

Crafting the Market for Bottled Water: A Social Praxeology Approach

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 exponential growth of this market in its historical and cultural context, paying particular attention to the fostering of the “social conditions of possibility” for this product in the French market. We link the socio-historical context and the interplay of stakeholders to our respondents’ understandings and uses of bottled water, 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 (Brownlie and Hewer, 2011). It also connects with recent scholarly pleas for a displacement of the consumer from the center of our analytic attention (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Holt, 2012). It does so by using the social praxeology approach associated with Pierre Bourdieu to study the 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. The social praxeology approach uncovers how brand and consumer value have been constructed in the French bottled water market.

Research limitations/implications – This study is based on the historical development and growth of the market for bottled water in France. It would be a valuable exercise to investigate other contexts to determine whether the strategies of symbolic competition, especially the use of expert intermediaries rich in cultural capital that we identify, are reflected elsewhere.

Practical Implications – Bottled water producers will have to confront the issue of the resource-intensiveness of their products. This feature stands in marked contrast to the symbolic capital and points of differentiation that producers have weaved around bottled water. Such contradictions will be exposed by actors in other fields (e.g. the environmental movement). 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 exponential growth of the bottled water market. Via a combination of historical re-construction and empirical research it highlights the interactive relationships between government, producers and consumers, uncovering brand and consumer value creation.

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

Paper type: Research paper.

1. Introduction

How are markets created and developed? There are at least three broad explanations within marketing and social theory: a consumer-oriented approach, a political/social approach, and a consumer-driven approach (Atik and Firat, 2013; Giesler, 2008; Humphreys, 2010; Keith, 1960, Martin and Schouten, 2014). The first views new markets as brought into being when producers identify unmet needs and devise product or service offerings to satisfy customer requirements (Keith, 1960; Marion, 2006). The second approach explains new market creation and development as a political and social process which hinges on the production of desire (Atik and Firat, 2013; Firat and Shultz, 1997; McCracken, 1986), and involves firms striving to legitimize the product or service they offer, in order to reap financial rewards (Humphreys, 2010). The third explains market emergence as consumer-driven (Martin and Schouten, 2014). In this paper we offer a perspective that merges the three approaches to analyze the explicit development and extension of a new market in a “multi-dimensional” format advocated by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1985).

Responding to calls for more engagement with social theory in marketing (Brownlie and Hower, 2011), we examine the development of the French bottled water market (hereafter named BW) through the Bourdieusian social praxeology perspective¹. This perspective combines structural and constructivist concerns to articulate how the industry-level affirmation and growth of the market for BW shapes consumer “dispositions” and practice (Bourdieu, 1989). Building on the concepts of field, capital and habitus we show how the French BW market grew through the interplay among firms and their stakeholders, including customers and government legislative activities in a non-conflictual way. We demonstrate how Bourdieu’s social praxeology perspective can be applied to uncover brand and consumer value creation which explains how and

¹ Applications of this approach to explain market development processes are extremely rare (Bourdieu, 2005), although the market-making and STS literatures have gestured in this direction in some respects. These highlight that the constitution of markets is a complex, multi-layered affair, with numerous factors impacting on the production, distribution and success of products (Geisler, 2008, 2012; Pettinger, 2004; Simakova and Nyland, 2008; Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006). But despite the relevance of the sociological understanding of how markets evolve (Araujo and Kjellberg, 2010; Geisler, 2012; Humphreys, 2010), there has not been an application of the key categories associated with social praxeology to explain the growth of markets that incorporate both marketer activities and consumer practice (cf. Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2011; Hanser, 2012; Holt, 1997, 1998; Martin and Schouten, 2014; Shaw and Riach, 2011; Tapp and Warren, 2010; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010).

why the French bottled water market has become one of the largest in the world in terms of per capita consumption.

Despite a decline in the growth rate of BW consumption among the 20 countries with the highest per capita consumption after 2006 (2.1% growth per year from 2006 until 2013, against 4.4% per year from 1998 until 2005), BW remains one of the fastest growing markets in the world. From 1999 to 2014, the volume of liters sold grew 158% across all countries (Euromonitor, 2014). While the geographic consumption landscape is changing (Lloyd, 2012), historically the largest markets are located in Europe (four of the seven largest per capita consumers in the world are located in Western Europe. France is the third highest per capita consumer (133 liters), after Mexico and Italy (170 and 147 liters, respectively)) (Euromonitor, 2014).

The “creation” of the French bottled water market is a much older phenomenon than we might expect going back to the 16th century (Foltz, 1999). This was not, however, a mass market product at the time. The market is a recent historical phenomenon, whose period of major growth is traceable to the middle of the 20th century. In 1946, for example, per capita consumption was just 6 liters per person (Marty, 2005). By 2005, this figure reached 171 liters (Insee, 2006), its historical peak.

When we reflect upon these figures given that 99% of the French population has access to high quality tap water which costs many times less per liter than BW, it is clear we cannot explain the growth of this market on the basis of price competitiveness (i.e. in neoclassical terms). 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. Burton, 2001). Rather, we seek to hold in abeyance such presuppositions to explore the expansion and maturity of the French market for BW².

² Despite being the third biggest per capita consumer in the world, there is evidence of the maturity of the French BW market. From 1999 to 2013, per capita consumption grew only 0.5 per year in France, against 7% on average per year in the rest of the world (Euromonitor, 2014).

With this in mind, our paper makes a number of contributions. First, it shows how three main social praxeology categories – field, capital, and habitus – can be used to study the development of markets. Whilst this perspective has been used to study the relational interaction between producers, retailers and consumers in studies of ethical consumer behavior (e.g. Shaw and Riach, 2011), our perspective is different in that we broaden the number of stakeholders we take into consideration. Second, we explain the processes of market development and the “work of representation” (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989) involved at an industry-level, connecting this with the “systems of perception and appreciation” that is the consumer habitus (Bourdieu, 1989). This thereby differs from previous explanations of market change based on the process of marketplace drama (e.g. Giesler, 2008). Third, we do not use institutional theory (e.g. Humphreys, 2010), but social praxeology to integrate the analysis of normative and regulatory factors as crucial components of the development and legitimation of a market, linking it to interactions of producers, consumers and figures outside of traditional marketing channels. Each of these groups impacts upon the development of the market for BW, acting in a network-like structure to affect the reception and reaffirmation of this product. Fourth, we go beyond Martin and Schouten’s (2014) explanation of market emergence as a consumer-driven process. We do consider the consumer’s role, but integrate it with other stakeholders’ practices in order to be consistent with social praxeology (see also Holt, 2012). Finally, we demonstrate how Bourdieu’s social praxeology perspective can be applied to uncover brand and consumer value creation.

We begin by detailing the assumptions underpinning social praxeology including an explanation of key concepts and terminology. Next we outline the data collection procedures 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 affirmation of the BW market. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study, stress the potential managerial implications of the empirical research, and indicate directions for future scholarship.

2. Social Praxeology

“Social praxeology” is a theoretically driven, problem framing strategy that links the concerns of structural analysis with an epistemological position that has affinities to constructivism (Bourdieu, 1989). Scholarship within this tradition 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; Moisander et al., 2009).

Conceptually Bourdieu refers to the intertwining of three categories. The first is termed the “field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). 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. He does not suggest these relations are the same, just that the analogy illuminates why we need to focus on the field as a structuring factor in social life. As Bourdieu argues, fields “are systems of relations” which can be considered largely “independent of the populations which these relations define” (in Wacquant, 1989, p. 6). He continues, “as soon as I speak of a field, my attention fastens on the primacy of this system of objective relations over the particles themselves...the individual [,] like the electron...[is] in a sense an emanation of the field” (Ibid).

By decentering the individual from epistemological priority Bourdieu is not claiming that people are not “agents” in their own right. Rather they “are socially constituted as active and acting in the field under consideration” (Ibid). A field, then, is a site of asymmetric “struggles” in which the participants compete to shape the texture of the field. 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, among others (e.g. Bourdieu, 2005, p. 194).

Within a capitalistic marketplace, economic capital is considered one of the most important by Bourdieu. Major participants in a marketplace such as wealthy corporations are able to shape the formation of discourses and values (Bourdieu, 1989). This does not mean that economic capital is necessarily powerful (cf. Bourdieu, 1985), 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 in circulation to symbolically legitimate their products and services, thereby cementing their position (e.g. Bourdieu, 2005; Holt, 2006, 2012; McCracken, 2005).

Symbolic capital is a function of the recognition that is granted to an organization and is contingent upon their ability to define the categories 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.

In various places, Bourdieu has sought to underscore the distance of social praxeology 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 one perceives, interprets and acts in any given context. One’s habitus is a function of his/her history, socialization, biography and biology respectively. In reflecting on this point, Bourdieu (in Wacquant, 1989, p. 10) problematizes deterministic readings of his oeuvre which neglect the conceptual space he allocates to “regulated improvisation”:

“The notion of habitus accounts for what is the truth of human action, namely, the fact that social agents are neither particles of matter that are determined solely by external causes, nor little monads guided solely by internal reasons, executing a sort of perfectly rational internal programme of action. Social agents are the *products of history*, of the history of the whole social field.”

To bring this epistemological and conceptual review together, research based on social praxeology needs to describe the historical emergence of the space of competition that forms the field of interest. It has to identify the key discourses mobilized by prominent actors in the field and their “actions of representation” (Bourdieu, 1989). These constitute attempts to define the “objective structures” of the field, those “spaces” occupied by particular actors who seek to define the categories connected to this market (Bourdieu, 1978, 1985, 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Finally, having identified via historical reconstruction the “fuzzy” boundaries of the field, Bourdieu counsels that empirical research is essential. This involves sketching the dispositions and styles of reasoning that are associated with a given consumption practice, highlighting their interplay with the field itself (e.g. Bourdieu, 2005, p. 24). Next we detail the data collection process that influenced this praxeological project.

3. Data Collection

Reflecting the axiology, epistemology and view of human nature previously described, our use of social praxeology to outline the creation and development of the French BW market has been guided by a number of questions: which period of time comprises the main development of this market? What were the “social conditions of possibility” (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 120), that is, the factors that changed the field? What groups were involved in the emergence and sedimentation of the field? What kinds of capital do the industry-level agents possess and how do they mobilize them? What are the preconditions for habitus formation? 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 patterning of industry and consumer practices. Our preliminary data collection focused on the development of the French BW market, with particular attention devoted to the roles of government, manufacturers and marketing practice in fostering this industry since the 1940s. This period represents the initial transformation of bottled water into a mass market product.

In constituting the Bourdieuan categories we collected a wide variety of secondary historical data including all pertinent books, market research reports and (circa) two hundred pages from newspapers, magazine and internet sources about actors, marketplace constitution and milestones that resulted in field changes. These were supplemented with marketing research reports and governmental analyzes of the market (e.g. Euromonitor, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Insee, 2004, 2006; Xerfi, 2009).

To understand capital and habitus development, we collected primary and secondary data including 357 advertising spots for branded BW from all media sources with additional data derived from the French National Library, the Musée de la Publicité (Museum of Advertising) in Paris, and public relations materials since the 1880s. We visited, photographed and filmed events sponsored by BW companies in Paris including three major sports events: Rolland Garros, Tour de France, and Evian Masters of Golf. Product packaging was collected and

a variety of retail locations (e.g. FranPrix (5 visits), Atac (2 visits), Monoprix (2 visits); Bon Marché (3 visits) and Colette Water Bar (4 visits)), reflecting the stratification of the BW industry, were visited, photographed and filmed to understand marketing and promotion methods and pricing structures.

Complementing these materials, 45 semi-structured interviews were undertaken via snowball sampling (see table 1). These explored French consumers' perceptions and behavior with respect to water consumption, which helped us to examine habitus development. Respondents were either French nationals or resident for a substantial amount of time. This filter was used to limit attention to only those individuals who had experience of BW in France. Most of the primary data collection occurred between 2005 and 2006, a similar time-frame to that of Martin and Schouten (2014) in their study of the mini-bike market. The mid 2000s coincides with the peak and stabilization of the French bottled water market³, while consumption continued to grow in the rest of the world. Secondary data collection was carried out from 2005 until 2014.

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

The history of BW 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 transportation of water over long distances. Supporting the interest in BW was the rise in the popularity of spas across the United Kingdom, Europe and America respectively. In the period between the 17th and 19th century, spas were

³ There is no record of a single phenomenon or event that has demarcated the start of the maturity of the French market besides per capita consumption figures, which have stabilized around 120-130 litres since the mid-2000s. The French BW market exhibited a smaller annual growth rate (0.5%) compared with the rest of the world (7%) (Euromonitor, 2014). We interpret this as evidence of the stabilization of the market.

still viewed as locations where people went for health restoration. Gradually this image was supplemented with spas 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 BW for centuries. Some of the major producers associated with this marketplace such as Evian and Perrier have been transporting and selling their products around the world since the early 20th century (Spar and Bebenek, 2008). They have thus been adept at mobilizing what Bourdieu (2005, p. 194) calls technological and commercial capital in terms of their technical competence and distribution networks. Even so, until the middle of the 20th century, BW remained a specialty good. Per capita consumption was very small (6 liters per person in 1947) (Auby, 1994) and most of the production was exported. 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 BW products, the categories affiliated with it were circumscribed. It was allied with “taking the waters”; this image was reaffirmed through the distribution methods adopted by the companies producing BW, which were reliant on drugstores as their point of contact with the consumer.

Prior to 1950, for the majority of the population, the image of BW was aligned with medicines and thermal stations (Marty, 2005). It was too expensive and sparsely distributed to be considered an option for everyday consumption for most people (Fourcat, 1998; Marty, 2005), and family socialization reflected these structural limits. In the case of water consumption, habitus is formed mostly at home and by education and imitation (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989). The comments provided by those old enough to recall their consumption habits during the growth phase of this market in the 1960s and 1970s illuminate these changing dynamics:

[Informant] – “When I was a child I used to drink only tap water. I think mineral water was not as important as today...[There has been a] profusion of bottles of water...all those sparkling waters...when I was young it didn't exist...There was only tap water at my family's home” (Liv, 43 years-old)

[Informant] – Fifty years ago we used to drink only tap water, because it was the only one [available].

[Interviewer] – Wasn't there bottled water?

[Informant] – Not 50 years ago...There was only tap water...The market changed.

[Interviewer] – Was this change fast?

[Informant] – Progressive” (Alisa, 49 years-old)

When BW was consumed, it was consumed for the medicinal benefits it offered:

“...when I was a child I remember to drink Badoit when we were sick...my mom used to make me drink Badoit ...I think Badoit is [to be consumed]...when we are sick” (Amanda, 58 years-old).

These consumption patterns started to alter at the end of the 1950s when there was a significant change in government legislation which determined the production and distribution of this product. These influenced aspects of production, transportation, blending, classification and sales, supporting the creation of a mass market (Chambriard, 1998). This shift led to new companies entering the market; new entrants that 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 and beverage industry and saw an opportunity to increase their capital endowments and profits by exploring the BW market. They acquired well known, regional enterprises, starting the process of brand management, later launching their own ranges, thereby attempting to increase their symbolic capital and shift the “relations” between firms (Bourdieu, 2005).

By the 1990's and 2000's, then, there was an expansion of the varieties of BW available, accelerated by the launch of Cristaline – the leading mineral water brand in terms of volume (Just-Drinks, 2008) – 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. The next section explores these issues in more detail.

5. Marketing Strategies and the Transformation of Economic into Symbolic Capital

Bottled water marketers often partner their products with imagery intended to speak to purity (Chase and Schlink, 1927; De Coverly et al., 2008; Holt, 2012; 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 BW 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 (see e.g. Hawkins, 2009; Holt, 2012). 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, the claims to purity produce a slightly perverse “theory effect” that helps constitute the social reality of consumer practice and manifests in the “spontaneous sociology” of respondents (Bourdieu, 1989). This does not actually

reflect current scientific knowledge as the linkage of purity and BW is subject to contestation (see Foltz, 1999; Wilk, 2006); BW sometimes contains more impurities than tap water, given that the latter is subject to far more stringent testing than the former. In other words, this assumption was relayed to consumers and incorporated into their “folk” theories of the social world (Bourdieu, 1989).

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 (cf. Holt, 2012, p. 247). 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 interweaved with a discourse of risk. It impacted on their consumption habits, leading them to switch from a previously ingrained habit of tap water to BW 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 BW. 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 BW...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 BW 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)

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 associated 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 BW, 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.

So, for those born during the growth years of BW (1960 onwards), the invocation of purity, the use of natural reference points like glaciers, and the ties of BW to medical and health concerns are important axes around which this market is reproduced. It is through these framing mechanisms which shape consumer dispositions that the constellation of potential meanings for BW is attenuated (Bourdieu, 1989). What has not been acknowledged in empirical research is how these associations are historically contingent, influenced by family and reaffirmed by influential intermediaries.

Habitus Formation Mechanisms: Medical and Pediatric Mobilization

As mentioned above, BW has historically been connected with medicine or health improvement (Royte, 2008). This representation continues to be used in the “symbolic struggles” (Bourdieu, 1989) of the major producers

who 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).

Such symbolic invocations of medicine have been used to sell products and services on the basis of their presumed health benefits for many years (Brown, 2001; Frederick, 1929) and this crafting of a medically inflected mythology (Bourdieu, 2005) and use of expert intermediaries continues to the present day. The reasoning behind the use of qualified practitioners is that they represent highly credible sources – “legitimate intermediaries” in Bourdieu’s terms (Wacquant, 1993) – by virtue of their cultural capital, training and knowledge (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; 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 discourse in their marketing strategies, channeling economic into symbolic capital. Taking their cue from extant cultural understandings of the therapeutic qualities of mineral water, manufacturers underscore the medical benefits of water consumption and enroll pediatricians in their attempts to influence consumer taste development which supports the generation of symbolic capital for the individual firm and industry as a whole (Bourdieu, 1989). This is an important 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.

Utilizing the support of pediatricians is consequently 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 BW, relating the consumption of this product to health issues (i.e. shaping the “categories of perception” (Bourdieu, 1985)). Buttressing this health message, the articles are

accompanied by features that discuss developments in the processing of various types of water along with advertisements for the company's major BW brands that reiterate the benefits and claims associated with this product. This conjunction of corporate public relations efforts and the use of paediatricians as a conduit influences the "social gestalten" of respondents (Bourdieu, 1985):

[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 BW]...and then the child becomes used to drink[ing] BW...the family as a consequence drinks BW too...and this doesn't stop anymore." (Cherry, 47 years-old)

These habits, introduced by influential figures, continue to be further incorporated into consumer practice via family socialization mechanisms, dietary norms and the activities of figures within the sporting community⁴ (Bourdieu, 1978). But as lifecycle events like the birth of a new child are infrequent in one's biography, BW producers have sought to expand their influence by tapping into French interests in gastronomy.

Habitus Extension: Working with Gastronomic and Aesthetic Codes

Gastronomy is a longstanding cultural practice in France, having emerged in the 19th century (Ferguson, 1998), and this makes it a desirable activity with which to associate BW. 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 BW to gastronomy was widely acknowledged in both secondary and primary data sources, with informants articulating a complex understanding of the relationships between BW, food and wine consumption which chime with gastronomic discourse.

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) and marketing communications were significant factors in crafting the field for BW products. There were many different corporate efforts to produce aesthetically pleasing advertising, bottles, labels, and distribution structures that spoke to the cultural capital of their audiences. Advertising was the primary manifestation of corporate attempts to convert economic into symbolic capital in a manner appreciated by culturally and economically affluent consumers. This was achieved via the use of artistic images created by prominent artists such as Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali or celebrity endorsement from cultural icons including John Lennon, Edith Piaf (for Perrier) and David Bowie (for Vittel).

⁴ Given space limitations we cannot explore the influence of sport and sporting intermediaries on consumer practice in this paper (see Holt, 2012, p. 245-246).

The distribution and price system played an important role in capital conversion. Participant observation, interview materials and secondary data all indicated two main groups of intermediaries involved in meaning constitution: 1) cafés, hotels, and restaurants; and 2) the “third market” which comprises bakeries, snack bars, and so forth. The most symbolically rich (and expensive) brands were largely distributed via the intermediaries in the first group. The Collete Water Bar, for example, located in one of the most expensive streets in Paris, displays a menu comprised of 90 different BW brands from 30 different countries. The most expensive – Bling H2O – cost 50 euros for a 37cl. bottle. All other types of intermediaries, including wholesalers, supermarkets, and hard-discount stores – such as Intermarché, Leclerc, Franprix, Leader Price and Netto – supplied brands low in price and symbolic capital.

Higher priced BW is thus linked to commensurate cultural and marketplace indicators. Affirming this attempt to texture habitus, the materiality of the bottles reinforces their culturally and symbolically rich positioning. In no way were these producers and retailers attempting to “diminish or neutralize the presence of the bottle” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 192). In fact exactly the opposite strategy is used. The materiality of the container plays a central role in constituting brand image. It supports symbolic representations by companies – but also by consumers – enabling the latter to derive their own meanings from package design, construction, size, volume, transparency, color, shape and label (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Race, 2012).

Innovations in containers for BW, their labels and the imagery that accompanied popular brands, are best understood as attempts to provide multiple subject positions, some more connoisseur-like, while others reflected a physiological-instrumental 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 meanings and respondents identified a symbolic association between the physical construction of the bottles and the importance of the social

occasion when water is consumed. In effect, they engaged in the “regulated improvisation” that Bourdieu remarks upon, devising their own “gastronomic code” for the consumption of BW (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).

Nor did consumers necessarily view the container, after consuming the water inside “as waste” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 191). This is a function of the strategies used by BW companies to reduce the “indeterminacy and fuzziness” of brand image (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 201) by lavishing time and effort on the material presence of the bottle as a key differentiator. Some 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, symbolically link the brand with purity via glass construction and tear and glacial shaped containers. And it is the material and aesthetic status of the bottles that encourages consumers’ to view them in ways that transcend their normal function of protection or packaging. They are objects of desire (Belk *et al.*, 2003), rather than “invisible” vessels (Coupland, 2005).

In this instance, corporations co-opt cultural resources to mold the meanings attached to product advertising which “is so effective only because it panders to pre-existing dispositions in order to better exploit them” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 23). Consumers accept, reject, or redefine the meanings that are offered to fit with their social world and specific circumstances (Campbell, 2005). Consumer “improvisation” manifested itself in respondent use of an aesthetically pleasing bottle to “fashion the home” (McCracken, 1989, p. 314). These were used as decoration in 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 to enact a personalized twist on a “taste regime” (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Arsel and Bean specifically refer to an individual using a lemonade bottle which has undergone the purification of its commercial attributes in housing decoration. By contrast, our respondents did not undertake to minimize the “signs of commercial production” that the aforementioned authors documented. As one informant averred,

[Informant] – “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 BW 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)

The symbolic struggles involved in the constitution of brand images and meanings is thus a complex process involving corporate investment, sensitivity to the cultural environment, and the active improvisation of consumers in ways not anticipated by marketers.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

In the recent history of BW, marketing has played a pivotal role in the creation of this market, helping modify consumer habitus, creating brand and consumer value. The large investments made by corporations enabled them to translate economic into symbolic capital; symbolic capital that was supported by the cultural capital of influential intermediaries and, in turn, leveraged for the economic benefits it provides.

In considering the managerial implications of this research, we will not belabor the more obvious points from the above empirical findings about the creation of consumer desire and trying to invoke and position products in ways congruent with explicit “taste regimes”. Instead, we would like to extend our reflections on habitus formation and the struggles for symbolic power to identify a probable market-shaping role for organizations in this industry. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s future oriented references in his own work (e.g. Bourdieu, 2005). In his writing Bourdieu (1989, p. 17) makes reference to “theory-effects”, these are theoretical ideas that have empirical warrant which are likely – transposing it to the current topic and context – to have an effect on industry and stakeholder practice.

While environmental issues were not flagged up during our period of empirical research among consumers, our reading of the legitimation tactics associated with bottled water products indicates that certain theory-effects are likely to be pronounced in the medium- to long-term in this industry. De Coverly et al (2008) for example point out that certain areas in the United States of America have already started criticizing bottled water consumption, labeling it an environmentally pernicious form of consumerism which results in unnecessary garbage and wastes energy, with the overwhelming proportion of bottles ending up in landfill sites. The problem with this is that these products “can take up to one thousand years to biodegrade” (De Coverly *et al.*, 2008, p. 298). Nor does recycling ameliorate these issues. The manufacturing of new bottles via recycling facilities is difficult and virgin material (i.e. crude oil and related products) is always required. Indeed, it is fair

to say that the political economy of water is likely to be the defining feature of the 21st century as supplies start to decline and property rights are purchased by large corporations – a problem that small communities with access to pure, fresh spring water already face – and which is directly linked to the demand for bottled water (Salina, 2008).

In equal measure, the politics surrounding the ownership and value of water is viewed by some scholars as the next potential resource that wars will be fought over, with some asserting that the ownership and use of water is likely to lead to “strategic conflict” (Gleick *et al.*, 1994), whilst others are more optimistic that alternative sources (i.e. desalinated sea water) will furnish community needs (Fisher and Huber-Lee, 2006). As such, the use and ownership of water, as well as the impact of the plastic packaging continues to be debated and problematized, as are the industries that continue to use less easily recyclable plastics when substitutes are available (see e.g. the documentaries, *Trashed* (Brady, 2012) and *Wasteland* (Walker, 2010)).

For example, the back cover of the recent documentary, *Trashed*, cites a quote from the *New York Times* which exclaims “THAT PLASTIC WATER BOTTLE IN YOUR HAND WILL FEEL AS DANGEROUS AS A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL” (Brady, 2012, emphasis in original). It is hard not to agree with this assertion when reading the literature on the problems caused by plastic containers of all kinds (e.g. Holt, 2012). In addition, these documentaries reveal that our consumption of plastic for carrying water is having very serious effects in seas around the world. Like other major environmental factors such as global warming, their effects do not remain restricted to the countries or locations where they were divested. They circulate around the world via oceanic currents, turning some areas of the sea into what commentators call a “global soup” (Brady, 2012), where very little animal life can subsist. This problem does not just change the nature of our water but enters the food chain through the fish and seafood we eat.

As Salina (2008) illuminates in great detail, the competition for pure water is reaching problematic levels with large corporations – often aided by lax policy or affirmative government intervention courtesy of neoliberal economic policies (e.g. Chomsky, 2012, p. 38) – chasing ever dwindling supplies and affecting the ability of local communities to access the water themselves, at the same time as large convoys of trucks transporting this product influence the quality of life of those living close to desirable water supplies in deeply negative ways. But, this is probably not surprising given the legal status of the corporation. We must remember the warnings offered by Bakan (2005) in his study of the corporation and its profit driven logic: the pursuit of profit knows very few bounds and as the profit-potential of water rises, we may reasonably expect even more unscrupulous behavior by corporations.

As seen in the foregoing analysis, the value of purity is an important one for producers. This is a feature of the historical narrative that is invoked in marketing communications and continues to be meaningful for the audience for these products. However, as Bourdieu cautions us, while there is a degree of meaning stability in the “structuring of structures”, the social world is also marked by “indeterminacy” and “uncertainty” (Bourdieu, 1985). And this has implications for source credibility given the importance of purity-nature links for capital generation by BW producers.

Trying to position a product transported in an environmentally deleterious vessel as somehow “pure” consequently seems like a futile and probably very expensive strategy. Those companies which seek to maintain existing levels of symbolic and economic capital would be well advised to treat these changes to the discursive texture of the field with due regard given their meaning destabilizing power and the potential ramifications of this for industry participants (e.g. Thompson *et al.*, 2006). After all, as Chomsky (2012), Bakan (2005) and other influential commentators have pointed out – and some states in the U.S. have already started moving toward – corporate charters can be revoked. Corporations are social constructions that may have certain rights

as enshrined in legal precedence, but they are subject to the legal system and the system seems to be moving, admittedly very slowly (cf. Holt, 2012, p. 240), to control them more forcefully (Chomsky, 2012; Gitlin, 2012).

BW producers have to eschew the conservatism that, for Bourdieu, accompanies powerful marketplace actors. Trying to structure, condition and shape stakeholder perception in order to maintain symbolic legitimacy is an especially hard task when the theory-effects of science, combined with vocal critics, strive to present an alternative vision of social reality. Criticism, however, can be beneficial. It can identify where points of fracture are growing in strength. When understood, these provide an opportunity given the “unequal distribution of capital” in many markets for a pro-active industry response since these actors partly “define the...rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 195). The problem is, Bourdieu asserts, those wealthy in capital terms tend to be the “least inclined to do so” (1985, p. 205). We submit that this would be a mistake.

Social praxeology reminds us that there are numerous stakeholders who hold different types of capital and influence. While historical analysis provides us with some idea of the current ordering of the field, the ground rules for capital accumulation and translation can change and we speculate that there will be a shift in this market in the medium to long-term regarding the ethical and moral justification for the continued use of plastic products for BW. Not only do current market research reports indicate growing recognition of this issue, it is not too much of a stretch to envisage similar legislation to control plastic bottles as was witnessed with carrier bags (e.g. De Coverly *et al.*, 2008). Such shifts will lead to a modification in industry structure, with those able to channel their product lines in concert with environmental desiderata, likely to avoid the shake-out of producers. Companies need to be acutely aware of their field defining function and their limited ability to control change when adjacent fields shift.

To sum up, from a perspective of theory development, our social praxeology analysis on the acceleration of BW consumption from 6 to 150 liters per person in five decades (mid 1940s to mid 2000s) is an important

phenomenon. It highlights how BW companies have transformed their economic muscle into symbolic capital, therefore creating significant brand value. In parallel, the plethora of brands, meanings, symbols, types of BW, vending and consumption outlets have substantially contributed to create consumer value. Considering that BW is an environmentally nefarious product, it is somehow surprising that consumer reactions against BW have been quite rare in France, especially taking into account the large per capita consumption. But, even acknowledging a less active consumer role, it is evident that consumer habitus contributes to value creation for brand owners, at least as it is currently formatted.

Limitations and Future Research

Our methodological strategy was based on the use of multiple sources of data that included the historical reconstruction of the BW market, complemented with relevant material disseminated by producers and the perspectives of consumers' themselves. There are a number of ways in which scholars could expand upon the research conducted here. Further studies could engage in oral historical interviews with marketing managers and advertising executives who have played an important role in expanding the market for this product. Such investigations could be deepened 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 producers.

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 its focus on one market. It would naturally be important to compare the analysis presented in this account with other markets, with other researchers following the lead of this paper and Holt's (2012) recent study to chart how interactions between multiple stakeholders can be beneficial and problematic in turn.

6. Conclusion

This paper has used the work of Pierre Bourdieu to investigate the development and struggles for symbolic dominance in the market for bottled water in France. The conceptual and theoretical architecture of social praxeology was outlined, relevant epistemological comparisons were made with structuralism, and the methodological strategy that followed from these assumptions detailed. Reflecting the axiology, ontology, epistemology and view of human nature articulated by Bourdieu, the historical emergence of the space of competition of bottled water was articulated. The key discourses mobilized by prominent actors in the field and their "actions of representation" (Bourdieu, 1989) were illuminated by the use of historical contextualization, extensive secondary and primary data gathering, including archival research, ethnographic engagements with appropriate industry sponsored events and immersion in the production and marketing strategies employed by prominent corporations in this industry.

Following this effort to define the "objective", "fuzzy" "structures" of the field (Bourdieu, 1978, 1985, 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), we engaged in empirical research to identify the dispositions and styles of reasoning associated with the consumption of bottled water, highlighting their interplay with the field itself (Bourdieu, 2005). In line with Bourdieu's comments regarding creative improvisation, the links

between the field and consumer habitus were not deterministic, but reflective of a structured improvisation. The activities of corporations, influential intermediaries and consumers alike, aided and supported by background changes in government legislation, were thus presented as informing, reaffirming and modifying the “mutually interpenetrating systems of relations” that constituted this market (Wacquant, 1993, p. 236).

7. References

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