



The building blocks of drinking experience across men and women: A case study with craft and industrial beers



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ABSTRACT

In today's market, every product seems to be marked by the label of "experience". It is expected that successful products give the consumer "extraordinary experiences". The research in consumption experience is growing, but much work still needs to be done to understand the food and beverage experience. A qualitative study was conducted using contextual focus groups to explore the building blocks of consumers' drinking experience of industrial and craft beers. The results show that drinking experience is shaped by our cognitive, sensory or affective systems, especially during the core consumption experience. Elements such as attitudes, consumption habits, and individual versus social consumption, shopping experience and product benefits are also responsible for shaping the experience, but are more relevant during the pre-consumption or post-consumption experience. Gender differences occur more frequently in the affective experience, as women search more for relaxation while men for excitement and stimulation while drinking beer. When comparing industrial users versus craft, in the latter the cognitive and shopping experiences are more relevant. Overall, the results showed that the drinking experience of beers can be studied as a function of the salient human system used during product interaction, and this systems act as the building blocks of the drinking experience of beer. This information can be applied in consumer research studies to further study the experiential differences across products and consumers.

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1. Introduction

The late 1980's have seen a new phase of consumption in capitalist societies, the era of hyper consumption and hyper modernism. Production systems, distribution and consumption are now impregnated, penetrated and shaped by operations of a fundamental aesthetic nature (Charters, 2006). According to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) what defines hyper-consumption capitalism is an aesthetic approach of production. The style of beauty, the evolution of tastes and sensitivity are imposed every day even more as strategic imperatives of the brands. Today, every

product seems to be marked by the label of "experience", our new sacred word as mentioned by Carù and Cova (2003). Successful products on the market should give consumers "experiences" (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014), "memorable experiences" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) or "extraordinary experiences" (Linberg & Ostergaard, 2015). Not only to differentiate themselves across a mass of products available on the market, but also to help consumers to escape from their ordinary daily lives. Researchers have paid especial attention to experience in the field of material goods and services (Carù & Cova, 2003; for a review).

The origin of the "experience economy" can be sought in the service industry, in which the product sold is not a physical object but a memorable event (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Experiences are no longer part of the entertainment or tourism industry; they are the heart of the design production, of the food and the beverage industry, and consumption venues (Vicdan, 2015). The hyper-individualist regime of consumption unfolds in an experience, in

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hedonism and emotions, in a word: aesthetics. The important aspects of consumption in capitalist societies from now on are to feel, to leave the moments of pleasure, of discovery or escapism (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015).

Aesthetics and experience have changed the way we perceive and speak. The terms used to designate professions and economic activities now carry the stamp of the aesthetic ambition: gardeners change into landscapers, haircutters into hairdressers, florists into floral artists, tailors into artistic directors, and car manufacturers into automobile designers (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013). In this experiential and aesthetic approach to consumption, the consumers express themselves constantly: at work, with their contacts, in sport, in leisure, with clothes, underwear, in such a way that soon there will be no activity that is not marked by the label of expression or communication (Lipovetsky, 1983). The Mac consumers, for example, are different from other computer users, by the sensation of belonging to a group in which the computer is not only a machine, but a symbol, an attitude, and a way of life.

The notion of experience entered the field of consumer research with the pioneering article of Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982 depicting a different consumer who focuses on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic aspect of consumption. More than thirty years later, the concept of experience has become an essential part of understanding consumer behaviour. The literature on experience research spans many fields and types of “experiences”, going from “product experience” (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007) to “consumption experience” (Darpy, 2012), “user experience” (Warell, 2008) and even “drinking experience” (Schifferstein, 2009). In a very simple categorization of concepts, “consumption experience” refers to the general experiential research in the consumer behaviour area. “Product experience” is used to define the experience of a material object: a designed object, a packaging or even a food product. “User experience” implies a repetitive interaction and usability of a product, and is usually used for software, computers and on-line platforms.

Product experience has been studied from many different perspectives. For example, Desmet and Hekkert (2007) have studied the framework of product experience in which they distinguish three components: the aesthetic experience, experience of meaning and emotional experience. The aesthetic level involves a product's capacity to delight one or more of our sensory modalities. The meaning level involves the symbolic significance of products and the emotional level involves the affective system in which emotions are elicited by the manipulation of a product. The concept of product experience has also been used to study food and beverages, perhaps because they are always consumed from a container: a package, a cup, a bowl, and so on; the properties of this container may affect how the food is experienced (Schifferstein, 2009). Although the same concept has been used to study physical objects as well as food (Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008), some aspects of food and beverages might differ from those of physical objects such as the relevance of taste and smell (Cardello & Wise, 2008), culture and context of eating or drinking (Mieselman, 2008). As Fishler mentioned (1988) the human relationship to food is a complex one; food not only nourishes but also signifies. For Fishler, the act of eating and drinking implies a principle of incorporation as an act laden with meaning. To incorporate a food is to incorporate all or some of its properties, as a symbol. We become what we eat or drink (Rozin & Fallon, 1981).

In this sense, it is interesting to study the case of drinking alcohol. It is not strange that alcohol holds a special position in human life. Its influence on motor activity and its gradual effect on human consciousness are sufficiently dramatic as a ‘sign’ that alcohol is something out of the ordinary (Johansson, 2001). Alcoholic beverages have been studied for their capacity to evoke

positive or negative emotions (Arellano-Covarrubias, Gómez-Corona, & Escalona-Buendía, 2016), modify mood (Desmet, 2008) as well as for their cultural relevance (Simonnet-Toussaint, 2006), their functional benefits (Guinard, Souchart, Picot, Rogeaux, & Sieffermann, 1998), and economic impact (Euromonitor, 2014).

Among alcoholic beverages, beers, and especially craft or speciality beers, seem to be particularly well suited to study the impact of identity, culture and product experience. In Denmark, Mejlholm and Martens (2006) found that consumers are changing their pattern of consumption towards local beer as a way to seek national identity. In their study with Danish consumers, men preferred strong ale beer, perceived as local and an identity product, while women preferred a regular lager beer. In another study with beers Cardello et al. (2016) found that familiarity and novelty were powerful differentiators of beers, which had important interactions with other cognitive and emotional differentiators. Their study with New Zealand consumers, showed the most familiar beers to be “ordinary”, “boring” and “simple”, and those judged novel to be “unusual”, “intriguing”, and “complex”. In spite of this, “appealing” beers could be found among both familiar and novel samples.

In a previous study with Mexican consumers, Gómez-Corona, Escalona Buendía, García, Chollet, and Valentin (2016) concluded that motivation to drink craft beers is generated by three important factors: desire for more knowledge, new tasting experiences, and a move away from the mainstream beer consumption. They found that the motivation to consume craft beer emerged as more experience-based than functional. Although this paper sheds light on the attitudes and motivation towards craft beer consumption, it does not provide much information regarding the elements that form the drinking experience and how this experience can help us understand the differences between industrial versus craft beer consumption. In the specific case of Mexico, there has been an exponential growth of the micro-brewed beers, creating a product category that is increasingly moving away from the traditional lager beer, which was for decades the only beer available on the Mexican market. Although today the craft beer accounts for only 1% of the market share, the sales of craft beer in Mexico increased by 30% in the last five years (Euromonitor, 2016), craft beer is changing the way consumers perceive the beer category, having a different pattern of consumption compared to industrial beers. This effect might be responding to a major experiential trend in which craft beer in Mexico and other countries are a sign of it, of this experiential consumption (Gómez-Corona et al., 2016).

Thus, the aim of this research was to understand the building blocks of the drinking experience in consumers that search for an experiential consumption. A similar approach has been previously used to define the building blocks of “user experience” (Roto, 2006) for design products such as mobile phones. We were interested in knowing whether the key elements of user experience (i.e. emotional states, physical context or people involved) would generalize to the drinking experience or if the two concepts were different (drinking versus product experience). The beer category was selected as being the case study, as it clearly represents two types of attitudes (e.g. experiential versus functional) towards its consumption experience in craft and industrial beer. Following this theoretical framework, we tested these two hypotheses: 1) The building blocks of craft versus industrial beer experience are the same, in terms of variables or blocks involved in the experience of drinking; however, their relative weight differs: some blocks may be dominant during the consumption of craft beer, while other would be dominant for industrial beer consumption; 2) The experience of drinking industrial beers is similar across consumers' genders but differs for craft beers, as industrial consumers may be generally more familiar to the products than the craft consumers.

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