Crafting the Market for Bottled Water

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Crafting the Market for Bottled Water

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to account for the crafting of the constellation of brand and consumer values around an everyday product, that of bottled water. We situate the emergence of this market in its historical and cultural context, paying particular attention to the fostering of the conditions of possibility for this product in the French market. We link the socio-historical context and conditions to our respondents’ understandings and uses of bottled water in their everyday lives, highlighting the importance of a range of factors that made this market and product resonate with their requirements.

Design/methodology/approach – This account responds to the call for more engagement with social theory in marketing and consumer research. It also connects with recent scholarly pleas for a displacement of the consumer from the center of our analytic attention. It does so by using the social praxeology approach associated with Pierre Bourdieu to study the emergence, affirmation and sedimentation of the practices surrounding the consumption of bottled water in France.

Findings – Influential institutional actors invoked discourses of purity, nature, and health, juxtaposing these with the risks of tap water consumption. These were cemented by the influence of pediatricians who encouraged changes in family drinking habits which translated into long-term shifts in consumer behavior. By contrast to studies of different contexts, our respondents were greatly enamored by the materiality of the products themselves, using these in innovative ways for aesthetic pursuits. Finally, our empirical research indicates the boundary of the French field of bottled water consumption.
Research limitations/implications – In spite of the publicity surrounding the deleterious environmental effects of bottled water consumption, these concerns are not registered by our interviewees. This is an issue that further research needs to explain and we offer the proposal that what we see here may indeed be a reflection of a lack of concern for the environment, but more provocatively it could be viewed as a Freudian-type repression.

Practical Implications – Bottled water producers will have to confront the issue of the resource-intensiveness of their products. Whilst our respondents did not register this issue as salient at present, the recent practitioner reports being issued by prominent market research organizations suggest that this is not something that will remain cognitively distant for long. This can be expected to have an impact on the consumption and viability of this market in future.

Originality – This paper uses a philosophical framework – social praxeology – to chart the development, affirmation and extension of the bottled water market in France. Via a combination of historical re-construction and empirical research it highlights the interactive relationships between government, producers and consumers. It is the first account to do so.

Keywords: Bottled Water; Consumer Culture; Environment; Bourdieu; France.

Paper type: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The constitution of markets is a complex, multi-layered affair, with numerous factors impacting on the production, distribution and success of products (Pettinger, 2004; Simakova and Nyland, 2008). Some commentators point to the role of the marketing concept in ensuring product success, claiming that by meeting
the needs of consumers, we can best achieve organizational objectives (Keith, 1960; Marion, 2006). Others argue that marketing does not simply respond to customer felt needs, but actually creates them (Borch, 1958; O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2007; Starr, 2007).

In this article we offer a perspective that aims to work between these interpretations of the market creation and management process. Building on calls for greater engagement with social theory in marketing (Brownlie and Hewer, 2011) we analyze the development of the French bottled water market through the social praxeology perspective associated with Bourdieu. Bottled water is one of the fastest growing markets in the world, showing average growth rates of about 9% a year between 2001 and 2005, and continuing to increase during the period 2006 until 2012 (Euromonitor, 2012a).

While the geographic consumption landscape for these products is changing (Lloyd, 2012), at present the largest markets are located in Europe and France is considered one of the “core markets” (Euromonitor, 2012a). To provide a more tangible insight into quite how popular this product group has become, in 1946, for example, per capita consumption was just 6 liters per person (Marty, 2005). By 2005, this figure reached 171 liters (Insee, 2006).

When we reflect upon these figures in light of the fact that 99% of the French population has access to high quality tap water which costs many times less per liter than mineral water, it is clear that we cannot explain the exponential growth of this market on the basis of price competitiveness. Nor do we wish to specify a priori a powerful role for marketers in creating this market as might be the case for those pursuing a Critical Marketing agenda (e.g. Benton, 1987; Burton, 2001). Rather, we seek to hold in abeyance such presuppositions to explore the creation, sedimentation and continued expansion of the market for bottled water products. We do so using Bourdieu’s work, situating the development of this market in its historical context, combining this with empirical research into the life-world habitus of consumers.
With this in mind, this paper makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, it shows how three main Bourdieuian categories – field, capital, and habitus – can be used as prisms to study the creation of new markets. Whilst this perspective has been used to study the relational interaction between producers, retailers and consumers in studies of ethical consumer behavior (Shaw and Riach, 2011), our perspective is different in the sense that we seek to broaden the number of stakeholders this analysis takes into consideration. We explore the interaction of producers and consumers, as well as government and its policy-making function, alongside figures outside of traditional marketing channels such as the medical and sports communities. Each of these groups impacts upon the development of the market for bottled water, acting in a network-like structure to affect the development, reception and reaffirmation of this product among its target consumers.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: we begin by detailing the assumptions underpinning social praxeology. In order to clarify the assumptions that Bourdieu has empirically and conceptually fleshed out, we differentiate the approach we adopt from structuralism. This is undertaken to avoid the criticisms of Bourdieu’s work (Brownlie and Hewer, 2011) that he denies agency in preference for a deterministic view of human nature when he invokes the concept of habitus. We follow this with an explanation of the category of “field”; alongside the various forms of capital that institutions and individuals alike can mobilize in their negotiation tactics; subsequently turning to an exposition of the concept of habitus. Next we outline the data collection procedures and the multiple data sources that informed our historical reconstruction of the field category. Attention then turns to our empirical research, using the three key categories indicated above to flesh out the structure and relations between key actors involved in the creation, maintenance and affirmation of the French bottled water market. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study and outline directions for future research.

2. Social Praxeology
Pierre Bourdieu’s work has previously been partly incorporated into marketing and consumer research, with a number of scholars focusing on the relations between people, the cultural climate, the marketplace and the various forms of capital that are utilized in attempts to position and cultivate a sense of self (e.g. Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013; Hanser, 2012; Holt, 1997, 1998; Shaw and Riach, 2011; Tapp and Warren, 2010; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010). Since Bourdieu’s work is complex it is appropriate to return to his original writings to unravel the key assumptions that inform his various studies. We should note that Bourdieu’s scholarship is an iterative affair whereby he subjects his concepts to continual critique via empirical research. As such, our purpose here is simply to offer an insight into his research as it applies to the study that follows. Such an approach is consistent with Bourdieu’s own practice.

In various places, Bourdieu has sought to underscore his distance from structuralism, particularly the variant associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Where Lévi-Strauss describes the micro-level practices of his anthropological subjects as largely determined by wider operative structures, Bourdieu speaks of the importance of habitus formation. People, for Bourdieu, are endowed with a “habitus”, that is, a set of dispositions that orient how they interpret and how they act in any given context. Our habitus is a function of history, socialization, biography and biology respectively. The possession of a habitus does not mean that individual actors are likely to act in ways that are necessarily rational or logical, but neither should we assume a priori that practices are not based on some form of logic. As Wacquant puts it,

“Habitus is creative, inventive, but within the limits of its structures, which are the embodied sedimentation of the social structures which produced it. Thus both concepts of habitus and field are relational in the…sense that they function only in relation to one another. A field is not simply a dead structure, a set of “empty places,” as in Althusserian Marxism, but a space of play which exists as such only to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prizes it offers. An adequate theory of field, therefore, requires a theory
of social agents…Conversely, the theory of habitus is incomplete without the notion of structure that makes room for the organized improvisation of agents.”

(Wacquant, 1992, p. 19; emphases in original)

Lest he be accused of modifying the lexicon employed by structuralist thinkers, Bourdieu is very quick to argue that, if anything, his work should be considered “anti-structuralist” (Bourdieu, 2008). His is not, he maintains, a “pessimistic functionalism” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 80). Throughout his writings he highlights the importance of studying human behavior in context, taking due account of the agency of the individual. But, whilst he highlights his distance from structuralism, in equal measure he dissociates himself from existentialism which assumes agentic self-constitution that transcends historical, structural and cultural influences. Bourdieu’s work, then, axiologically lies between the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the profoundly subjectivist, individualistic conception of the subject found in the existentialism of Sartre.

Put differently, scholarship inspired by Bourdieu is interested in how wider structural factors influence and shape the way we perceive social reality at an individual level, but it places more emphasis on non-individual structuring factors than has typically been the case in interpretive marketing and consumer research (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Moisander et al., 2009). This has important ramifications for the methodological strategy that is employed. Conceptually Bourdieu refers to the intertwining of three categories. The first is termed the “field”. For consumer researchers the field can be conceived at a level below structural factors such as the political, the economic, or the cultural environment which are external to the individual yet which shape self-conceptions and decision-making. The field is inflected by structural factors whilst it patterns the positions that can be adopted by those operating within it.

While he is careful in terms of the analogies he uses, Bourdieu sometimes compares the relationship between the field and those within it to the relations between a magnet and its influence on the environment. A field does
something similar in that the participants compete to help shape the (discursive) texture of the field which are, in turn, received, reinterpreted or rejected by those involved in the status-games characteristic of the marketplace. The ability of any one participant to do this effectively is mediated by the forms of capital they possess. These include economic, cultural (or informational) and symbolic capitals.

Within a capitalistic marketplace, economic capital is considered one of the most important by Bourdieu. Major participants in a marketplace, for instance, large wealthy institutions such as corporations are likely to be able to shape the formation of discourses in a field. This does not mean that economic capital is necessarily powerful, but it does provide corporations with the ability to stake out their position in the field, differentiating themselves from other participants, often drawing from prominent cultural discourses that are already in circulation to help symbolically legitimate their products and services, thereby further cementing their position (e.g. Holt, 2006; McCracken, 2005).

Symbolic capital is a function of the recognition that is granted to an organization and is somewhat contingent upon their ability to define the categories that are used by actors to orient their behaviors and which frame the products or services being offered in a way that is preferential to the company. Alternatively, it can be the recognition and prestige that an individual has managed to accumulate in some way. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic, non-financial capital accrued by virtue of, for instance, institutional accreditation offered by scholarly institutions and training programs that certify an individual as a professional in their intellectual domain. On the other hand this type of capital can be communicated via the socialization that takes place between family members and wider social circles which provide advice about how to successfully negotiate different life experiences such as having children.

These conceptual and theoretical assumptions are reflected in the methodological approach that Bourdieu frames as “social praxeology”. Specifically, such research needs to describe the historical emergence of the
space of competition that forms the field of interest. Secondly, it has to identify the key discourses mobilized by prominent actors in the field. These constitute attempts to define the “objective structures” of the field, those “spaces” occupied by particular actors (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) who seek to define the categories connected to this market. Finally, having identified via historical reconstruction the “fuzzy” boundaries of the field, Bourdieu counsels that empirical research is essential (Calhoun and Wacquant, 2002). This involves sketching the dispositions and styles of reasoning that are associated with a given consumption practice, highlighting their interplay with the field itself.

Reflecting the above axiology, epistemology and view of human nature, our use of social praxeology to outline the creation of the French bottled water market has been guided by a number of questions: what groups were involved in the emergence, fostering and sedimentation of the field of bottled water? What kinds of capital do the agents possess and how do they mobilize them? What are the preconditions for the emergence and fostering of habitus formation regarding preferences in relation to bottled water? Understanding such complex factors is best achieved through a process of historical contextualization, where pertinent economic, social, political and cultural factors are studied to help unravel the social patterning of consumption choice behavior (see also Giesler, 2012; Moisander et al., 2009 for related arguments). As such, before entering the field, our preliminary data collection focused on all facts concerning the development of the French bottled water market, with particular attention devoted to the roles of government, manufacturers and marketing practice in fostering this industry.

We collected a wide variety of bottled water related material such as books, advertisements, bottles and labels, and visited, photographed and filmed events sponsored by bottled water companies. This data is used to thematically and contextually situate the perspectives of our research co-participants (cf. Smith and Lux, 1993, p. 604). Second, we undertook empirical research to identify the factors that fostered habitus formation among consumers of bottled water in France. A summary of the archive of data is shown in Table 1.
The main method of field-based research was the interview combined with unstructured observation at various social events sponsored by water companies (e.g. sports meetings). In depth interviews lasted from 17 minutes up to 33 minutes and were undertaken between May and July 2006, all in the Paris region and nearby cities. Respondents were either French nationals or had lived in the country for a substantial amount of time (i.e. the major proportion of their lives). This filter was used to limit analytic attention to only those individuals who had experience and knowledge of the consumption of bottled waters in France (Moisander et al., 2009; Thompson et al. 1989) (see Table 2), with the data analyzed via multiple iterations of close reading of interview transcripts and a part-to-whole interpretive strategy (Thompson, 1997).

Having discussed the central tenets of the Bourdieuan approach that we draw upon theoretically, conceptually and methodologically, we now turn to establish the key categories of field, capital and habitus. As Bourdieu and colleagues remind us, these categories feed into each other in a co-constitutive process. For this reason, any attempt to parse the conceptual exposition, empirical research and discussion will reflect a similar shading process.

3. Field: The Emergence and Constitution of the Bottled Water Market in France

The history of bottled water has been traced by various commentators to different periods. Spar and Bebenek (2008) highlight the ancient origins of this product, outlining the history from the early Egyptians and their valorization of the water taken from the River Nile via the Romans, through to the 16th century and beyond...
(Foltz, 1999). By the 17th century bottling technology had become sophisticated enough to permit the relatively easy transportation of water over long distances. Supporting the interest in bottled water was the rise of the popularity of spas across the United Kingdom, Europe and America respectively. In the period between the 17th and 19th century, spas were still viewed as locations where people went for health restoration. Gradually this image was slowly supplemented with spas increasingly being associated with luxury consumption and seen as desirable places where the rich and famous could rejuvenate themselves in pleasant surroundings, relaxing, engaging in business transactions or just getting away from everyday busyness (Spar and Bebenek, 2008).

The French have been drinking bottled water for centuries. Some of the major producers associated with this marketplace such as Evian and Perrier have been actively transporting and selling their products around the world since the early twentieth century (Spar and Bebenek, 2008). Until the middle of the twentieth century bottled water remained largely a specialty good and, as McCracken appreciates, “It is clear that each product category and brand has a heritage, a body of meanings that have come to surround the brand over time. An inventory of this heritage will show that some meanings are richer…[and] it is more strategic to take advantage of meanings already in place” (2005, p. 179). So it is with bottled water.

Prior to 1950, for the majority of the population its image was mainly associated with medicines and thermal stations (Marty, 2005). It was still too expensive and sparsely distributed to be considered among the options for everyday consumption for most people. At that time, the French market was dominated by tap water companies, including Compagnie Générale des Eaux (i.e. Veolia), founded in 1853; Lyonnaise des Eaux (Suez), established in 1880; and Saur, in 1933. Given the limited consumption and knowledge of bottled water products, the cognitive categories affiliated with it were circumscribed. It was still allied with “taking the waters”; this image was reaffirmed through the distribution methods adopted by the small number of companies producing bottled water, which were reliant on drugstores as their main point of contact with the ultimate consumer. This was to alter at the end of the 1950s when there was a significant change in government legislation which set the
“ground rules” determining the production and distribution of this product (Peterson and Anand, 2004). These changes influenced aspects of production, transportation, blending, classification and sales, supporting the creation of a mass market (Chambriard, 1998).

This legislative shift was revolutionary and new entrants emerged; new entrants that ultimately became market leaders, including Nestlé and Danone in the 1960’s and 1970’s and Neptune (Castel Group) in the 1990’s. These corporations were already operating in the food industry and saw an opportunity to increase their profits by exploring the bottled water market. They acquired well known, but smaller enterprises, starting the process of brand management, later launching their own ranges. By the 1990’s and 2000’s, then, there was an expansion of the varieties of bottled water available, accelerated by the launch of Cristaline by the Castel Group in 1992, followed by the launch of water differentiated by source, type of purification and flavor. Product and brand innovations resulted in the expansion of the boundaries of this market still further (Eurostaf, 2004), with the material transformation of the product, that is, the use of plastic rather than glass, easing the market penetration of this consumable, making it convenient for people to carry without fear of breakage in transit (Hawkins, 2009, 2011). Underwriting this market expansion, however, was a process of problematization which was based upon the symbolic construction of brand images differentiating bottled from tap water.


Bottled water marketers often partner their products with imagery intended to speak to purity (Chase and Schlink, 1927; De Coverly et al., 2008; Opel, 1999; Spar and Bebenek, 2008; Wilk, 2006). For example, key reference points include a hydrographic basin, a city or region, a natural formation or a specific mineral water source (Race, 2012). Evian, for instance, invokes the purity connected with melted water streaming from the Alps; and the energizing power of geysers underpins the strategy of Arvie.
These references to purity are one way in which manufacturers distinguish bottled water from tap water. By referring to purity – as if one is somehow more pure than the other – it logically follows that the other is somehow substandard, somehow less pure and possibly dangerous to consume (Hawkins, 2009). These reference points have historically struck a chord with consumers concerned with their health and welfare in an environment of product adulteration, poisoning and swindling (Wilson, 2009). In this case, it appears that the claims to purity produce what others have called an “ideological effect”, as the linkage of purity and bottled water is subject to contestation (see Foltz, 1999; Wilk, 2006); bottled water sometimes contains more impurities than tap water, given that the latter is subject to far more stringent testing than the former.

Still, this is not to dismiss the perceived risks associated with local water consumption. Some of our respondents articulated similar interpretations regarding the contamination of the water-table by harmful substances. These kinds of associations parallel those outlined by Beck (1992) in his exposition of the risk society. What Beck maintains is that people are preoccupied with various types of risk that are a concomitant of modernity. For our interviewees, the consumption of local water was firmly interwoven with a discourse of risk (see also Race, 2012). It impacted on their consumption habits, leading them to switch from a previously ingrained habit of tap water to bottled water consumption. Respondents from agricultural and industrial regions alike indicated that the pollution of water flows and a perception of poor infrastructure maintenance were significant reasons for the consumption of bottled in place of tap water:

[Informant] – “When I was a child we used to drink always tap water…I don’t know why I began to drink bottled water. I’m from the Bretagne, west of France…Bretagne is a[n] agricultural region, there is a lot of pork breeding…people accuse farmers and pork breeders [of polluting water with nitrates]…this is why in Bretagne we say that tap water has lots of nitrates and is not good. But it’s true that we used to drink tap water when I was a child, but…we began to drink bottled water…lots of people have changed their habits…I think it is a massive [change in] behavior.” (Pauline, 35 years-old)
[Informant] – “My parents have always bought water in Normandy [their home region]...there was always bottled water on the table...my friends used to drink tap water regularly...I think there was a time when there was a [negative] preoccupation with tap water due to pollution; I think this has influenced my parents.” (Edith, 30 years-old)

These are not necessarily surprising interpretations. Among certain market actors, there were explicit moves to undermine the image of tap water. As a case in point, Cristaline uses a straightforward positioning strategy presenting itself as a substitute for tap water. Where consumers’ may previously have attributed tap water with qualities such as value for money, the communications for Cristaline seek to “shake the sign” of economy (Goldman and Papson, 1996), substituting in its place the trope of contamination.

Irrespective of the scientific credibility of the purity of bottled water, these concerns were important for Pauline, Edith, and Charlotte among others. And our close reading of the history of this market, along with the comments from those we interviewed, indicates that pollution, the activities of farmers, along with marketing communications which echoed the debates surrounding purity versus contamination, operated as a cultural context in which there were changes in the behavior of our respondents.

For those born during the growth years of bottled water (1960 onwards), the invocation of purity, the use of natural reference points like glaciers, and the ties of bottled water to medical and health concerns are important axes around which this market is reproduced (Race, 2012; Wilk, 2006). What has not been acknowledged in empirical research is how these associations are supported by influential intermediaries in France.

5. Medical and Maternity Associations: Cultivating Bottled Water Consumption
Throughout its history, bottled water has been connected with medicine or health improvement (Royte, 2008). This representation continues to be used by some of the major producers which invest themselves with diuretic properties (Vittel), liver protection and insomnia avoidance (Hépar), the amelioration of kidney stones (Evian), and overall health benefits (Vichy-Célestins) (Spar and Bebenek, 2008).

For a considerable period now, symbolic invocations of medicine have been used to sell products and services on the basis of their presumed health benefits (Brown, 2001; Frederick, 1929). The use of expert intermediaries continues to the present day. The reasoning behind the use of qualified practitioners is that they represent highly credible sources by virtue of their training and knowledge (Hovland and Weiss, 1951-1952; Palmer and Alpher, 1937). This increases their effectiveness as communicators of brand and product messages to those currently undergoing changes in their lifecycle (McCracken, 1989).

For instance, pregnancy and motherhood are lifecycle events when new parents devote more attention to health maintenance. Brands such as Vittel and Evian have drawn upon this kind of discourse in their marketing strategies. Evian has associated itself with meanings of purity, cleanliness, and stresses that it is suitable for pregnant women and recently-born children. Taking their cue from already existing cultural understandings of the therapeutic qualities of mineral water, manufacturers have underscored the medical benefits of water consumption and these brands enroll pediatricians in their attempts to influence consumer taste development. This is a particularly apposite move. Not only are people interacting with the medical community at a time of change and stress, but the interaction partner here is likely to be female. As feminist consumer researchers have pointed out, women read the cues offered by marketing communications differently to men. Specifically, they are less inclined to impute bias or problematize social credibility (Stern, 1992, 1993).

Utilizing the support of pediatricians in the promotion of bottled water is thus a logical strategy and was undertaken in numerous ways. For example, Mineralix Santé? is a specialist publication owned by Nestlé that
targets medical practitioners. It contains numerous articles about bottled water, often relating the consumption of this product to health issues. Buttressing this health message, the articles are accompanied by topical features that discuss scientific developments in the processing of various types of water along with frequent advertisements for the company’s major bottled water brands that reiterate the benefits and claims associated with this product for this key audience. Indeed, medical practitioners are reminded that there is a dedicated telephone line – the so-called “green number” – which enables them to speak to appropriate company representatives. While the extent to which practitioners make use of such services is unclear, the impact of pediatricians on the consumption practices of our respondents is not as ambiguous:

[Informant] – “We buy Evian because we have children; otherwise, I would buy another [brand] on the supermarket [shelf].

[Interviewer] – Why do you think Evian is better?

[Informant] – Why? [laughter]. Because this [is] the water that is freely distributed [to you] when you…have a baby. They say ‘drink Evian’…it’s the maternities that say to you to buy it to prepare the feeding bottle...and for everything else…the maternity and the pediatrician…they are the ones who impose Evian and not [some] other [brand of] water, and then…sometimes they say that when the baby is constipated you should buy Hépar.”

(Jayne, 39 years-old)

[Interviewer] – “When did you change your habits [in terms of drinking water]?

[Informant] – When I had my babies. When we are pregnant we are completely conditioned to...fear...bacteria...sickness, and actually it’s when the medical doctors want to sensitize [us]...

[Interviewer] – Have you gone to a pediatrician?

[Informant] – Yes, and before [I went]...the gynecologist...says we have to pay attention to what we eat, drink...and water is one of those things we need to check...and when a baby is born, we are very influenced by advertising because the feeding bottles are associated with Evian...then we begin [to drink bottled water]...and
then the child becomes used to drink[ing] bottled water…the family as a consequence drinks bottled water
too…and this doesn’t stop anymore.” (Cherry, 47 years-old)

Our respondents indicated that this was an important strategy, connecting bottled water consumption with the
desire of new parents to engage in appropriate forms of impression and health management (Goffman, 1959;
Race, 2012). More pragmatically, it was also registered that bottled water in plastic containers is easily
transportable; an especially important feature when dealing with young infants. These habits, introduced by
influential figures, continue to be further incorporated into the life-world of consumers via family socialization
mechanisms, dietary norms and family food events.

**The Gastronomic Code of Bottled Water Consumption**

Our respondents articulated a complex understanding of the relationships between bottled water, food and wine
consumption which chime with gastronomic discourse. Since this is a longstanding cultural practice in France,
having emerged in the 19th century (Ferguson 1998), this makes it a desirable activity with which to associate
bottled water. As Royte (2008, p. 26) puts it: “In Europe, they value food. High-end waters, with nice bottles
and brands, tie into this concept”. The association of bottled water to gastronomy was widely appreciated by
informants.

Just as wine enthusiasts enjoy stratified price points, water consumers have an equally large range of offerings
available, running from low price, mass market products, through to very high end items (e.g. Acqua di
Cristallo Tributo a Modigliani, Glace Iceberg Water). These rarified products aside, innovations in containers
for bottled water, their labels and the imagery that accompanied popular brands, are commensurate with
attempts to provide a connoisseur-like subject position. Supermarket shelves are weighed down with various
sizes and shapes, all jostling for customer attention. These marketers take what Holt calls one “of… the most
mundane of consumption objects” (1998, p. 17), investing it with a variety of different qualities and meanings in sophisticated ways.

What we would argue is that consumption practices in this case can be fruitfully understood through the prism of Marx’s comments on fetishism. For Marx, the term commodity fetishism refers to the practice whereby an item is ascribed “mystical qualities” which obfuscate its real characteristics and use-value (Ellen, 1988). As Marx put it, “The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise…from the stomach or the imagination makes no difference” (Marx, 1976, p. 125). It is plausible to suggest that bottled water producers are encouraging commodity fetishism in the sense that people are happy to pay a premium for a product otherwise available at minimal price via the municipal water system. Their willingness to pay this premium is arguably related to the marketing activities of producers in terms of the aesthetics of the bottles, advertising and promotions.

While our interviewees had their own interpretive repertoires for the bottled water products they consumed, their fetishistic behavior was aided by corporate efforts to produce aesthetically pleasing advertising that spoke to the cultural capital of their audiences. It did so, for instance, via the use of artistic images created by prominent artists such as Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali (for Perrier) or celebrity endorsement via important musical cultural icons including John Lennon, Edith Piaf (for Perrier) and David Bowie (for Vittel). What we wish to firmly underscore is that by contrast to Hawkins who argues that “marketing seeks to diminish or neutralize the presence of the bottle” (2009, p. 192), we find exactly the opposite strategy being used. The materiality of the container plays an important role in constituting brand image. It supports and encourages fetishistic behavior by consumers, enabling them to derive their own meanings from package design, construction (glass or plastic), size, volume, transparency, color, shape and label (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Race, 2012).
Among our respondents there was a strong symbolic association between the physical construction of the bottles and the importance of the social occasion when water is consumed. In effect, respondents devised their own “gastronomic code” for the consumption of bottled water (Ferguson, 1998). As a rule, glass bottles were considered more suitable for important social or business events:

[Informant] – “…in a business meeting I would ask for Evian in glass…or San Pellegrino.

[Interviewer] – Why a glass bottle?

[Informant] – I don’t know…but Evian bottles…are always glass ones. In important dinners I’ve noticed that Evian…[is] served in glass bottles. I think this brings a more solemn image than the plastic bottle. It reduces the impression of something cheap…it has a connotation more refined than the plastic bottle.” (Daniele, 25 years-old)

By contrast, for an informal meeting or a meal with a loved one, the materiality of the product was less salient. In this context, plastic bottles were considered appropriate: “In a special dinner we are prone to ask [for] a bottle [of water] made of glass; that’s for sure! When we are with someone whom we know well it doesn’t matter” (Philip, 20 years-old).

Moreover our interviewees did not necessarily view the container, after consuming the water inside, “as waste” (Hawkins, 2009: 191). This is a function of the time and attention that has been lavished on the material presence of the bottle and its use as a key differentiator. Some brands have developed special edition bottles, either for important events such as Evian’s New Year bottles or sporting fixtures (e.g. Perrier’s for Rolland Garros). Evian’s bottles, most notably, aesthetically demarcate themselves in sophisticated ways, symbolically linking the brand with purity via the glass construction and their tear and glacial shaped bottles. This, in turn,
encourages consumers’ to view the bottles in ways that transcend their normal function of protection, information or packaging. The bottles became objects of desire (Belk et al., 2003).

Here we are far removed from the idea that people merely passively consume particular commodities or the “staged histories” offered by practitioners in support of brand image and equity (Thompson and Tian, 2008). As numerous scholars have pointed out, this is a limitation of early models of meaning production and dissemination (e.g. McCracken, 1986) with their comparatively unidirectional flow of meaning from producers to consumers. With increased attention being paid to the co-creation of meaning, consumer behavior is re-conceptualized as “proactive” in terms of meaning constitution (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011). Corporations and their consumer market act, in other words, like bricoleurs. The former co-opt cultural resources to mold the meanings attached to products via marketing communications (Holt, 2006); the latter accept, reject, or redefine the meanings that are offered to fit with their social world and specific circumstances (Campbell, 2005).

Consumer bricolage in the case of our participants manifested itself in their use of an aesthetically pleasing bottle to “fashion the home” (McCracken, 1989, p. 314). These products were used as decoration in their living accommodations; a use not reflected in any marketing communications, but which resonates with wider design changes in which aesthetically keyed individuals look to unusual resources like bottles to enact a personalized twist on a “taste regime” (Arsel and Bean, 2013). In their recent study Arsel and Bean specifically refer to an individual using a lemonade bottle which has undergone the purification of its commercial attributes. Our respondents did not undertake to minimize the “signs of commercial production” that the aforementioned authors documented. As one informant averred, “I liked this golden drop [Evian’s 2001 special edition bottle] very much; it’s charming. In general, we do not buy them to drink, but to decorate [the house]” (Esther, 26 years-old).
Whereas American consumers do not apparently consider the aesthetic qualities of bottled water packaging or brand names as important, focusing instead on price (Geissler and Gamble, 2002), Edith, Vera, and Esther paid a great deal of attention to packaging and brand names:

[Informant] – “The packaging has an influence…it is true that [it] is something simple, but we feel more encouraged to consume [it] if the bottle has a[n] elegant shape. I don’t try any particular brand, but I did like to try the new bottle of Vittel…it is something stupid, but I wanted to try it...to compare...For example, I found the same bottle in my parents’ house. My mother said to me: ‘…it’s a new bottle...its red, she shines...’” (Edith, 30 years-old)

[Informant] – “I think that today there is much more communication about water...this creates an aesthetics of water...and to drink water today is ‘tendance’...there is a need of purity.

[Interviewer] – …what do you mean by ‘tendance’?

[Informant] – It’s a tendance, it’s a fashion.” (Vera, 27 years-old)

This fashion aspect influenced the use of bottles in the home and outside. The activity of carrying a bottle of water was considered to be a communicative act, communicating messages about who they were, their lifestyle and their personality (Belk 1988):

[Informant] – “…there is probably a certain fashion of having your bottle...now they make bottles for New Years’ day...Advertising has had an enormous impact...Now there is this ‘brand effect.’” (Edith, 30 years-old)

[Informant] “…there are certain people that like very much to have a small bottle of water. It’s like a cigarette...to have a small bottle of water. Sometimes it’s like a social object, like the cigarette, or the [mobile]
phone. We love to have a nice bottle of water. For example, in my bag [I]...have one bottle of water...it’s a bottle that has a particular form. It’s not a big bottle.

[Interviewer] – So it’s not any kind of bottle?

[Informant] – No, it’s very personal the bottle of water someone has. This defines well one’s personality.”

(Esther, 26 years-old)

Not only was the materiality of the container viewed as an important signal of the personality of the individual carrying it, the product inside literally helps to fashion the embodied character of the person themselves via its perceived health and performance benefits.

*Lifestyle and Health Benefits*

With the growth in knowledge about the impact of healthy or unhealthy lifestyles on lifespan and quality of life, some consumers have sought to modify their consumption habits either as a response to health concerns or because of advice from significant others and the influence of intermediaries such as marketers and medical practitioners. To move from the general structure of the field to the practices of a specific provider, Badoit has positioned itself as beneficial for digestion, helping people overcome bloating after a rich meal. Attempts to symbolically invoke this discourse of health and wellbeing appear to make business sense given the changing nature of consumption habits in France. Wine intake has declined dramatically from well over one hundred liters to under 50 liters per capita. At the same time as this shift took place, the consumption of bottled water accelerated from 27 to 152 liters per capita (Insee, 2004). But, Bourdieu tells us to be attentive to the “hidden mechanisms of social life” (Calhoun and Bourdieu, 2002), that is, those field defining operations that may not be obvious immediately. As such, changes in marketing strategy could, other scholars have asserted, conceivably be related to changes in the definition of the field of health.
Race (2012), for example, describes a series of changes in the social environment that have impacted upon the
definition of health and refract upon the role of hydration in everyday life. These include the scientific
contributions of sports researchers studying the importance of hydration in marathon running, the institutional
support for physical research, the growth in interest in health and exercise, combined with a neoliberal emphasis
on self-directed health management, all of which are fed through into the marketing of bottled water on a large
scale. These shifts in health concerns were reflected in the marketing outputs of prominent brands in France
which sought to generate symbolic capital by associating their products with diet, health, fitness, thinness and
beauty (Featherstone, 1982).

Contrex, Taillefine and Courmayer position themselves as waters for people concerned with thinness and
beauty. Vittel, Volvic, Perrier and Aquarel coupled their brands to sports activities. Our findings concur in part
with Race (2012) but also take a slightly different tack, focusing more on aesthetic self-cultivation which is
largely ignored in extant research. Interviewees frequently mentioned the relationship between bottled water
and a healthy active lifestyle, occasionally pointing to the influence of other opinion leaders who encouraged
increased water consumption:

[Informant] – “I drink San Pellegrino after sport practice…to recover…because it is very mineralized.
[Interviewer] – How have you learned this?
[Informant] – The [sports] coaches tell us to drink sparkling water.” (Richard, 26 years-old)

[Informant] – “…when I buy bottled water [it] is due to health [concerns] or when I want to lose weight. Tap
water is for when I’m thirsty. Bottled water is for when I don’t want to drink a cola because I’m on a diet or
when I need magnesium…or due to any other health concern.” (Barbara, 30 years-old)
Informant] – “I think people believe in anything that they think will help them to lose weight. They are ready to believe in anything that says ‘drink it and you will lose weight’…they will do it…and Contrex [Nestlé’s brand] for me is a synonym of diet…and I don’t like the taste of Contrex. Thus, I’ll only consume Contrex if I really have a problem.” (Daniele, 25 years-old)

Many of our informants stated that they began to consume bottled water when they became more concerned with their body image or sports performance; issues which have merited increased attention during the growth period of the bottled water market (Featherstone, 1982). What we see in the discussion therefore are the important relational interactions between the field and prominent corporate actors that seek to shape it in ways most conducive to the translation of symbolic currency into economic capital, that is, to organizational imperatives of differentiation and profit accumulation. These attempts to texture the field cannot be divorced from wider changes in French society such as an aging population focused on their health, the decline in wine consumption, the accelerated consumption of bottled water at important social events, all encouraged and justified by the interventions of actors with high levels of cultural capital, especially pediatricians and sports coaches. Across the narratives offered by our respondents, however, there was a clear lacunae which signals the current boundaries of the field of bottled water namely, the complete absence of any links between the consumption of these products to wider impacts on the environment.

6. The Boundaries of the Field: Environmental Pollution and the Consumption of Bottled Water

Capitalism, for Marx, systematically elides the human origins of the products we consume. We forget the production relations that underpin our consumption patterns. This can happen because we are cognitively and spatially distant from those who make the goods we consume (Desmond, 1998). In equal measure, there are ways and means that producers and governments alike are complicit in ensuring that the actual, often deleterious, impact of our consumer lifestyles, are removed from our everyday processes of self-reflection. De
Coverly et al (2008), for example, point to the nature of waste collection in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, highlighting how the rubbish we dispose of is collected before we wake or while we are at work. We thus never actually see and smell the ultimate result of our resource intensive lifestyles. As these authors write,

“Even in areas where tap water is safe to drink, demand for bottled water is rising. As such, the production and consumption of bottled water create unnecessary garbage and consume vast quantities of energy…The environmental problems associated with bottled water are numerous. It tends to be packaged in single-serving plastic bottles [and]…If they are simply dumped into landfill, they can take up to one thousand years to biodegrade. If they are incinerated, they produce toxic-by-products such as chlorine gas and ash containing heavy metals…Thus recycling is the only real option. However, only 23 percent of bottled water containers are recycled in the United States…Even when recycled, it is hard to turn…into new bottles. More virgin material is always necessary.”

(De Coverly et al., 2008, p. 298)

Given this, we might have expected to hear our respondents articulate some discomfort with this concomitant of their practices in view of the extent to which this environmental-political aspect of bottled water consumption serves for the mobilization of social criticism. As Hawkins underscores, the activist community and manufacturers of competing products have problematized the associations of purity and the “imaginary lifeworlds that bottled-water advertising so assiduously creates” (2011, p. 537). These images “collapse in the face of the brute reality of the bottle and its filthy industrial origins” (ibid). But, as De Coverely et al (2008) remind us, we are often far removed from either the production and industrial origins of the products we consume or not engaged with the waste products of capitalistic production when we have used them. Connected to this, the structure of capitalism works to distract our attention: modern lives are extremely busy and advertising provides an ever-changing landscape of cultural distraction; indeed our attention is very selective and information processing by many consumers limited.
Moreover, people frequently do not change their behavior in the face of accumulated knowledge of harmful environmental effects. And we do generally know about the environment harms that accompany packaging; the news media reinforce this periodically (Cluley and Dunne, 2012). These acts of repression do return to consciousness on occasion albeit “in safe forms” (Billig, 1999, p. 326). As Billig explains, we can justify continued consumption if it is used to help benefit others, irrespective of the harm it might wreak on the natural environment which, of course, has effects on those making their livings using the environment itself. For consumers of bottled water, there is an outlet for their repressed knowledge of environmental harm namely the purchase of ethical products which benefit those in “less developed countries” like certain brands of bottled water (Brei and Bohm, 2011).

Nevertheless, Hawkins (2011) underlines the prominence of accounts which destabilize the meaning of bottled water, highlighting the dark-side of this consumption practice. For our respondents, these accounts have not touched their life-world, perhaps testifying to the power of mainstream corporations to craft the “necessary illusions” (Chomsky, 1989) or the fact that people simply do not have the interest, time, or will to process the environmental information about this product in the face of industry attempts to provide the “replacement thoughts” (Billig, 1999) that are essential to the perpetuation of commodity fetishism; these include the discourses detailed in our empirics around purity, aesthetics and lifestyle fashioning.

Hawkins, we should add, is correct to note the potentiality for this discourse of environmental pollution to disturb the interconnected conceptual webs circulating around bottled water. After all, turning to practitioner reports reveals that Mintel and Euromonitor have both cited “consumers’ environmental concerns with regard to the potential impact of bottled water” (Euromonitor, 2012a). The potential and current purchasers of these products apparently register the “hefty environmental footprint” (Euromonitor, 2012b) and the “negative publicity surrounding the environment effects” of the bottles (Lloyd, 2012). These issues have not punctured the
discourse of purity or the conception of risk articulated by those we interviewed, despite the fact that they have
been widely cited for a considerable time, albeit in specialized media outlets.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Using the insights offered by Bourdieu’s social praxeology as our springboard, we have demonstrated that the
French bottled water market is the product of at least a double social construction: demand is fostered through
the development of preferences and tastes; supported via state policy and laws, producer activities and
marketing practices aimed at the development of a market for this product (Bourdieu, 2001).

Our construction of the field category shows that there have been a number of key historical moments that
contributed to the development of the market for bottled water. First, the transformation of water into an
economic object in the 18th and 19th centuries; until then, water was not considered by law or the overall
population, as something much different from air: a free, collective good, not an economic object. Second, the
foundation and growth of private industry that treated and distributed water between the mid 19th century and
1930. Despite the existence of a few brands sold in bottles, until that moment bottled water was a luxurious
product, largely associated with medicine and thermal stations. For the vast majority of the population, water
originally had no meaning other than its hydration function. Third, the modification in legislation promoted
major changes in production, transportation, blending, classification and sales, supporting the creation of a mass
market. Fourth, the development of a mass-market derived from the entrance into the field of major institutional
actors such as Nestlé, Danone and Castel between the 1950s and 1990s. Fifth, the veritable explosion of bottle
water brands that differentiated their product on the basis of function, flavor and so forth.

Throughout the recent history of this product, but especially from the 1990s, marketing has played a role in the
creation of the market for bottled water, helping modify consumer habitus. The massive investments in this
market by some of the biggest corporations in the world has enabled them to translate their considerable economic capital into the symbolic capital associated with major brand-names jostling for position within this product category; capital which is leveraged in terms of the economic benefits it provides.

Drawing from our wider data set of 357 marketing communications for all of the major brands in this market, they reflect and refract many of the themes our respondents described. Thus, some of the key symbolic meanings include associations with medicine (Vittel, Hépar, and Vichy-Célestins), digestion and gastronomy (St-Yorre and Perrier), motherhood/fatherhood (Evian), slimming and beauty aids (Contrex, Taillefine, and Vichy-Célestins), energy provision and sexual arousal (Evian, Perrier and Vittel), sports drink (Volvic), and luxury and sophistication (San Pellegrino) among others. These communications provide the discursive resources through which our respondents make sense of their consumption practices and that reflect historically and contextually sedimented values that resonate with the French marketplace.

To conclude, we have identified three different aspects of habitus change: 1) life cycle, 2) non-entrepreneurial external influences, and 3) life style influences. What this means theoretically is that we would argue that marketing theory must critically assess the centrality of the individual consumer in our discussions of consumption practices, incorporating a greater range of actors into our theoretical and conceptual accounts. In terms of this paper, by using the work of Bourdieu as our sensitizing device, it has encouraged us to incorporate the activities of actors whose actions can change the macro-environment such as government. In equal measure, it called attention to the practices of influential agents such as the medical and sports communities. The first group had a major role to play in encouraging the consumption of bottled water in the narratives relayed by our respondents who had undergone a major change in their lives as new parents. Being encouraged to use bottled water for their new born child subsequently influenced the consumption habits of the rest of the family in some cases. The second group was particularly prominent in the accounts provided by respondents engaged in sports and recreational activities. By expanding our focus to include individual consumers, institutional actors and
expert communities, we gain insights into the tapestry of factors that help constitute a particular consumption pattern.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Our methodological strategy was based on the use of multiple sources of data that included the historical reconstruction of the bottled water market, complemented with relevant material disseminated by bottled water producers and the perspectives of consumers’ themselves. There are a number of ways in which scholars could expand upon the empirical research conducted here. Linked to the historical reconstruction provided in the first part of the paper, further studies could engage in oral historical interviews (Davies and Elliott, 2006) with marketing managers and advertising executives who have played an important role in expanding the market for this product. Such investigations could be further developed with the study of corporate records about specific campaigns and the perceived relationships between competitors (Savitt, 1980).

Paying due attention to their narratives is important by virtue of the role marketers have played in constituting and reaffirming systems of cultural and consumption values (Peñaloza, 2000). But, the difficulty of this type of research should not be underestimated. Savitt (1980) points out that many firms are unwilling to let scholars explore their records due to the insensitivity with which they have been treated in the past. This said, it would certainly be of interest to compare and contrast their practice-led intentions with consumer reception of the various marketing communications circulated by bottled water producers because this group of actors are charged with ensuring “that the object of the firm’s manufacture remains unique, fetishized and operational in a sphere in which it competes with similar objects” (Applbaum, 2000, p. 121).

But, attention should not just be focused upon marketing managers, but upon the entire array of other stakeholders in this industry, such as the bottling companies and producers of soft drinks who have been active
in using their distribution networks to expand their dominance of the marketplace for beverages. Linked to this stakeholder pluralization, a limitation of our paper is the focus on one market, the French marketplace. It would naturally be important to compare the analysis presented in this account with other markets. Finally, our empirical evidence suggests that marketing theory and consumer cultural research could benefit from greater engagement with psychoanalysis, focusing in particular on the discursive constrictive debate around the consumption of environmentally harmful products such as the bottles used to deliver the benefit of thirst quenching (Race, 2012). Psychoanalysis is only making tentative inroads into our sister discipline of organization studies and its advocates are careful to underline its contentiousness (Stein, 2007). With that in mind, the fact that the environmental effects of such consumption failed to be registered by our respondents in any shape despite the voluminous amount of social commentary on these issues (Hawkins, 2009, 2011) would indicate – critically minded social psychologists (Billig, 1999) and consumer researchers argue (Cluley and Dunne, 2012) – that there is an element of social amnesia accompanying the processes of fetishization that we have unraveled. In an era in which our environment is being seriously harmed by our consumption patterns, such research would not only provide marketing with a theoretically sophisticated rethinking of consumer-environmental behavior, but also potentially enrich the research agenda of the fast growing domain of Transformative Consumer Research.

9. References


Palmer, R.L. and Alpher, I.M. (1937), 40,000,000 Guinea Pig Children, New York, The Vanguard Press.


Race, K. (2012), “Frequent sipping’: Bottled water, the will to health and the subject of hydration”, Body & Society, Vol. 18 No. 3&4, pp. 72-98.


### Table 1 – Summary of Collected Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of analysis</th>
<th>Data description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books, historical documents, news</td>
<td>Two dozen books and historical documents, plus two hundred pages from newspapers, magazine and internet pages about actors, marketplace constitution, development and historical milestones that resulted in field changes.</td>
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<td>from mass press, internet websites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>357 advertising spots of branded BW of all kinds (printed, TV, radio, outdoor, subway, bus stops and other places, such as pubs, bakery, small shops, and vending machines) exhibited in France from 1880. Printed, video and audio.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Photos, video recording and field notes of visits to 5 retail chain stores: FranPrix (5 visits), Atac (2 visits), Monoprix (2 visits); Bon Marché (3 visits) and Colette Water Bar (4 visits).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bottles and labels</td>
<td>Collection of bottles and labels, besides photographs and internet pages to complete the physically collected material.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Articles from specialized magazines detailing characteristics from the main brands in the French market (including average price).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Events, sponsoring and public</td>
<td>Photos, audio and video recordings, participant observation field notes and internet pages about events developed or sponsored by water brands; public relations materials distributed to specific publics.</td>
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<td>relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>250 pages of water brands websites of the most important French bottled water. Other materials downloaded from the websites, such as advertising, bottles and labels.</td>
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<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>45 phenomenological interviews about behavior, opinion and perception about drinking water consumption. See Table 2 for the descriptive characteristics of informants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal interviews and field</td>
<td>Photos, videos and field notes about informal interviews and observation of water consumption scenes on the streets and at distribution outlets in Paris.</td>
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<td>Agatha</td>
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Key: These are pseudonyms. BAC (Baccalauréat) is France's national secondary-school (lycée) diploma. The higher the number of years added to BAC the higher the academic degree. The last year of a PhD course is equivalent to BAC+10.