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King or Pawn? The Role of the Australian Beer Drinker

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### ABSTRACT

This analysis of Australian beer consumption provides support for the Consumer as Pawn perspective. This perspective provides an interpretation of the consumer as a culturally-programmed individual who exists in a constant state of balancing competing demands. From this orientation, the consumer is viewed not as a utility-maximising entity, but as an individual who can be anxious and insecure. This perspective is not intended to replace existing conceptions of consumers, but instead to provide an alternative interpretation that may be relevant to certain consumers and to the consumption of certain products, especially those possessing high levels of cultural significance.

### ARTICLE

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The study reported in this article was designed to explore the relationship between culture and consumption through the detailed study of a particular consumption behaviour in the Australian context. A product was selected for analysis that is characterised by high levels of cultural significance, the objective being to explore the nature and extent of this significance. The choice of beer as the product of interest was determined by the perceived strength of correlation between Australian culture and the product in the eyes of both Australians and others (Bedwell, 1992; Fiske, Hodge, and Turner, 1987; Kerr, Fillmore, and Marvy, 2000; King, 1978). An ethnographic approach was employed to "see" the product through consumers' eyes and to investigate the extent to which consumption of the product is primarily the result of individual or cultural imperatives.

In the early years of consumer research, culture was considered to be an exogenous variable of little operational interest. Viewed as a utility maximising individual, the consumer was granted the freedom to enact any form of consumption as long as it was accommodated by income. The macro view of consumption that has recently become more popular takes a more direct interest in culture and its implications for consumption (Belk, 1987; Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993). Even within the macro view, however, there exist two opposing views on the role of culture in the consumption process. For the purposes of this discussion, the view that favours the power of the individual over culture has been titled the Consumer as King perspective, and the view that favours the power of culture over the individual is titled the Consumer as Pawn perspective.

### **King Versus Pawn**

The Consumer as King (CaK) perspective currently dominates the macro consumer behaviour literature. According to this perspective, consumption has become a recreational activity just as much as a survival requirement and the consumption process is an enjoyable end in itself (Belk, 1996; Holt, 1995; Sherry, 1990). Consumers are viewed as thinking, feeling subjects who have more choices and latitude in consumption than ever before (Appelbaum, 1998). They are seen to be in control of their consumption projects, with an array of product options from which to choose in their efforts to mould their self-determined self-images (Holt, 1995; Lury, 1996; McCracken, 1990). Perceived as optional and selective, cultural guides are used by consumers when they are beneficial to the achievement of their objectives.

An important implication of the CaK perspective is that marketers need to be careful when communicating with potential customers to enhance the possibility of a sale (Scott, 1990). Hence extensive market research must be undertaken to correctly structure the product offering around the needs and wants of consumers (Domzal and Kernan, 1992). According to the logic of the CaK perspective, unless marketers can satisfy consumers' self-determined needs for both functional and symbolic outcomes, their products will fail in the market place (Englis and Solomon, 1995; Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994). Brown (1994, 1995) posits that the result is the plethora of product options that is available in many product categories, an outcome that is attributed to the fragmenting markets and intensifying competition that encourage niche marketing.

In contrast, the Consumer as Pawn (CaP) perspective offers a very different interpretation of the relationship between culture and

individual consumers. The cultural environment is viewed as a major determinant of consumption behaviour (Kilbourne, 1996; Venkatesh, 1995), with consumers acting out the roles dictated to them by those wielding cultural power (Firat, 1991). Cultural ideals are manufactured by marketers and a limited number of other powerful opinion leaders, enabling them to compel consumers to repeatedly acquire products that may provide no persisting happiness or gratification (Murphy and Miller, 1997; Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero, 1997). In this interpretation, the world of consumption exists to perpetuate the dominant culture, a task that is accomplished by the reinforcement of existing cultural practices through the presence of consumer goods (Firat 1987a, 1987b, 1991).

The CaP perspective acknowledges that in most developed economies, individuals' consumption choices do not appear to be constrained by anything except their own preferences and incomes (Fenster, 1991; Baudrillard, 1988). However, the forces of culture and society exert their influences subconsciously on consumers in their decision-making processes (Amine, 1993; Bauman, 1990; McCracken, 1987; Levy, 1981). The result is that consumers are unwilling or unable to acknowledge sociocultural influences when traditional research methods are employed (Costa and Bamossy, 1995; Venkatesh, 1995; Droge, Calantone, Agrawal, and Mackoy, 1993). Although simple observation of individuals' consumption behaviours suggests that they choose freely between product alternatives, the CaP perspective suggests that their choices are more likely to be a reflection of their social, ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984).

### **Beer and Australian Culture**

In order to explore further the relationship between culture and consumption, this study focused on the consumption of beer in the Australian context. Australians rank nineteenth in the world in terms of alcohol consumption, and ninth in terms of beer (Productschap Voor Gedistilleerde Dranken, 1999). Alcohol plays a major role in Australian stereotypes, with beer in particular being closely associated with the Australian lifestyle (Fiske et al., 1987; Kerr et al., 2000). This has been the case since the early convict years when beer was consumed by convicts as a form of escapism and rebellion (King, 1978). The literature suggests that beer is the product that enjoys the strongest bond with Australian culture, to the extent that the product has been described as being important to the process of self-definition among Australians (Mackay, 1989; Fiske et al., 1987). Beer in Australia is a consumer good that has been described as having a vital role in communicating and reflecting the social categories of gender, age, and social class

(Conway, 1985; Horne, 1988). The perception that beer is culturally representative exists despite Australia being a multicultural nation in which over 140 cultures are represented (Ho, 1990) and an increasing polarisation in income distribution that has significantly reduced economic equality (Mackay, 1993, 1997).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 1995) classifies beer into three categories, full-strength beer, low alcohol beer, and extra/special light beer. Full-strength beer has an alcohol content of 4% or more, low alcohol varieties have 2-2.9% alcohol, and extra light beers have less than 1% alcohol (Health Department of Western Australia, 1997). The vast majority of beer consumed in Australia continues to be full-strength beer, with the average Australian drinking 70.8 litres of full-strength beer per year (ABS, 1997). However, despite high average consumption figures beer in Australian culture is strongly associated with masculinity (Mackay, 1989; Horne, 1988), a link that is also found in other cultures (Gough and Edwards, 1998; Levy, 1986; Dichter, 1964). The ABS (1990) found the incidence of regular beer consumption among Australian females to be relatively low (14.3%), with the preferred alcoholic beverage among Australian females being wine (30.5%). Females in general are less likely to consume alcohol on a regular basis than males (ABS, 1990, 1995). While the available statistics on beer consumption are comparatively vague on the issue of socio-economic status, there appears to be a greater incidence of beer consumption among lower- and middle-income earners and a greater incidence of wine consumption among higher-income earners (ABS, 1990; Stockwell, Masters, Philips, and Daly, 1998). These income-related differences in alcohol preferences have been discussed by various Australian social commentators over the years (Bedwell, 1992; Horne, 1988; Mackay, 1989), with the general assumption made that beer is a working man's beverage while other forms of alcohol, such as wine and spirits, are associated with wealthier drinkers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Interviews, participant observations, and non-participant observations were employed in this study to gather data relating to beer consumption in Australia. The objective was to generate a thick description of the ways in which beer is consumed from which to obtain an understanding of the cultural role of beer in Australia. In total, over 400 people were interviewed for the study, of which 109 were interviewed and observed in 23 pubs and clubs in three Australian states (Western Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria). The majority of informants interviewed in public drinking venues were male (n= 96; 88%), an outcome due largely to the disproportionate representation of males in Australian public

drinking venues (Fiske et al., 1987; King, 1978). In addition to being in the minority, females were more reluctant to be interviewed in public drinking contexts. This is not an unusual result in qualitative research, as Adler and Adler (1994) have noted the tendency for females to be more cautious and resistant when talking to unknown researchers.

In addition to the ethnographic (in situ) interviews and observations, further non-ethnographic interviews were conducted to obtain information pertaining to the role of beer in Australian culture. These interviews were conducted in informants' homes (12 informants), retirement villages (13 informants), primary schools (n=93 informants), and secondary schools (208 informants). The split between males and females across these non-ethnographic interviews was roughly equivalent. The number of students interviewed is large primarily due to the logistics of having to interview many student informants in groups due to the conditions stipulated by those providing access to the students. The interviews with secondary school students, however, were especially useful as many were in the process of experimenting with alcohol. Due to their "amateur" status, these drinkers were more conscious of their decision-making processes relating to beer consumption, and the socialisation effects at work in their attitudes towards beer were more apparent. Interviews with younger children were valuable in exploring the process by which young Australians come to learn the cultural role of beer and the myths associated with its consumption.

In an effort to sample a broad cross-section of Australians, data collection was programmed to cover both sides of the continent and several age and socio-economic subgroups. Approximately half of the public drinking venues in which interviews took place were located in working-class areas, while the other half were located in middle-class areas. Due to the tendency of high socio-economic Australians and first-generation migrants to largely avoid public drinking venues, a limitation of this study is the lack of representation of more affluent Australians and migrants in the ethnographic interview component of the study. It was possible to obtain a broader spread of informants for the other non-ethnographic interviews, and interviews in schools, homes, and retirement villages were spread across members of working-, middle- and upper-class groups. Both "big city" residents and those living in smaller regional areas were incorporated into the sample population. However, Australians living in rural areas were largely absent from the sample with the exception of occasional country-dwellers who happened to be visiting a city pub that was targeted for interviewing and country children who attended the schools where interviews were held.

In addition to interviews with consumer informants, nine bartenders and five brewery representatives from the two major brewers operating in Australia were utilised as key informants. Bartenders in particular were typically very experienced observers of those consuming alcohol, especially beer. Through their contributions they provided a degree of continuity to the study as they had usually formed relationships with patrons and had observed their behaviours over extended periods of time. As interviews and observations were conducted in numerous drinking locations, it was not possible to engage in persistent long-term observation at individual sites. Bartenders were able to minimise this limitation by adding an historical dimension by describing the drinking habits of specific individuals over weeks, months, and in some cases, years.

Interview transcripts and observation notes were imported into NUD\*IST for coding. Transcriptions were coded by line-unit, the result being over 300,000 lines of coded data assigned to 201 nodes. The result of the coding was a densely branched "tree" - the NUD\*IST term for the diagrammatical illustration of the hierarchical structure of node inter-relationships. It was then possible to examine node intersections to assist in the interpretation of the data. By studying the transcripts in their entirety and also by examining data stored at individual nodes and at node intersections, the interview and observation transcripts were read repeatedly in various different formats, enhancing familiarity with the data and facilitating interpretation.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the interview and observation data yielded five cultural myths that are central to the role of beer consumption in Australia: (1) the All-Australian Myth - all Australians drink beer; (2) the Taste Myth - taste is the primary reason for drinking beer; (3) the Advertising Myth - advertising is ineffective in influencing beer consumption; (4) the Pleasure Myth - beer consumption is a totally enjoyable activity; and (5) the Control Myth - consumers are completely in control of their own beer consumption decisions and behaviours. These five myths are inter-related, each serving to consolidate the effects of the others. They form a protective layer for drinkers, sheltering them in the familiar and comfortable symbolism of beer that permits satisfying social interaction. They also serve to support general beliefs about Australian culture, particularly those pertaining to its perceived differences from other cultures.

### **Myth 1: The All-Australian Myth**

Data obtained during interviews with informants supported the link between beer and Australian culture suggested in the literature.

There was a strong perceived bond between beer consumption and "Australianness" among informants to the extent that, for many, there exists the myth that "all Australians drink beer". Most informants were very comfortable with the close association between the Australian way of life and an alcoholic beverage, and the naturalness of this association was implicitly assumed and rarely questioned:

*SP*: Where do you think beer fits into Australian culture?

*Male*: Shit, I don't know. Does it really matter? I've got no idea. It's just what everyone is brought up on really (adult male).

A typical Australian is someone who sits down and drinks beer (adult female).

When discussing the role of beer in Australian culture, informants typically indicated that they consider beer to be an important part of Australian life. Their accounts of beer as an Australian icon portrayed the beverage as a defining element of Australian culture that reflects the (perceived) national emphasis on mateship and leisure. At this macro level of discussion it was rarely mentioned that beer consumption is predominantly the domain of certain types of Australians. Instead, the impression was given of great uniformity in beer consumption among the population, with little distinction made between the consumption patterns of different groups within the culture.

The view that all Australians drink beer is held concurrently with the belief that beer is a male beverage. Informants appeared to hold these conflicting understandings of the mythical place of beer in Australian culture and the nature of its actual consumption with no apparent discomfort. When discussing who drinks what in Australian culture, informants often spoke of the "natural" associations that they perceived to exist between males and beer, and females and other forms of alcohol:

Champagne is classed as more of a women's type of drink and beer is sort of a male type drink (male child).

Women today drink wine and mixed drinks. Women drink more mixed drinks than men do, obviously. I don't know any women in my circle who drink beer actually. They all drink wine or mixed drinks and stuff like that(adult male).

The use of the word "obviously" in the second quote illustrates the gender segregation in alcohol consumption is considered normal and correct. The extent of the gendered nature of beer consumption is evident in the attitudes held towards female beer consumption:

Most of my mates my age don't like women who drink beer. We like women who are socially acceptable (adult male).

Such negative attitudes towards female beer drinkers were pervasive amongst both male and female informants of all ages, although less so among those aged between 18 and 30 who are being exposed to greater numbers of female beer drinkers in their socialising environments. While the rate of beer consumption among females is gradually increasing (Mackay, 1989) and Australians are becoming more accustomed to witnessing female beer consumption (Fiske et al., 1987), the general perception remains that beer is naturally suited to male consumption and inappropriate for female consumption. As such, beer as a product category exists as a point of differentiation between males and females in Australian culture.

Not only does the All-Australian Myth conceal gender-based differences in beer consumption, but it also serves to obscure class-based differences. From the interview data it became apparent that there exist expectations that Australians belonging to different social classes will drink different varieties and quantities of alcohol:

They (the working classes) like to spend all day drinking beer, while we just have wine with dinner (adult female).

These expectations, however, were not often explicitly stated by informants. In order to gain an understanding of the relevance of class to beer consumption it was usually necessary to wait until later in interviews when rapport had been established, and then ask specific questions on the subject. Few informants raised the topic of social class unprompted and there seemed to be a general hesitancy to make attributions based on socio-economic status, an outcome that is not overly surprising given the proclaimed dedication to egalitarianism in Australia (Dewhirst, 1989; Horne, 1988; Mackay, 1997). The following quote illustrates the Australian tendency to down-play the existence of rigid social categories into which people are born:

There are lots of reasons why the lower classes drink beer and we drink wine. We can afford it and they can't. I think it's all about money, and how that chooses what you drink and where you sit at the cricket. I don't equate money with class, necessarily. I think everyone is the same, they just have different access to money. I don't think people are born into classes that determine their choices (adult female).

There is thus an apparent disinclination to interpret consumption



behaviour in the light of class membership, and most informants preferred to ascribe choices to individual preferences.

### *The Function of the All-Australian Myth*

The All-Australian Myth encourages a general belief that beer is universally enjoyed by Australians. Perhaps a better interpretation is that beer as a product category achieves universality in terms of its perceived coverage of the Australian population, rather than in its actual coverage. As such, beer is a cultural icon that unites Australians in spirit, if not in body. Actual usage figures illustrate that the perceived universality of beer consumption is mythical. Beer consumption is a male-dominated activity in Australia, and class differences in consumption also exist. Despite this segmentation, the All-Australian Myth permits a sense of bonding amongst Australians on the basis of a consumption behaviour. At a superficial level it enables Australians to conceive of themselves as a uniform population, engendering a feeling of belonging and of commonality. A closer analysis, however, suggests that beer plays an important function in the demarcation between the sexes and members of different social classes. The All-Australian Myth serves to cloud this symbolic function of beer in Australian culture. It offers a sense of oneness, while actual beer consumption represents and reflects the boundaries between groups of Australians.

### **Myth 2: The Taste Myth**

The Taste Myth states that taste is the primary reason for beer consumption in Australia. Beer drinkers interviewed were uniform in their insistence that taste is the most important reason for consuming beer. However, throughout data collection it became apparent that there are more important motivating forces behind the decision to drink beer. Primarily, beer in Australia has a symbolic function that is well defined and understood. This symbolism facilitates extensive stereotyping according to alcohol category and brand choices. As a result, social factors are highly significant in influencing beer consumption. In particular, the drinking context was found to be critical to alcohol choice, peers were frequently mentioned as moderators of individual consumption decisions, and fashion cycles were found to be highly relevant to changes in brand preferences over time.

### *The Symbolic Importance of Beer Consumption*

For some Australians, passion about beer is at a level normally reserved for religion or politics, and this strength of feeling comes from the substantial symbolism attached to beer consumption in Australia. Beer offers symbolic benefits to the drinker over and above the utilitarian function of thirst relief:

Beer has an emotional layer that is different to other drinks, all this parochialism, badge stuff that happens (brewery representative).

There is often conflict, however, between the symbolism desired and the individual's initial taste preferences. The following extract from a discussion with a male drinker illustrates the drinker's paradox. Drinkers feel socially compelled to enjoy drinking beer, and adopt taste as a justification for this compulsion. However, it is often the case that upon first and subsequent samplings of beer, they do not enjoy it at all:

*Male:* You drink for the taste of it. You have a few beers, unwind, unstress, whatever. That is where your alcohol comes in. But if you can't stand the taste you are not going to drink it.

*SP:* Do you remember the first time you drank beer?

*Male:* Yes

*SP:* Did you like the taste?

*Male:* No, at sixteen years of age, no I didn't (adult male).

Thus, after stating that people will not drink beer if they do not like its taste, this informant acknowledged that initially he did not enjoy beer but had continued to consume the beverage regardless. Motivations other than taste are clearly at work. Beer consumption offers a form of social bonding that is much more important to drinkers than its taste, and the Taste Myth provides a much more socially acceptable rationale for bonding behaviour than the need to bond itself.

The relative irrelevance of taste preferences is also apparent in drinking rituals that encourage conformity. For example, the ritual of shouting (where each drinker buys a round of drinks in turn) serves to reinforce the tendency to choose the same brand as one's peers, as drinkers often prefer to order the same brand for everyone when taking their turn in a shout:

I drink the brand that I drink because all my mates drink it. When they shout they shout VB, Reds, or Golds (adult male).

Beer drinkers are aware of the common tendency to make attributions based on brand consumption, and as a result the anticipated attributions of others impinge upon their decision-making. Through their consumption of specific brands of beer, drinkers indicate aspects of their (ideal) selves to themselves and others, making brand selection very important to the individual. The following quote is indicative of the attributions that are made based on the brand of beer consumed. With such associations accruing to the drinkers of particular brands, it becomes necessary to ensure

that one encourages the attributions that are required to communicate a desired self-image:

*SP:* What sort of person do you imagine drinks Fosters?

*Male 1:* Losers

*Male 2:* Die-hard Australians, Ford fans.

*Male 3:* The type of person you are not really bothered with (adult males).

As beer is a product capable of communicating much about the drinker, consumers are not tempted to play with its symbolic meanings. The role of beer is too important to the self-concept for drinkers to risk experimentation. The consistency with which informants made similar attributions relating to drinkers of particular brands indicates that they typically only attempt to decode and assign product meanings as they have been culturally defined, far from willing or able to assign their own meanings to products that may be culturally inappropriate. By interpreting brands and their drinkers in the same ways as their peers, drinkers are assured of making "appropriate" choices that will communicate the "right" message to others.

#### *Taste Discernment*

Drinkers feel compelled to conform to the image-management requirement that they can discern the subtle differences between beer brands, enabling them to decide which has the superior taste. It is on this basis that they claim their brand choices are made. A little delving, however, can quickly demonstrate the constructed nature of their preferences:

*SP:* Can you tell me what sort of beer you are drinking?

*Male:* Tooheys New

*SP:* Can you tell me why you chose that particular one?

*Male:* It is the best beer in Australia

*SP:* Is it the taste or because you can buy it everywhere, or some other reason?

*Male:* It's the taste.

*SP:* So if I gave you two glasses of beer and told you to guess which one is New, could you pick it?

*Male:* No. Oh, I probably could. Yes. This is not a trick question, is it? (adult male).

*SP:* Do you think there is a lot of taste difference between beers?

*Male:* Yes, very definitely

*SP:* So if someone gave you lots of different glasses of beer, could you pick the one that is Carlton Cold (his previously stated favourite brand)?

*Male:* No (adult male).

Such inconsistencies were quite normal in interviews. Informants were keen to appear knowledgeable about brands and to be loyal to their stated favourite(s). Once it became apparent that there may be underlying motivations other than taste, they made contradictory statements with little or no sign of distress or confusion. A more common reaction was mild displeasure at someone who refused to "play the game" of the Taste Myth.

A representative from one brewery explained that some beer brands on the market are in fact the same product in different packaging, although their consumption patterns would tend to indicate otherwise:

(Tooheys) Draught and New are exactly the same beer. One is on tap, and one in a pack. It is amazing how many people who drink New in the pub but buy a VB to take home (brewery representative).

In some instances, a little colouring is added to provide a point of differentiation between different brands that come out of the same tank. Vastly different prices are then charged, and packaging is designed to indicate the symbolic differences between the brands. As a brewery representative stated: They think they can tell the difference, but they can't. They will tell you that one beer is crap and another tastes wonderful, when in fact they come out of the same tank. They just have no idea (brewery representative).

Thus while taste was proclaimed by almost all beer-drinking respondents to be the most important choice criteria when choosing among brands, the breweries perceive the decision process differently. They are under no misconception that the majority of consumers can actually discern differences between brands within a beer category, nor that taste preferences are strong enough to counter the factors of image and price. Instead, they focus their efforts on those factors that they know influence sales - advertising, packaging, and price.

Most beer drinkers interviewed were reluctant to acknowledge the lack of differentiation among many brands. The perception of significant differentiation is necessary to provide justification for the selection of one brand over another, and to recognise a lack of difference would go against the social conditioning to which drinkers have been long exposed. Only a small minority of informants was prepared to acknowledge that they could perceive no difference between beer brands within the same beer category. However, this was usually only the case where the informant was either senior in

years, and thus less concerned about the image management function of beer, or intoxicated and less inhibited. The following informant appeared to be quite "merry" when approached for an interview:

*SP*: What sort of beer do you drink?

*Male*: Emu Export or just tap beer, draught, whatever, it doesn't really matter. Tastes all the same.

*SP*: So how do you choose?

*Male*: I don't know. That is too tricky for me. I just follow everyone else. I am a sheep (adult male).

This informant is acknowledging his need to monitor and mimic the consumption behaviours of others in order to behave appropriately in the social context. More sober informants were less likely to make such revealing statements. Instead, they appeared determined to maintain the façade of personal taste preferences required by the Taste Myth.

#### *The Function of the Taste Myth*

The Taste Myth serves to enable the drinker to communicate the consumption skills that are considered necessary in beer consumption and to justify choices that would otherwise appear to be based on conformity. The Taste Myth also disguises the negative feelings underlying consumption by down-playing social requirements that can be in conflict with individual desires. For example, the myth that beer has a flavour that is inherently pleasant to Australian males means that the requirement to drink beer in Australian culture is viewed as a self-determined activity rather than a cultural imperative. Through its ability to assure drinkers of the autonomy of their consumption decisions, the Taste Myth provides a socially-acceptable interpretation of beer drinking that effectively produces an agreed social reality that glosses over the less acceptable reality of mass conformance in consumption.

#### **Myth 3: The Advertising Myth**

Closely related to the Taste Myth is the Advertising Myth, which states that advertising is unable to influence beer consumption. The importance of beer consumption in Australian culture and the wide acceptance of the Taste Myth create an environment conducive to the Advertising Myth. This myth encourages drinkers to discount the influence of advertising and the media, causing them to believe firmly in their autonomy in the consumption process. Advertising cannot be granted influential status without endangering the perceived "natural" association between beer and Australians, thus placing in question the crucial justification of taste. As a result, many beer drinkers are adamant that advertising has little or no influence over their consumption decisions.

### *The Use of Advertising in Consumers' Decision Making*

It is important to drinkers that the legitimate justification of taste be attributed to their consumption choices. The use of advertising in the decision-making process is viewed as markedly inferior to the reliance on personal ability to identify better-tasting products from the range of beers available:

*SP:* Why do you drink those brands? Is it because you like the taste or the advertising...?

*Male:* The taste. It has got nothing to do with the advertising. It's just the taste (adult male).

*SP:* Does beer advertising have any effect on you at all?

*Male:* No. No. I think the advertising is very good, but no (adult male).

These were typical responses to any suggestion that advertising may play a role in informants' personal brand choices. After some discussion, however, some informants conceded that advertising may play some part in brand choice, although this was usually limited to the gathering of information about brands recently released onto the market. The following quote indicates the grudging acceptance of advertising as a source of product information:

*SP:* Does advertising affect what you drink?

*Male:* No.

*SP:* So if you saw an ad for a brand new beer would it make you change or try it even?

*Male:* Okay, take the Hahn Ice. I have tried that because of the advertising (adult male).

Despite informants' general reluctance to attribute any influence to advertising, those working in public drinking venues were convinced of the effectiveness of advertising on the drinking habits of the average person. They noted a direct correlation between sales of specific brands and the breweries' marketing activities:

*SP:* What do you think is the most popular beer out of all the beers you serve over the counter?

*Male:* Probably VB. It is the advertising. It makes a difference (bartender).

*Male:* VB is probably the most popular packaged beer right across Australia.

*SP:* Why is that?

*Male:* Well, Carlton United Brewery is the biggest brewery in Australia and VB is their most heavily promoted packaged beer. That is probably the reason (bartender).

Similarly, while drinkers attributed advertising with little influence over their own consumption decisions, they readily nominated advertising as a primary source of information for other drinkers:

I have to be truthful and say that advertising affects what people drink (adult male).

Beers like Carlton Cold and Hahn Ice which have come out which have absolutely no redeeming facts in terms of taste, but sell very well. They have actually said this beer is clean, this beer is good, this beer is whatever. That is not true. It is rubbish, absolute rubbish. But it is all image and it sells (adult male).

The last informant had been vehement about the taste superiority of his favoured brand just moments before. It was very important to him that his own consumption choices be perceived as intelligent and rational, or in other words, based on his ability to detect differences between brands and to identify those with the best flavour. He tried to achieve this objective while simultaneously arguing the importance of advertising to the broader beer market, and appeared quite comfortable with his position that his consumption choices are based on one set of criteria while the choices of others are based on less socially-acceptable factors such as advertising.

#### *The Function of the Advertising Myth*

According to those drinkers interviewed, taste is the only "real" reason for selecting one beer over another, with the occasional exceptions of price discounting and the unavailability of a favoured brand. In such an account, advertising plays an insignificant role in beer consumption decisions. Those working in the industry, however, readily acknowledge the power of advertising over market share. The budgets set aside for the development and implementation of advertising campaigns are testimony to the breweries' belief in the ability of marketing communications to influence the consumption decisions of beer drinkers. Consumers, however, are generally reluctant to acknowledge the influence of advertising on their own consumption decisions as this is perceived as an acknowledgement of weakness. To some degree it is considered acceptable to use advertising as a guide to new products on the market, as was evident by the willingness of some informants to acknowledge the use of advertising for this purpose. To admit to the persuasive power of advertising, however, is completely different. Most informants were adamant that their decision-making behaviours are unaffected by advertising. The Advertising Myth reinforces the Taste Myth as by emphasising the ineffectiveness of advertising it effectively consolidates the

perception of the dominance of taste in individual's consumption choices.

#### **Myth 4: The Pleasure Myth**

Beer consumption in Australia has connotations of a physically, psychologically, and socially pleasant pastime. While the numerous positive outcomes of beer consumption were readily acknowledged, the possibility that it may at times be an unpleasant experience was only occasionally raised by informants. Social requirements dictate that beer consumption is perceived as an inherently enjoyable activity to which drinkers are naturally and irresistibly drawn. Beer advertisements depict happy, congenial drinkers, content in their beer consumption activities. A closer analysis of beer consumption behaviours suggests that a different interpretation may at times be appropriate. Instead of being an entirely pleasant experience, the beer consumption process can involve psychological and/or physical discomfort. Psychological discomfort can occur as drinkers struggle to acquire or maintain their knowledge of competing brands and their symbolic meanings, and attempt to employ these meanings in such a way as to communicate desired images to others. Physical discomfort can result from the requirement to overcome initial taste preferences and the perceived need among some drinkers to consume large quantities of beer.

#### *Psychological Discomfort*

Beer drinkers are effusive about the physical and social reasons for beer consumption. They will talk at length about taste, refreshment, and the association with spending time with selected others. However, behind their comments lies an underlying anxiety about fitting in. Beer consumption is a ticket to social acceptance, but only if performed in the appropriate manner. As a result, many drinkers constantly monitor the external environment for symbolic meaning. They are intensely interested in the meaning of beer as a product category, and the more specific meanings of individual brands. This meaning is integral to their perceptions of their gender and their culture, and to a lesser extent their age and social class categories. It is the means by which they can attain a degree of commonality with relevant others.

Rather than always being a social activity in which consumers can drop their usual social reservations and relax, beer consumption can be laden with cognitive and emotional effort. It is important that drinkers choose appropriate brands to consume in appropriate quantities, in appropriate places, at appropriate times. An error in such choices can have negative social consequences, so care is taken to observe the consumption behaviours of others for guidance:



They come in and say, "What is that you're drinking? If you are drinking it, it must be all right. Give us one" (bartender).

In this instance, drinkers are following the lead of the bartender, assuming that his extensive experience in drinking environments places him in a superior position to choose brands appropriately. Similarly, advertising communications are monitored for the symbolic information that is required to make socially-acceptable consumption choices.

Peer pressure is sensed by many drinkers to be a motivating force behind their consumption decisions, although it usually took some time for informants to feel adequately comfortable to share this in interviews. Disclosure usually occurred after informants had expressed their adherence to the Taste Myth, allowing them to then consider and identify other less acknowledged and less acceptable motivations. Examples of peer-based motivations include a desire to conform and a fear of ridicule. Taste is subordinated to the desire to conform to the behavioural norms enacted by relevant reference groups:

*SP:* Did you initially enjoy the taste?

*Male:* No.

*SP:* What made you persevere?

*Male:* As everybody else does, just because they are perceived as people who enjoy a beer. And I suppose when you are young, you drink anyway because it seems like the thing to do, and you do just get a taste. But now I enjoy the taste (adult male).

As beer is primarily consumed in an effort to manage image and facilitate social interaction rather than for taste enjoyment, the introduction of numerous new brands means that decision making becomes more difficult. For many, it is no longer acceptable to engage in consistent, unchanging consumption. The beer drinker feels pressure to consume different brands at different times and locations. As a result, drinkers (with the partial exception of older drinkers) are compelled to remain permanently watchful, timing their brand changes to send appropriate signals to their peers:

Nobody wants to be thought of as not being with it, or being out of it, or being a bit of a dork. You know, not willing to try anything else. So if everyone is drinking VB, well I will drink VB. Or if people are going across to Cold then I will try it. It is kind of like getting up on the dance floor first. You don't want to be the first one up there, but you don't want to be the only one not up there as well (brewery representative).

### *Physical Discomfort*

There are two major areas of physical discomfort associated with beer consumption in Australia. The first is the requirement to consume large amounts of beer, and the second is the frequent need for novice drinkers to overcome an initial dislike of its taste. The following quote illustrates the perceived need to consume beer in large quantities, often leading to negative physical side-effects:

I used to get shit-faced every night. In the end I got sick of waking up and saying, "Shit I must have had a good night last night because my head is bad this morning" (adult male).

The beer drinker must choose an appropriate level of consumption, a level that among Australian males has been higher rather than lower. To choose a consumption level that is too low can attract unwanted ridicule from others, and excessive consumption makes one socially unacceptable. It is therefore important for drinkers to learn the levels that are required by the social environment and that can be tolerated by the individual. At the same time, the drinker must contend with the physical bloating that can accompany extensive beer consumption.

There is nothing worse than every time you sit down and drink beer you are up to the toilet every five minutes (adolescent male).

As noted in the discussion of the Taste Myth, many Australian male drinkers must overcome their initial dislike of the taste of beer to prove their manliness. This effort is not perceived as a sacrifice or hardship to the many drinkers who are faced with this situation. Instead, it is assumed that their palates were initially immature, requiring repeated exposure to the substance to correct the situation. Eventually the substance is considered to have a favourable taste and consumption becomes habitual.

### *The Function of the Pleasure Myth*

Beer consumption behaviours do not typically include any socially permitted latitude of unpleasantness, requiring instead that only pleasant outcomes be associated with such consumption activities. The expectation that beer consumption is an enjoyable pastime is so ingrained in drinkers that they can fail to recognise or acknowledge any negative feelings to which they are exposed during consumption. It is not the intention here to suggest that beer consumption is a generally unpleasant consumption experience. This is obviously untrue in any holistic sense, and it became obvious throughout data collection that most beer drinkers find it a pleasant pastime. However, the Pleasure Myth suggests that instead of being an entirely enjoyable experience, beer consumption can involve some cognitive and physical discomfort.

Drinkers, however, are usually hesitant to concede the existence of these negative feelings, their conditioning largely preventing them from recognising their existence. The Pleasure Myth thus assists drinkers in their efforts to gloss over those aspects of beer consumption that do not directly result in pleasure, allowing them to focus instead on the positive social outcomes of beer consumption. The Taste Myth and the All-Australian Myth combine with the Pleasure Myth to ensure that for most beer drinkers beer consumption is perceived as a natural and enjoyable pastime. This effectively overcomes the paradox of extensive beer consumption in Australia despite a frequent initial dislike and some ongoing negative physical and psychological outcomes.

### **Myth 5: The Control Myth**

The four myths discussed so far combine to produce the Control Myth. By embracing the previous four myths, drinkers can be assured that they are completely in control of their own beer consumption behaviours. The All-Australian Myth suggests that all Australians are welcome to partake in beer consumption, thus concealing the gender and class constraints upon consumption. The Taste Myth proposes that the consumption of beer is based on taste, with no other impediments except financial resources. The Advertising Myth decries the effectiveness of advertising, implying that consumption decisions are based on individual choice alone. The Pleasure Myth magnifies the positive feelings associated with beer consumption, offering a legitimate reason for beer consumption and thereby suppressing any realisation of the lack of control individuals can have over their own consumption choices. The following discussion outlines the pre-determined nature of much beer consumption, providing examples of conforming behaviours that are largely invisible to drinkers.

#### *Autonomy Imagined*

In effect, the choice of alcohol to consume is pre-made for many Australians. Social conditioning has ensured that only a relatively small number of alternatives are considered, with the decision between these options largely pre-programmed according to gender, class, and context. In order to be a "real" Australian male it becomes necessary at some time or another to engage in beer consumption. Paradoxically, an inherent understanding of the necessity of drinking beer co-exists with the perception of consumption freedom. The pressure to drink may commence well before the attainment of the legal drinking age. The earlier a male begins to consume beer, the sooner he can begin to communicate his emerging masculinity and maturity:

*Male 1:* I think if you want to be an Aussie man you have to drink beer. Every Aussie man drinks beer. It is just what you have always known.

*Male 2:* You have seen your father do it, you have seen your uncles do it, your grandfather all that sort of thing. Yes, you grow up with it (adult males).

Beer drinking is not an optional activity, but a compulsory one in the likely event that a male wishes to be accepted in Australian culture. There is something immediately suspicious about a male who does not drink beer:

I know a guy who doesn't drink beer and he is a bit of a loser. He never touches it (adult male).

Not only does the "genuine" Australian male have to drink beer, but he is pressured to consume large quantities of the beverage. To conform to this requirement is to communicate one's manliness to one's peers, and to society in general. The volume of beer that can be drunk without vomiting or having to visit the bathroom is a means by which Australian men measure their masculinity. To fail to consume adequately can cast doubt on one's cultural hereditary and sexual orientation.

In terms of context, the informants quoted below explain how beer is most strongly associated with informal drinking environments, while wine is considered appropriate for more formal occasions:

It is much more sociable to drink wine with your dinner. I guess at the bar you drink with your mates you know, have a beer and a casual chat, whereas having dinner in the restaurant is sort of a bit more of a step up (adult female).

(When) we go to dinner or to a theatre restaurant we will have a wine. At the races we will have a wine or a champagne (adult male).

Informants were thus aware of a social requirement to drink different types of alcohol in different contexts. The degree of conformity to this social requirement expressed by those interviewed indicates an effective lack of individual autonomy in consumption choices.

#### *The Function of the Control Myth*

The parameters of beer consumption in Australia are culturally defined. The volume of beer consumed, the fashion in which it is consumed and by whom, and the places in which it is consumed are all taught to consumers long before they are in a position to make their own beer consumption decisions. The extent of this conditioning is largely imperceptible to drinkers, and they generally

believe in their ability to make individual consumption decisions regardless of the influences of social forces. They prefer an interpretation that assigns the primary decision-making power in the consumption process to the individual. The result is the Control Myth, which views beer consumption as an optional activity in which consumers engage at their own will in any way in which they choose. The function of the Control Myth is to assure beer drinkers of their decision-making autonomy, the outcome being a perception of beer drinking as a consumption activity in which Australians choose freely to participate in order to communicate their unity, egalitarianism, and easy-going natures.

### **KING OR PAWN?**

The consumption choices of Australian beer drinkers were found to be largely culturally programmed, leaving drinkers reactive rather than proactive in the consumption process. Thus, while consumers are often seen to have considerable autonomy in decision-making that derives from their individual personalities and interpretations of the cultural frameworks to which they are exposed (Holt, 1997; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), the findings of this study indicate that some consumption behaviours may instead be highly culturally specified.

The notion that consumers have an important function to perform in the perpetuation of the prevailing social order has been proposed in the postmodern consumer research literature (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat, 1991; Venkatesh, Sherry, and Firat, 1993). To date, however, there has been little in the way of empirical evidence to support the proposition. This study of beer consumption in Australia supports the contention that consumers may in some consumption scenarios have little in the way of effective free choice while falsely perceiving a significant degree of control. In particular, the cultural requirement for image management can greatly reduce free choice, relegating drinkers to the position of consuming on demand to produce appropriate images, which are in turn culturally specified.

The implication of the Consumer as Pawn perspective for the meaning transfer process that occurs during beer consumption is that drinkers usually only attempt to decode and assign product meanings as these meanings have been culturally defined. Concerned with assigning culturally-inappropriate meanings to products and thus complicating their interactions with others, drinkers prefer to operate in the more certain environment where they accept those meanings that have been culturally prescribed. This has implications for the Consumer as King interpretation that holds that individuals have control of cultural meaning, thus giving

them a vital role in cultural change (see Wallendorf, 1993; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; McCracken, 1990). Where consumers are constrained in their decoding activities in the ways found here, their ability to exert cultural change is correspondingly reduced. This supports the Consumer as Pawn argument that the modern individual has little control over the changes occurring in the cultural environment.

In conclusion, despite ongoing assumptions of the primacy of the individual consumer in modern market economies, the results of this study suggest that the truly idiosyncratic component of consumption may at times be minor. In the case of beer consumption in Australia, variations in consumption patterns appear to converge around the key variables of gender in the first instance, then by age and social class, with context also playing an important role.

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