Rick expressed pride for achieving his goal of climbing Mount Rainier, at the time of the interview just months later, he was already focused on a much more challenging goal of climbing to the highest summit on each of the seven continents. He responded quickly when asked why he was not satisfied with just climbing Rainier:

> *What makes it exciting to me is accomplishing a goal. It's all about setting a goal, working toward that goal and accomplishing it. I mean, we're talking about ultimately looking at [this] being a 10-year goal. Most people just*

don't have the perseverance to achieve something that takes that long to accomplish. And that's why, I think, when you go out and you look at the people who have accomplished this goal, there are so few of them.

This "ratcheting up" of difficulty is not merely about achievement—it reflects a deeper need for meaning-making through striving. As Krakauer (1997) observed, many climbers gradually escalate their challenges to maintain existential relevance. Within TMT, this pattern reflects a symbolic immortality project. By continuing to strive, climbers affirm their identity as resilient, goal-oriented individuals capable of transcending the finality of death through effort and growth.

A subtle contradiction emerges in the data between our qualitative interviews and netnographic sources. While the online communities emphasized practical tips and safety guidelines, our direct, postexperience interviews provided for reflective, higher-order meaning-making. This contrast suggests that the full psychological depth of mountaineering may only be accessible through lived encounter and retrospective thought. As was the case, the majority of the netnographic sources accounted for discussion before the excursion, not after.

Proposition 4. *Identity reformulation and symbolic self-worth emerge through alignment with the subculture's worldview, often independent of summit success.*

Across all narratives, the core tenets of TMT were consistently evident. The ever-present risk of death activated mortality salience, leading climbers to seek peace of mind by immersing themselves in the symbolic structures of mountaineering culture. This worldview, rooted in technical competence, rigorous preparation, and risk-conscious decision-making, offered more than a code of conduct, it offered existential reassurance. By living in accordance with these values, climbers found meaning, bolstered their self-esteem, and constructed a durable sense of self in the face of danger.

Proposition 5. *Long-term fulfillment and self-esteem in mountaineering stem not from reaching the summit, but from living in accordance with the subculture's values.*

5 | Discussion

Mountaineering as adventure tourism is not new. The first successful summit of Mount Rainier was in 1870 and expeditions to tall peaks continue to become much more commercialized (Krakauer 1997). This study explores how mortality salience shapes the consumer experience of mountaineering, revealing that the journey is not driven by adrenaline or thrill, but by sustained symbolic engagement with danger, discipline, and identity. Our findings contribute to both TMT and the adventure tourism literature, highlighting how climbers derive meaning from the enactment of preparation and principled decision-making in the face of risk.

Across participants, we observed a tension between culturally available narratives of high achievement (e.g., summiting) and the lived values of mountaineers, which emphasize safety, preparation, and protection of others. While summit goals provide structure and motivation, success was reframed as making wise, value-consistent choices, even when that meant turning back. This finding adds a surprising nuance to the adventure tourism literature. In contrast to dominant narratives that emphasize thrill (Buckley 2012), euphoria (Privette 1983), or flow (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2014), mountaineering emerges here as a deeply moral undertaking, rooted in restraint rather than risk-taking.

Preparation, often seen as a means to an end in adventure contexts, was elevated to an end in itself. Participants described the preparatory phase (physical, mental, educational, and logistical) as not only enjoyable, but symbolically rich. Preparation was the process through which climbers assumed their identity, earned their place in the subculture, and mitigated fear. In this way, preparation became the practice of symbolic immortality, buffering mortality salience through worldview alignment and self-esteem bolstering.

A significant emergence was the pride climbers derived from enacting risk management, positioning control as the central source of fulfillment. Execution of learned safety skills, such as self-arrest, became critical touchpoints of identity affirmation. While the adventure tourism literature has long emphasized risk-seeking and edgework (Celsi et al. 1993; Lyng 1990), our findings suggest that climbers feel most fulfilled when fulfilling the cultural expectations of mountaineering.

Finally, our data highlight a paradox that even as climbers internalize a worldview that de-emphasizes summit attainment, the summit retains symbolic power. Many who did not reach the top expressed feelings of incompletion, even as they voiced satisfaction with their choices. This unresolved tension suggests that identity work in mountaineering is an ongoing negotiation between internalized subcultural values and external cultural narratives of success. This insight challenges conventional applications of TMT by showing that symbolic self-worth is less about achieving outcomes and more about staying true to one's values when tested by risk and uncertainty. Unlike adrenaline-driven extreme sports, mountaineering fosters a deeper, enduring relationship between climber and mountain, shaping identity through challenge and perseverance.

6 | Theoretical Implications

While our findings emerge from mountaineering, the broader contribution is how mortality salience shapes consumer identity work across domains. Our extended TMT model suggests that whenever consumers face existential threat they derive meaning not from fleeting thrill or conquest, but from disciplined preparation, alignment with subcultural values, and reframing success as symbolic achievement. This opens new avenues for marketing research and practice well beyond extreme sports.

Our findings extend TMT by conceptualizing mortality salience as a sustained and lived process that shapes identity over time, offering new insights into how consumers adapt, find meaning, and reaffirm identity across high-stakes domains. While TMT

has been widely examined for decades (Burke et al. 2010), our research contributes to the limited qualitative and extended efforts to explore the theory in applied consumer contexts. In doing so, we challenge the dominant framing of extreme recreation as a space of adrenaline, spectacle, or temporary transcendence. Instead, our findings position mortality-salient consumption as a space where fulfillment is constructed through discipline, value-aligned action, and long-term identity development.

Whereas most TMT studies focus on acute mortality primes, our findings demonstrate how chronic mortality salience can shape identity across an extended consumer journey. Consumers in our context are not reacting to sudden reminders of death; rather, they are choosing to engage with it directly, repeatedly, and often voluntarily (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). This sustained confrontation leads not only to anxiety, but also to profound identity transformation, as individuals construct meaning and worth through long-term adherence to value-driven subcultures. This process is not unique to mountaineering. Parallel dynamics may be observed in consumer domains where physical or existential threat is salient, such as health and wellness, climate-conscious lifestyles, or financial complexities. In these contexts, mortality salience similarly becomes enduring, shaping how consumers prepare, adopt cultural norms, and reaffirm their identities over time.

This study extends recent theorizing on the turbulent consumer journey (Mirabito et al. 2025), which emphasizes prolonged consumer experiences marked by uncertainty, crises, and high consequentiality. Our findings suggest that TMT provides a valuable lens for understanding these journeys, as mortality salience is not episodic, but persistent across time. In such contexts, consumption is driven by the need to grapple with existential uncertainty, reaffirm values, and construct durable identities. Consumers facing health challenges or navigating wellness regimens experience mortality salience as a chronic backdrop that shapes how they prepare, align with cultural norms, and pursue symbolic forms of mastery in their own navigation of market forces. In this way, we highlight how mortality-salient identity work unfolds across diverse domains, positioning consumption as a means of navigating uncertainty through disciplined practice, community alignment, and meaning-making in the face of existential threat.

Our study also enriches research on extraordinary consumption by offering an alternative to risk-based fulfillment models. While much prior work has emphasized thrill-seeking, flow, or transcendence (Buckley 2012; McDonald et al. 2009; Tsaur et al. 2013), our participants found meaning through structure, preparation, and community ethics. Rather than adrenaline-fueled excitement, our participants valued emotional regulation, judgment under pressure, and even the humility to turn back. These findings align with recent calls to examine the eudaimonic aspects of consumption (Ritpanitchajchaval et al. 2023), where fulfillment arises not from heightened stimulation, but from purposeful engagement, discipline, and alignment with shared values. More broadly, we propose that mortality-salient consumption be understood as an identity practice in which individuals engage in symbolic meaning-making over time. This extends prior work on extraordinary experience (Arnould and Price 1993; Heinonen and Lipkin 2023) by showing that the extraordinary is not confined to a peak moment, but develops across preparation, cultural immersion, and reflective integration afterward. In this way, high-stakes consumption can be theorized as a form of value-centered endurance in the face of existential limits.

7 | Managerial Implications

This study sheds light on how consumers derive satisfaction and identity reinforcement when faced with mortality salience. The themes that emerged carry important implications for firms seeking to engage with consumers whose journeys are shaped by uncertainty and existential concern. Since the perceived benefits of an activity strongly influence nonparticipants' likelihood of engaging (Shoham et al. 2000), managers may benefit from understanding the sources of fulfillment revealed in this study and incorporating them into their marketing efforts (see Table 3).

We find that consumers derive deep satisfaction not only from outcomes, but from the preparation processes that precede engagement, whether that be training for a climb, navigating a complex health concern, or learning the tools of financial planning. By getting involved early and often in the consumer decision-making process, firms can help foster this sense of satisfaction. Managers should focus on providing complementary products, services, and guidance that make preparation easier, accessible, and meaningful. Practitioners who recognize the subcultural values embedded in these journeys may be able to cultivate cultural principles that resonate with both newcomers and seasoned participants.

We find that consumers in mortality-salient contexts do not take satisfaction in recklessly engaging with danger, but rather in their ability to anticipate, calculate, and effectively mitigate that danger through the execution of learned skills. The fulfillment comes not from exposure to risk itself, but from demonstrating competence, discipline, and control when risk arises. For practitioners, this suggests that offerings should not be positioned solely as thrill-seeking or high-adrenaline experiences, but rather as a set of attainable goals that can build upon each other for growth and success. Consumers should be made aware of potential risks and given confidence that those risks can be managed and mitigated through knowledge, tools, and structured processes.

For example, fitness and health companies can frame programs not just around dramatic before-and-after results, but as progressive mastery of skills such as strength training, meal planning, or stress regulation—tools that help consumers feel prepared for long-term health challenges. Similarly, in financial services, firms might shift communications away from fear-based mortality reminders (e.g., "What happens if you die tomorrow?") and toward empowerment narratives that highlight how clients can manage uncertainty by gradually acquiring knowledge, building savings, and using protective tools like insurance. In both cases, the managerial opportunity is to reframe risk not as something to be endured for excitement, but as a structured challenge where consumers derive meaning through successful mitigation.

Further, the long-term goal accomplishment experienced by our participants fostered a profound sense of achievement and

TABLE 3 | Potential marketing initiatives.

Theme	Marketing initiatives
Foundational motivations: Constructing meaning before the experience	• Center customer messaging around personal meaning, long-term goals, and internal drivers (e.g., "Reach for something greater"). • Offer customizable customer journeys that reflect diverse reasons for participation (e.g., family bonding, self-discipline, transformation). • Develop storytelling campaigns that highlight varied customer motivations and emotional depth.
Preparation: Part of the experience	• Provide tools, training content, and educational resources that turn customers' preparation into a brand-supported experience. • Partner with retailers, service providers, and digital platforms to cocreate value during consumers' preparation and learning phases. • Gamify customers' prep process (e.g., checklists, progress tracking, preparation badges).
Achievement orientation: Risking mitigation as a source of pride	• Elevate services as enablers of customer safety and self-mastery, not just performance. • Use language of control, foresight, and discipline in product positioning efforts aimed at customers. • Celebrate customers' calculated decision-making and guide-supported success stories.
Reframing success: symbolic completion without obtaining the goal	• Shift brand narratives away from "goal-or-bust" to long-term growth and adaptive accomplishment. • Communicate known success/failure rates to assist customers with managing expectations and setting reasonable goals. • Create an online interactive community for customers where they can track goal progress, give advice, and share stories. • Encourage risk-takers to set another, more challenging goal after they accomplish their initial goal to help build customer loyalty.

satisfaction. Practitioners should facilitate both the setting of meaningful goals and a successful process of pursuing them over time. One effective strategy is the creation of supportive physical and digital communities where consumers can track progress, exchange advice, and celebrate milestones together. Digital health platforms like Noom or Peloton sustain engagement by linking incremental progress with community validation. Such communities do more than provide accountability, they embed participants within cultural worldviews that reinforce identity and values throughout the journey. By remaining present across the entirety of the experience, firms can become closely associated with consumers' ultimate sense of accomplishment and transformation—a sticky factor that keeps them emotionally connected in the long-run. This can also be implemented in sustainability markets, through which brands can encourage consumers to adopt long-term practices (e.g., reducing waste, lowering carbon footprints) and provide forums for recognition and shared achievement. Firms can help transform individual goal pursuit into a socially reinforced, culturally meaningful practice, ensuring their brand becomes interwoven into the consumer's broader journey of identity development.

Firms that recognize mortality salience as a driver of long-term identity work can move beyond transactional offerings and instead position themselves as enduring partners in consumers' lives. This requires shifting focus from selling discrete products or experiences to embedding the brand within the broader arc of the consumer journey. By supporting rituals of preparation, facilitating practices of risk management, and celebrating incremental progress toward meaningful goals, firms can cultivate trust and loyalty that extend far beyond the immediate context of purchase or participation. By supporting rituals of preparation, enabling effective risk management, and celebrating incremental progress, firms can cultivate trust and loyalty that extend well beyond a single purchase or experience.

8 | Directions for Future Research

Commercialization and awareness of adventure tourism has grown rapidly over the past few decades, evidenced by the formalization, professionalization, and commercialization of associated activities within the context of extreme sports (Ayles 2020). Many adventurists, in particular mountaineers, prepare for months to tackle the inherent dangers of their respective activities in an attempt to provide themselves with a satisfying experience. This study extends TMT by emphasizing how the implicit mortality salient nature of the activity only promotes worldview adherence and acts as an important component of the overall satisfaction of the experience.

Future research can extend these findings to other adventure tourism contexts such as base jumping (where gratification is immediate), bouldering (with lower resource demands), or space tourism (which pushes human boundaries; Mehran et al. 2023). These settings differ from mountaineering in their psychological drivers, ranging from thrill-seeking to varying financial and time investments, yet they share themes of risk, challenge, and mortality salience. Beyond adventure tourism, further work could also investigate more complex consumer journeys where mortality is persistently salient, such as health, sustainability, or financial security. Additional studies with larger and more diverse samples could shed light on how risk tolerance, decision-making, and goal-setting evolve as consumers face increasingly difficult challenges. Examining shifts in preparedness, mental resilience, and self-regulation within existential mortality frames would provide a deeper understanding of how identity work unfolds under intensifying or more ambiguous conditions.

Examining differences between novice and experienced consumers can reveal how prior exposure and learned strategies shape goal-setting, coping, and outcomes in mortality-salient contexts. Less experienced participants may focus on foundational preparation (e.g., building basic skills, acquiring knowledge, establishing routines) while seasoned consumers refine advanced techniques, stress management, and identity-affirming practices. Further, analyzing the complexity of the journey itself can help identify the limits of traditional preparedness strategies. These insights would extend academic understanding of how consumers adapt to existentially threatening journeys and inform practical interventions that support resilience and identity development across domains.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Supplement.