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Beer Talk: When Consumer Culture Makes Work Meaningful

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Abstract

This study examines the potential for consumptive narratives legitimizing a market system to inform the narratives of workers occupying job roles in that same market system. Participant observation in the craft beer lifestyle of North Carolina found emergent discursive themes articulating the consumer culture. Interviews with thirty-nine employees across twenty-two firms provided accounts of jobs. The analysis found overlapping themes between these observations of work and consumption. One set of three themes—beer talk, us against them, and community—existed similarly across jobs, regardless of autonomy or task. Implications suggest that when markets are shaped by strong consumer cultures, these could become an independent source of meaningfulness, separate from job design and organizational culture. Research implications for meaningful work in the contexts of consumptive discourses are discussed.

Keywords

Craft beer, Consumer Culture, Meaningful Work, Organizational Culture

1. Introduction

Can consumer cultures make the experience of work meaningful? Meaningful work (MFW) refers to the potential for workers to ascribe intrinsic value to their jobs, such that they become symbolic material for a conception of self (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019). Research presuming meaningful work can be influenced by consumer discourse has expanded in recent decades (Alvesson, 1998; Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012) Scholars find market discourses serve to legitimize workplace subjectivity (Du Gay, 1996; Land & Taylor, 2010; Misra & Walters, 2016). For example, Misra and Walters (2016) report that management expects workers in clothing retail to identify with the "cool

clothes," and thus accept subpar pay and difficult working conditions. Land and Taylor (2010) argue that workers using their lifestyle to authenticate a company's brand—by posting pictures of skateboarding scars to social media—are not properly compensated for value added to the company. Symbolic material used to legitimize consumers' lifestyle also constitutes discursive material for workplace power.

Research regarding these "blurred boundaries" often suggests workers' subjective experience of work occurs within a terrain of contestation, where managers exercise a prerogative to control the labor process (Kuhn, 2006; Mulholland, 2004). Workers are thus conceptualized as resisting, ignoring, or being exploited by these external market discourses (Fuller et al., 2006; Storey et al., 2005). However, so far studies of blurred boundaries have considered the issue mostly from the perspective of the workplace, thus limiting the analysis to organizational or job-level characteristics on the one hand (Brannan et al., 2015; Halford & Leonard, 2006), or macro level occupations (Hoedemaekers, 2018), industries (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019), or labor market characteristics (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Research designs beginning with the discursive content of specific consumer markets—and then how that discourse penetrates the workplace—are less developed.

Consumer cultures could more intimately connect the employees to a broader purpose for their work—beyond management and organizational culture. Consumer cultures exist when a common set of rituals, symbols, and narratives provide coherence, meaning, and identity to a distinct system of consumptive practice (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). These markets might be characterized by coherent consumer "lifestyles," or "grassroots" consumer movements (Wahlen & Laamanen, 2015) offering symbolic material for worker narratives. Land and Taylor's (2010) example hints at a larger discursive context shaping the meaning of surf or skate culture that would "in-between" the organization, but more specific than macro-level conceptions of context.

In a parallel literature on the meaning of work, scholars increasingly examine how the discourse legitimizing some specific lifestyle context also provides source material for narrating the experience of meaningful work with embedded organizations (Florian et al., 2019; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Thompson, 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019). Studies on MFW have consistently found that purposive context provides meaning to jobs (Grant, 2007, 2008; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). The task conceptually connects to some broader narrative beyond the immediate *doing* of the task. This could be as simple as learning new skills (Gallie, 2013)—doing this task will enable one to expand the capacity of their future self—to something as grand as "putting a man on the moon" (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017). Research in job crafting (Tims et al., 2016), callings (Duffy et al., 2013) spirituality (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000) and job characteristics theory (Oldham & Hackman, 2010) finds individual and organizational mechanisms connecting tasks to purposive context.

By identifying a strong consumer culture constituting the market system, and then the jobs within workplaces at the center of that market system, we may find

conditions where consumer-discourses increase workers' potential to make their jobs meaningful. The "relational architecture" of the job (Grant, 2007) would be diffuse, emerging across all jobs in those organizations. For these kinds of workers, if pressed to explain how they conceptualize themselves relative to their tasks, do consumer discourses animate their narratives? If so, do these discourses serve to legitimize their work, or do they appear to be sources of strain (and hence, indicate control)?

The findings below argue that the enthusiasm of the consumer context embeds workplaces with discursive themes allowing workers to author their own engagement with the job tasks. The craft beer industry in North Carolina offered a compelling case, since it is driven by a strong consumer culture of passionate hobbyists (Chapman et al., 2017; Hindy, 2014). The current study developed a mixed methods approach for dually observing data that might illustrate pathways connecting the consumer culture to workplace narratives. First, participant observation found six market themes legitimizing consumption. Meanwhile, interviews with thirty-nine workers from twenty-two different North Carolina firms that produced and/or sold craft beer were conducted. Respondents were asked to narrate their employment choices and current experiences of work. Emergent coding of observational data in both consumer markets and worker interviews found three consistent themes overlapping in these different methods of data collection: beer talk, us against them, and community. *Beer talk* refers to the moral impetus that knowledge of beer should be learned, shared, and expanded. *Us against them* rhetoric emerged as workers depicted the shadow of "Big Beer" in this effort. *Community* refers to the variety of narratives presuming the craft beer lifestyle reflected an authentic local aesthetic, or it connected people and organizations. Most surprising was how consumer culture made work meaningful even for low autonomy respondents.

These findings suggest future workplace research should conceptualize the relationship of workplaces to the consumer culture—if it exists—when examining how workers make sense of their jobs. Similar to the "callings" literature, (Duffy & Dik, 2013) we may expect that employees vary in their degree of identification with that lifestyle. An overly strong valence toward the consumptive project may allow workers to find MFW despite objectively difficult job conditions. On the other hand, this could cause the employees to be more suspicious of the firm, holding them to higher standards (Thory, 2016). In either case, the standards of the consumer culture become a "measuring stick" for employees to evaluate the job and/or the firm. Job-level characteristics like autonomy could be less salient in meaningfulness attribution. More research will be needed to conceptualize the characteristics of consumer cultures creating meaningful work.

The paper is organized by first describing parallel literatures examining how consumer discourses are used to shape workplace subjectivities in "brands" and the "entrepreneurial self." Next, I describe consumer cultures, particularly how the notion of discourse overlaps with the MFW literature's symbolic contexts for

narrating meaningful experiences. Then, the methods section will explain the approach to observing discourse at two parallel levels of analysis: the market system, and jobs within that system. The findings describe discursive overlap between these levels in terms of how jobs mediated workers' relationship with consumer culture. Finally, a discussion section reviews the implications for the study of meaningful work in contemporary management studies.

2. Blurring Workplace Identities

In the United States, before the 1990s, sociological research on the subjective dimensions of organizational life often presumed the "primacy of production thesis," (Cohen, 1978) which implied the central discursive phenomena constituting the reproduction of society emanated from the "shopfloor" (and its hidden abode.) Scholars like Michael Burawoy (1979) suggest cultural dynamics forming within workplaces affected macro patterns structuring society overall. Similarly, researchers focused on how the occupation (Becker, 2002; Damarin, 2006), the organization (George, 2000; Whyte, 1957), or the informal culture emergent from workers' tasks (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Roy, 1954) served to constitute pride or engagement, and concomitantly, symbolic sources for workplace identity performance. In terms of what matters for performing workplace identity, researchers presumed the point of production should be the primary focus.

By the late 1990s, examinations of "flexible," temporary or non-standard employment structures (Kalleberg, 2000) began to indicate the emergence of more volatile, shifting labor markets (Smith, 1997). The traditional corporate extension of commitment to the employee's career (Whyte, 1957) was replaced by arguments that employees should be committed to developing themselves, by viewing any temporary job as the opportunity to develop human capital (Cappelli, 1999). Novel strategies emphasize allowing employees to "just be themselves," for example, by encouraging workers to recruit their young friends for the job, permitting them to dress in bright colors with short, club-going skirts, and in effect "symbolically blurring the divide between work lives and private lives" (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011: p. 188). Thus, the ubiquitous notion that a company, or the workplace itself, should be the discursive center for making workers' tasks meaningful began to erode. Two distinct literatures, "the enterprising self" and "brands," have independently traced this process. Each implies the onset of blurred boundaries, and how these encroaching external discourses challenge workers' capacity for making their work meaningful.

The entrepreneurial self refers to how, in the context of flexible labor markets, *the consumer* has developed into a coherent rhetorical strategy for management to communicate the expected comportment of self to workers (Du Gay, 1996). The image of the needy consumer communicates a new employee ethos, where workers should be both predictive *and* pliant. Subsequent research has examined how management implements policies inspired by this "entrepreneurial self," and how employees respond, in self-branding (Hearn, 2008), public administration

(Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006) and education (Ball, 2003).

Empirical findings are mixed regarding how an "enterprising self" discourse impacts an employee's workplace identity. Researchers sometimes argue that the amount of resistance found in these studies indicates the "enterprising self" may only be rhetorical, with no effect in the employee's daily engagement with work (Fournier & Grey, 1999; Halford & Leonard, 2006; Storey et al., 2005). On the other hand, research on employment seeking strategies existing more generally in the labor market finds strong evidence that the "enterprising self" is an ever-present stressor for individuals as they write resumes, or seek out interviews and advice guides (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Relatedly, analyses of the self-help literature for job-seekers suggest dominant theme: choose a line of work that allows passions to flourish, so that communicating authenticity comes more naturally (Hong, 2014). These labor market messages contradictorily confront workers: brand yourself clearly, but also flexibly.

Critical inquiries within the "brand" literature finds a second strategy for using consumer market discourse to control workers. Over the long history of its development, the brand has increasingly become a tool for corporations to communicate a particular emotional affect, and thus a kind lifestyle to consumers (Wood & Ball, 2013). Since as early as the 1990s, marketing scholars began advocating that same branding symbol could be used to communicate the corporate culture as well (see Rafiq and Ahmed (1993) for an example). Researchers encouraged companies to consider how employees perceive the brand, and if that transferred to behavior, or attitude, in the workplace (King & Grace, 2007; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010). Critics argue the brand has become the principle technology for marring Fordist distinctions between work and consumption—where one's passion for lifestyle pursuits is at once industrious and pleasurable (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

Brands-as-management strategy advocate workers to "live the brand." Land and Taylor (2010) researched workers employed by a T-shirt company whose brand espoused extreme sports, and thus, for the sake of authenticity, employees were encouraged to post their skateboarding injuries to the company's website. If employees do so, the act simultaneously creates real advertising value for the company, while self-commodifying an aspect of one's lifestyle. However, as with research on the enterprising self, similar patterns of apathy or irony toward the brand are repeated here (Brannan et al., 2015). Meanwhile, in some contexts, the brand is embraced by employees as an opportunity to communicate a professional identity (Vásquez et al., 2013).

Critical researchers in both branding and the enterprising self tend to see the external consumer driven discourses as forms of control, where workers variously negotiate this new form of exploitation. However, a potential theoretical gap here concerns the level of analysis where discursive contexts are conceptualized. Few studies have explicitly considered the possible "in-between" linkages: between the organizational identity (brands) and the broader labor market (enterprising self).

These "lifestyles" would be more general than the brand, but more specific than the enterprising self.

For example, environmentalism allows consumers to identify with their consumptive habits; researchers evaluate company's effectiveness at targeting environmentally conscious consumers (Leary et al., 2017). Meanwhile, research shows that corporations do struggle to reconcile environmentalist discourse and worker subjectivity (Wright et al., 2012). For companies staking their organizational identity on environmental protection, would a discourse of "caring for the earth" characterize those shopfloors? Would workers feel pressure to ride bikes to work, or more intimately identify with their tasks? Research on individuals whose strong passions motivate their work suggest these could be double-edged, leading variously to burn-out or fulfillment (Amarnani et al., 2020).

Could Consumer Culture Make Work Meaningful?

In recent decades, cultural and market scholars increasingly note that consumers create content being consumed within market systems (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Raven & Pinch, 2003). In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins (2012) documents the enormous energy and attention to detail that Star Trek fans, and other types of fandom, put into their own creations, that they then share on the web—freely—with other fans. This energy on the part of consumers deepens their connections to the products, but also raises their expectations. These markets are characterized by strong "consumer cultures," or the sets of beliefs that certain groups of consumers share as they engage in actively consuming products associated with a particular lifestyle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002; Schau et al., 2009). Consumers and companies seem to work hand-in-hand to create the ideal, collectively imagined version of the consumptive experience (Dujarier, 2016; Merz et al., 2009). Cultural narratives knit these consumers together as they engage in the production of value for that market, and these narratives become symbolic material for consumer identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) that may be termed "consumer tribes," (Cova, 2007). Hence, consumer culture theory offers a potential framework for better specifying distinctions in the external market spaces blurring workplace identity.

A distinct sub-discipline of marketing research, much of consumer culture research aims to specify the discursive character of rituals, meanings, and identities that people generate around bundles of consumptive practice (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This literature examines market phenomena from any scale, from regions (Martin-Woodhead, 2021; McDonald & Dan, 2020) to digital platforms (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022) to global planetary market systems (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Consumers' shared enactment is focused on some common pursuit, which then stabilizes into a "field" system (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Giesler & Fischer, 2017). Fields are spaces—varying in duration, symbolic and material dimensionality, intensity, and stability—where collective or individual action can occur. Within these fields, a specific domain of discourse develops to stabilize the aesthetic character of consumption

(Hungara & Nobre, 2021). Discursive domains provide context for making sense out of symbols in the field—language, positions, goals—and what is worth pursuing.

The current study draws from this literature to theorize discursive systems providing a specific aesthetic context cohering around a "lifestyle," shared by those enacting the lifestyle's practice (Biraghi et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2015). The institutions, rituals, and narratives constituting the distribution of products thus serve to transmit cultural meanings that legitimize their consumption (McCracken, 1986). Classic market dynamics (i.e. supply and demand) may occur within, between, or across fields. Each dimension will play some role, revealed through observation. However, narratives and practices (here referred to as "discourse") will exist to stabilize the ongoing process of consumption (Fourcade, 2007). They provide context for making sense out of symbols in the field—language, positions, goals—and what is worth pursuing. Because markets require both workers (producers) and consumers, the extent to which discursive spaces overlap (to contextualize the meaning of the employment relationship, or the meaning of consumption) is an open question.

Research in MFW (Mitra, 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017) and consumer culture (Akaka et al., 2015) share the notion that broader (macro) ideological systems create spaces within for (mezzo) shared meaning-making. Since workers can make a range of discursive materials into sources for meaningfulness attribution—especially if others find it meaningful (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999)—it is possible these consumer-driven discourses become source material for purposive narrative, apart from other contexts for MFW ascription. Firms could be embedded within consumer cultures providing discursive "links" connecting employees, workplaces, and the environment beyond firms. Workers may use market system discourses stabilizing consumption to *also* make sense of their tasks. Following (Grant's, 2007, 2008) relational architecture of jobs, this creates a potentially new pathway for connecting the job to a broader purpose—where the "blurred identity" is experienced meaningfully, rather than as control.

3. Methods

Observing symbolic content at two levels of analysis—the market systems situating firms, and the workers' narratives within those firms—may offer observations of overlapping discursive themes. Hence, the study's research question is: Could the meaningfulness legitimizing a particular consumer culture also be used to make that work meaningful? If workers' legitimize tasks using symbolic material reflected in the consumption of the products those tasks create, then the consumer culture could be embedding jobs with a context for making tasks meaningful.

The emergence of the craft beer market in North Carolina offered a case where a strong consumer culture would also feature firms providing paying jobs. In both United States (Rao, 2009) and Denmark, (Kjeldgaard et al., 2017) hobbyists and enthusiasts have formed social movements creating space for the market activity

to flourish. In North Carolina, the most recent boom may be traced to 2006, where a successful "Pop the Cap" movement, driven by a combination of local entrepreneurs and homebrewing clubs, changed anachronistic prohibition laws, allowing beer to be brewed above six percent alcohol by volume (Tamayo, 2009). While the decade before Pop the Cap saw zero growth in brewery foundings, the next decade would see that number mushroom from the mid-twenties to more than one hundred and seventy. The state became a destination spot for beer tourism, writers, and other breweries (Hayward & Battle, 2018; Kraftchick et al., 2014). By 2014, both Oskar Blues and Sierra Nevada, two nationally reputed craft breweries would open production facilities near Asheville, NC, cementing that city's status as "beer mecca." The craft beer market in North Carolina flourished from the enthusiasm of consumers, hobbyists and entrepreneurs. Scholars of the state have described conditions explaining its emergence from cultural and political perspectives. (Chapman, 2020; Hayward & Battle, 2018)

Prior scholarship on the meaningfulness of craft beer work has found both positive and exploitive situations. Purposive fulfillment in the intrinsic nature of "craft" work has been shown to be prominent in craft beer (Thurnell-Read, 2014). Meanwhile, scholars have also found exclusionary raced and gendered practices (Delgaty & Wilson, 2024; Thurnell-Read, 2022) or precarious working conditions pressed through exclusionary or coercive market practices (Fox Miller, 2019; Munro & O'Kane, 2022). Others found the prosumptive practices create intrinsically meaningful intellectual journeys as consumers develop their tasting or brewing skills (Rodgers & Taves, 2017). Bell et al. (2021) argues these spaces—craft and consumption intersections—invite potentially new imaginaries on the structures of society. However, while a systematic review of the craft beer literature demonstrates many marketing and strategy analyses, it shows an under emphasis on narratives about working experiences (Nave et al., 2022).

Consistent with field theory (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), the current study chose to concurrently use two methods for observing two different kinds of spaces where discursively-constructed contexts for meaning-making might occur. The first was the market for consumers. These spaces legitimized the lifestyle of a devoted craft beer consumer. The second was the narrative of workers at some trajectory in their labor market careers. Here workers drew upon occupational or job-level discursive contexts to describe their work, what they do or do not like, and how they imagine their job horizon (Watson, 2008). Consistency in the content used to construct meaning across these two levels could suggest the market discourse aids the creation of meaning in worker's experiences.

Being unfamiliar with the craft beer lifestyle it, I was able to adopt the perspective of the outsider, seeking to observe narratives legitimizing consumption. From August 2014 to December 2016, I volunteered at five beer festivals, visited fifty-seven different business locales, and "followed" over one hundred craft beer writers, brewers, and organizations based in the state, thus documenting about two hundred hours of observation on (then) Twitter. Supplemental analysis included a random

sample of forty (of two hundred and fifteen) breweries' "About us" websites. These observations were analyzed for emergent themes legitimizing the lifestyle.

Concurrently, semi-structured interviews, between 2015 and 2016, with thirty-nine respondents were convenience and snow-ball sampled from twenty-two organizations operating in North Carolina (18 of the 22 were locally owned in the "Triangle" area). Sampling for workers included 2 criteria: the person had a paid position within a for-profit business that ostensibly identified as "craft beer." These would include eighteen independently owned brewers, two bottleshops and two bars. After being told their names would be changed to protect anonymity, respondents were asked to reconstruct their past, present and future career trajectories, and to specifically focus on what makes their work fulfilling versus frustrating. The interview method here requires the respondent to account for their career choices in both taking and maintaining the employed position, thus creating an interaction where the respondents use of discursive themes relative to the job becomes observable (Watson, 2008). The workers sampled consisted of 6 brewers, 4 assistant brewers, 6 sales/service managers, 12 sales reps, and finally 11 servers or bartenders. Men outnumbered women, by a ratio of 3 to 2. Interviews were transcribed. The average length of tenure in the current job was twenty-three and a half months. The respondents were overwhelmingly white—thirty-eight of thirty-nine respondents.

Workers' narratives were coded using Dedoose software in three steps. Step one coded for moments where the respondent identified personally with specific aspects of the task or work domain, indicating that aspect was personally fulfilling, meaningful, or something they enjoyed; these moments may have been in direct response to a prompt for meaningfulness, or while describing other aspects of the work. Moments indicating the opposite—frustrating or difficult aspects—were also coded. Secondly, the "meaningfulness mentions" were then coded according to the MFW concepts supplied by psychological approaches (see especially Bailey et al., 2019). *Work tasks*, originally conceptualized by Hackman and Oldham (1980) include task identity, task significance and skill variety. The *job role* is situated in the broader narratives of society, whereby purpose, prestige or status is conferred to the self through the occupation, which the respondent identifies with. *Interactions* with others, within or outside (customers, stakeholders, or other partners) the boundaries of the workplace, can be a source of MFW. Grant (2007) argues that jobs can be designed so that workers are connected to the stakeholders directly. This is also consistent with Lips-Wiersma and Wright's (2012) notions of unity and service with others. Finally, the *organization* itself can be the source of meaningfulness in three ways: organizational belonging, person-fit, and brand identity (Garg & Rastogi, 2006; Schnell et al., 2013).

For each interviewee, only unique mentions were coded. For example, if a server said she loves her regulars, and then later reinforced that sentiment, only the first mention was coded. However, if that same server later described going to work a festival, and the positive feeling of connecting with strangers also seeking to learn about beer, that would be a second observation of MFW (if attendance at

the festival occurred within the scope of their job). Further descriptions of that feeling would not be coded. So, only unique mentions per interviewee were coded as a dimension of meaningfulness. Unique mentions were taken as rhetorical devices that organize the communication of how and why the work is meaningful within the interaction of the interview.

One-hundred and ninety-nine unique mentions of meaningfulness were reported from thirty-nine respondents, for an average of 5.1 mentions each. No new dimensions of meaningfulness emerged that did not already fit management literature's psychological approach. This is expected, since—using a variety of data collection techniques—scholars have robustly researched how tasks, roles, interactions and organization can be sources of meaning. Even if meaningfulness is being ascribed using discourses of the consumer culture, it would still filter through the job, as wage paying connection to the labor market system is the focus of the narrative elicited. To create comparative analysis, respondents were categorized according to two concepts expected to offer the most variation in meaningfulness: autonomy and service versus craft. Autonomy was coded as "restricted" or "unrestricted" based on whether someone (manager or customers) was directing their tasks on a day-to-day basis. Randy Hodson's (2001) coding of workplace ethnography finds dignity (related closely to meaningfulness) occurs differently for workers focused on production, relative to those involved in service. The intersection of these concepts created four categories of job roles, represented in Table 1.

The final analytical step sought to observe "thematic overlap" between the sensemaking narrative of the worker, and the discourse legitimizing the consumer culture. For this, each distinct narrative of meaningfulness was considered for its similarity with narratives legitimizing consumption. For example, a bartender that describes a relationship with her regulars could have been observed in any type of bar job. A brewer that describes the satisfaction of seeing a patron drink their beer could be describing any sort of task significance (e.g., a carpenter seeing a family move into a completed home.) These would *not* count as observations of thematic overlap.

Table 1. Distribution of sample by job role.

	Production-Facing	Consumer-Facing
Unrestricted Autonomy	6 Head Brewers	12 Sales Representatives 6 Managers (Service/Sales)
Restricted Autonomy	4 Assistant Brewers	11 Servers, Bartenders, and Clerks

The mention had to resonate with a specific discursive point that *also* emerged when analyzing the narratives of craft beer consumption in the market system. For example, a common overlap observed concerned servers who wanted to "convert" wine drinkers into craft beer drinkers. They gained a thrill from seeing excited faces in people who did not know beer could contain such a wide variety of

flavors. This impetus to "know beer" in terms of its distinctions was also ubiquitously observed throughout the consumer culture. Here we observe "thematic overlap," since the same kind of narrative that legitimized consuming *craft* beer—as opposed to other beers—is utilized to make a task meaningful in the respondents' narratives. Workers enjoyed seeing a person try new beers, while the excitement of tasting new beers is a common narrative legitimizing consumption.

Convenience and snow-ball sampling strategies eliciting narratives about working life likely biased observations of meaningfulness by the individual, the interaction, and the job role in ways unknown to the researcher. A "rosy picture" of wonderful work and intentional career choices dominate these narratives. While the evidence that a consumer culture effect is a unique source of meaning is strong, there is not systematic evidence to say craft beer is more meaningful than other types of work.

4. Findings

The observation of market construction legitimizing the market spaces could be grouped into six distinct domains, summarized in **Table 2** below. These domains were spaces where distinct patterns in narrative and practice emerged as different kinds of market actors produce distinct spaces for exchange. The structure of narratives legitimizing consumption of the craft beer consumer culture was organized by two basic tensions in the reproduction of those spaces. First, the legitimization strategy was caught between consumption for the price (often presuming the "fun" of drinking for intoxication), and consumption for taste (which, consumers would insist, is *not* about being intoxicated.) Secondly, the organizations for these two discursive tensions range from the single actor with a passion to use craft beer for some political cause, to the regional or national firms seeking to profit from the economies of scale that pure monetary-oriented firms tend to pursue.

The table hierarchically arranged domains according to the relative size of organizations typically operating, and the scope of consumers that were affected. The specificity of discursive content would narrow toward smaller organizations. From the "macro" perspective, we can observe the most generic, open-ended invitation to drink one mass-produced flavor. Americans overwhelmingly drink beer from three conglomerates, and the flagship brands—bud, miller, coors, Heineken, stella—all reflect slight variations on one, rice-based style of beer, the American Pale Lager. This has been shown to be the gateway for many consumers into a more complex drinking world (Elliott, 2023; Wilson, 2024). Moreover, corporations actively try to limit the growth and influence of craft beer, through legislation and through leveraging distributors (Tamayo, 2009). Most beer was sold in grocery stores and gas stations.

At the *quality* domain, craft beer reached out to mainstream consumers by fashioning itself as an advanced, sophisticated luxury good. This included regional (multi-state) brewers and up-scaled, family-dining experiences attached to the brewery. Within the *internet media* realm, the labyrinth of craft beer's diversity

becomes digestible, and consumers can learn more about tasting or creating beers. Meanwhile, the *festival* domain includes a kind of free-for-all, with each tent pitched potentially housing a markedly different kind of craft beer organization and discourse. Next, the *local* domain may be described as the "heart" of the craft beer consumer culture: finely honed beer knowledge is communicated in direct exchange with consumers. Finally, the smallest domain is the *consumer-producer* level. Here, fans of craft beer have created organizations producing content for other craft beer consumers.

Table 2. Six domains of craft beer discourse.

Domain	Narratives	Practices
Macro-Controlled Beer	Watch out for "Crafty" Beer	Distributors control tap space and shelf space
	People want to drink inexpensively.	American Pale Lager
	Price drives preferences.	Acquisitions and mergers
Quality	Beer is Great, Beer is Good	Family and friend's restaurant experience
	Inclusive Branding (open-ended, generic invitation to the market spaces)	Consumer clubs
Internet/Social Media	Tasting Beer	Professionals Reviewing Beer
		Consumers Rating Beers
	The Fantasy Life of Beer (imagining how beers are paired with other experiences—e.g. a watermelon lager by the pool.)	Sharing Information
		News
		Content describing Lifestyle & Trends
Festivals	Taste and Try	Tame Party
	Have FUN!!	Drinking and Tasting to extremes
Local	Local, community businesses are good	Open Spaces
	Macro beer vs. Craft beer	Inclusive feeling
	Exclusive Branding (delimiting and specifying its market space)	Teaching beer
	Escape the Corporate World	Rotating Selections
Consumer-Producer	Political Cause X intersects with local, independent beer	Raising awareness, spreading information, or opinions (reviews)
	Empowerment or Advocacy	Small, tiny, part-time organizations
	Taste and Try	Focused purpose
	Drink!	

4.1. Emergent Themes in Workers' Narratives

In terms of discursive overlap, workers across job types consistently referenced:

1) "beer talk," or the moral assumption that knowledge about craft beer *should* be learned, taught and shared with others; 2) Us against "them," or the corporations mass producing one beer style, the American pale lager; and 3) the notion that beer was a vehicle for creating "community," in a variety of ways.

Beer talk was the discourse shared ubiquitously throughout consumers' labor on beer rating websites, social media, festival customs, and in the interactions observed. Knowledge about beer should be taught, learned, and shared. Rather than an ivory tower protecting its secrets, bloggers, twitter feeds, festivals, and million-dollar CEOs were united in the collective message that beer knowledge should be freely expanded. Learning and sharing new information about beer's flavors, styles, history, and its more recent innovations, should occur in conversation, or through social media.

Learning to distinguish between styles was necessary for the "newbie" to become familiar with the craft beer lifestyle. With over six thousand *unique* named (and sold) beers produced in North Carolina in 2016, there was an overwhelming selection. Sorting through the variety, and then which fit your (the sovereign consumer's) taste pallet *felt mandated*. The proliferation of smart phone applications such as "Untapped," websites such as "Ratemybeer.com," and hundreds of other blogging sites, with content completely generated from consumer labor, served to both highlight the moral importance of learning beer, while also enabling consumers' celebration of that endeavor. "That guy really knows his beer," was a high compliment. People routinely shared pictures on social media of their beer and location, with no more a message than, "I'm drinking this!" Knowledge regarding the history of beer, where "good beers" were located, and stories about drinking beer were frequently shared across interactions.

Since taste is subjective, and because distinctions between styles and breweries are vast, there was much grist for symbolic meaning making regarding what is "good," and why. The ability was either learned—from someone with more beer knowledge—or taught, to someone with less beer knowledge, but either process creates fulfilling interactions. A bottleshop clerk implicated the consumer culture in *interaction with others* this way:

> Beer is one of those hobbies that you can fairly easy become knowledgeable in, so you can have an in-depth conversation with almost anybody. Once they have had some experience it with themselves. And it is something that pretty much anyone can enjoy. Like that is a big part of it for me at least. You can learn all this stuff about it and then you can see it put it to practice by actually tasting the beer and enjoying it. And that is a sort of mutual experience that you get to talk to other people about, and they feel the same way about, and that makes it fun to bond with people over. —*Charles, Clerk, Local Bottleshop*

For servers and sales reps, *skill variety* and *learning* were found to be different dimensions of MFW implicating beer talk in their tasks. For example, this server described the meaningfulness from *learning* needed in this consumptive context:

> And that is the thing I love about this environment in the tap room where we have 13 beers on tap…every time a new product comes in, you got to taste, that's the thing. How am I going to make John Q Public say "man that sounds really interesting? I want to taste that. —*Larry*, *Sales Rep*, *Brewpub*

He enjoyed tasting new beers, and then thinking through *how* he would explain that taste to people—what words would best invoke an interesting subjective experience. Moreover, the unique, constant flux of beer styles was identified as the reason the job is both challenging and rewarding. Learning the consumptive context—which breweries "do" which styles "the best," and when new beers are coming out, as well as making distinctions between styles—was the most cited task-domain source of consumer culture MFW for consumer-facing workers. As one sales representative explained, "I love learning new things every day. This industry is so dynamic." While managers need to know the market styles, servers and sales reps were planning interactions with the consumer. Both involved "keeping up" with trends, so that it could be anticipated during their work. The dynamism of the consumer culture was thus a source of MFW through the task domain. One regional sales manager explained:

> It's not stressful for me, because I'm a beer geek at heart. So I'm always on beer websites in my spare time…If I'm knowledgeable about what competitors are selling, it helps me sell my product better. If I know what's coming out and what it tastes like I can compare it to what I'm selling and it's more of an advantage to me. —*Chris*, *Regional Sales Manager*, *Regional Brewer*

The manager identifies with being a "beer geek at heart,"—a phrase used often, along with "beer nerd,"—to indicate someone who loves learning to make distinctions in beer styles. Following Kahn (1990), this manager finds the challenge of knowing trends in the consumer culture meaningful, since it aligns with his personal identity. This contrasts with previous conceptualizations of the link between consumption and work, where the external discourse is an additional form of control (Du Gay, 1996; Land & Taylor, 2010). Similarly, this production-facing brewer's *interaction* with passionate consumers provided energy:

> I get up every morning excited to go to work. Every day we are constantly doing new beers, trying new things, doing collaborations stuff like that…And talk to people about our beer. And ask them questions. And we get a lot of homebrewers and they come in and I will get a direct message on Twitter and they will ask me, hey I am trying to do your golden ale and I am wondering what yeast you use in this beer. I tell them what we use: this and this and this. It is the interaction with people. The whole industry is very tight knit in that. -*John*, *Head brewer*, *Local Brewpub.*

In this quote, the brewer was directly adopting assumptions of the market discourse. They discussed beer, they shared—interacted with people on social media by giving them information on their recipes—and he portrayed the "tight knit"

expectation that seemed to exist more generally in the craft beer space. The impetus to teach and share beer knowledge made the work meaningful.

4.2. Us Against Them

When Charlie Papazain founded the homebrewers association, he wrote the "Beautiful Davids vs. Grotesque Goliaths" rallying cry in the first letter to its members (Hindy, 2014). This founding myth of the craft beer movement persisted throughout the consumer culture in North Carolina by the absence of America's most popular beer. Not one of the bottleshops—establishments that do not brew their own beer but depend on suppliers to bring them beer to sell—carried "Bud-Miller-Coors." During data collection, one of the state's most celebrated breweries, Wicked Weed, sold itself to Anheuser-Busch. "Us versus Them" rhetoric became inflamed within the market spaces, with bottleshops proudly announcing on social media they would no longer carry Wicked Weed's beer, while some distributors would admit in private conversation, they were happy the Wicked Weed owners "got their money." A Budweiser Super Bowl commercial ran during the data collection period, suggesting the effeminate nature of persons drinking craft beer. It became a common source of amusing conversation amongst sales reps and bartenders. "Big Beer" employs multiple lobbyists in each state to maintain post-prohibition era laws that favored the consolidation of the industry (Williams, 2017). The discursive "battle" lines between these consumptive realms are clearly drawn.

In workers' narratives, this sentiment expressed itself as workers sought to convert beer drinkers who only drank (Big Beer's) American Pale Lager. One person shared a story of their first experience with craft beer. He walked into a local bottleshop, and overcome by the selection in front of him, panicked and asked for a Bud Light. The two clerks laughed and said, "I guess you have never been in a craft beer shop before?" They offered him something close to Bud Light. He was hooked, going on to spend afternoons meeting the other regulars, volunteering for the upstart brewery that owned the bottleshop, and then gaining a sales representative position for the firm after moving to the Triangle area. Every server in the sample proudly referenced a similar moment of successfully converting a Big Beer drinker. Some even made such a mission central to their *job role*. For example:

> I usually put a few options in front of [the customer.] Things I think they would like. Some tasters…part of my draw to this world is I like introducing people to new things…. And if I can get one person who drinks nothing but Bud-Miller-Coors to try craft beer and say hey that is really good…just kind of opening up their own world a little bit bro, opening up their horizons.. …There is so much better product out there, that is made with a lot more care, a lot more attention, a lot better ingredients and it's better for you. —*Bob, bartender, Craft Beer Bar*

This low autonomy worker identified with the overall mission of the craft beer consumer culture: to share and learn beer, thereby breaking down the control that

"Big Beer" has over American consumers. Those beers are framed as both harmful and shoddily made. One sales rep for a regional brewery explained, "At the end of the day, people buy beer from people. That is something Anheuser-Busch and the big boys will never understand." Bartenders, servers and sales reps directly connected with the purpose Charlie Papazain had outlined 4 decades prior in another state, perhaps because that purpose is a defining narrative of the larger consumer culture.

4.3. Community

Craft beer has been associated with a phenomenon geography (Holtkamp et al., 2016; Schnell & Reese, 2014) and tourism scholars (Reid, 2021) call "neolocalism." Small, independent firms use the idiosyncratic heritage of place to communicate a specific "local" affect to consumers, usually through branding, product labels, and motifs (Schnell, 2013). For example, Wilmington, NC features breweries with names such as Edward Teach, signaling the historic pirate known for exploits near the Port City, and Flytrap Brewing, signaling the curious plant unique to the area. In the analysis of the consumer culture, forty "About Us" pages from the two hundred and fifteen North Carolina breweries were randomly sampled to be thematically coded for brand aesthetic. While only nineteen of these were deemed neolocal, all used the word "community" somewhere in their descriptions. For example:

> Appalachian Mountain Brewing believes that every company has a duty to be conscious, ethical entities within the community they serve, and we strive to do so. We understand how important the ecology and environment are to the people of the High Country and we employ cutting-edge and tried-and-true technologies to protect our natural environment. —*From "About Us" on Appalachian Mountain Brewing's website* (*www.amb.beer/about*), *accessed March* 18th, 2016.

AMB's branding was more regional than the threshold for being coded "neolocal," but the brewery still communicated its investment in the "community." This effort to signal importance to community was widespread by brewers in both their branding and event strategies. Breweries routinely planned charity drives, often with non-profit organizations, that involved drinking beer; for example, the "crafthalf" event sponsored by Foothills Brewing is a 5k marathon combining drinking and distance running to raise monies for donations. One owner said, "It would be weird for a brewery to *not* be doing something for the community."

Meanwhile, 80 percent of employee respondents used the word "community" in their meaningfulness narratives. While the usage of the word community was quite diverse in the sample, three broad themes emerged. For one, people referenced the notion that a particular beer's recipe should represent an aesthetic indicative of place. As one brewer—whose *person-fit* MFW overlapped with this dimension of the consumer culture—explained how why he left one brewery for another:

> But specifically, I was interested in working with more forage ingredients…. If you want to be a local brewery, what does that really mean? And that got me excited. A place that was actively pursuing that in a way that was more meaningful than we are around the corner so we are local. But if you buy all of your barley from the Midwest, and you buy all of your hops from the Northeast, are you really local? —*Bob*, *head brewer*, *Local Brewery*

For this brewer, it was important that his recipes included ingredients found locally. In this sense, he was being conscientious about what it meant to fuse beer and community. (He would go on to use the word community differently, in an explicitly political way: brewing beer locally, and being a responsible local business, would "add more positive than negative to the community.") Another server suggested that the beers she pours reflect the taste preferences of the surrounding community. A sales rep echoed this sentiment, intimating his fulfilment in knowing how certain urban spaces favor beers that would be unpopular in other parts of the state. Hence, *local* or *community* is an aesthetic quality that was sought (foraged from local ingredients for the most discerning), constructed, and married with beer styles.

A second theme in "community" referenced the responsibility to the local area. For example:

> Our hope is making this into a community space and a public space and beer is a big part of the Carrboro community and so forth in creating a sustainable business. That resonates with me in a very passionate way. –*Aron*, *Bartender*, *Local Brewery.*

In these types of quotes, workers referenced the *belonging* felt in how their organization sponsored or supported other local organizations in the surrounding community. The ostensible goals represented by breweries and festivals to "give back" resonated strongly with employees. Almost every brewer or assistant brewer discussed how their spent grain goes to farms in the area, or that they are attempting to locally source as many of their supplies as possible. Here, community is reflected in the built environment constituting the spaces proximate to the breweries.

A third predominant community theme suggested the role that beer plays in creating connections between people:

> And I also love the idea of community and people being drawn together. And I feel like drinks a lot of time start that. So it is a talking piece. To sit down. And we talk about coffee. You can sit down and you can say oh wow, this beer tastes like pine or is like the color of the sun or it smells like grass. And you know whatever you can talk about it. —*Cary*, *Bartender*, *Local Brewery*

Rather than a built space, community is the process of consistently bringing people together for time spent in one another's company. Respondents expressed the notion that craft beer is a conduit for stabilizing *interaction*. As another sales rep put it: "So I saw beer as this way to drive relationships. You know, nothing really

brings people together in any other way. Yeah they have cooking events, and food events, and pairing events, and food truck rodeos but people don't interact like they do at beer festivals," suggesting that non-beer events cannot create the same level of intimacy. These three themes of 1) how beer's taste reflects local aesthetics, 2) being an active partner with local organizations, and 3) creating connections between people were reflected in the broad usage of the term "community."

4.4. Double-Edged Consumer Culture Meaningfulness

Two people in the sample expressed dissatisfaction with their job, but their reasoning was quite similar. The following quote is from a sales representative who had grown unhappy with her firm:

> I saw that they had won a gold medal for their lager. Vienna lager is not my favorite style, but ours is the example of what it should be. So I figure that any brewery that brews the beer right has to be great. I never expected the founders of the company didn't have a love for beer. I never expected that the brew master didn't start as a homebrewer." —*Victoria*, *Sales Rep*, *Regional Brewery*

This person once had a prominent sales position with a large (non-beer) corporation and left to join this brewery. She first researched them by examining their beers. Having found them satisfactory, she decided to take the position. She soon came to realize the brewer and owner were not "beer nerds," however. They did not have an extensive background prior to the enterprise, and had chosen the industry because of growth potential. She came to regret working for them, and hoped to one day start her own brewery, with her husband being the brew master (two years after the interview, she had).

The other dissatisfied respondent admitted to quitting a large, regional brewer because their sales goals were "more numbers driven," rather than relationship driven. These dissatisfied respondents suggest the double-edged nature of consumer culture as the source of meaningfulness. If the external context of the firm drew the worker to the job, workers may hold that firm to the standards of the consumer culture. Hence, monetary focused organizations were devalued, presumably because they did *not* share in the larger consumer project of learning, teaching and sharing craft beer.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Consumer Culture Source of Meaningful Work

This study demonstrates that consumer culture narratives offer symbolic material for workers to construct a sense of fulfilling, meaningful subjective experience. While job, organization and person-level characteristics are widely studied, the consumer cultural context offers a distinct path, where discourse situates firms *and* jobs. In this case, the "craft" beer consumer culture provided: 1) a concrete

narrative of systems external to the lifestyle (us against them), 2) a narrative for why the internal space mattered (community), and 3) praxis, or parts to play in a broader mission (teaching, learning and sharing). The firm's role was to provide tools, resources and platforms for a social mission that feels important, and larger than oneself. For workers, craft beer narratives explained the external market environment, while giving them a clear purpose relative to that environment.

Practitioners, consultants, and managers interested in designing jobs with meaningfulness should recognize the values of the consumptive context situating the production of goods and services. What goals, ambitions, and aspirations drive consumer projects? Are workers being selected from this context? Do the values of the firm reflect the values of consumers? Workers strongly motivated by social concerns or callings may view the organization as more or less suited to fulfilling that purpose (Grant, 2007; Steger et al., 2012). In other words, employees who highly value the consumer culture may perceive the firms' pursuit of profit as antithetical to its values. No research has discovered a consumer culture seeking to maximize returns on investment. Firms legally bound to increase shareholder value may find themselves in a bind when marrying the meaning of the consumptive context to the purpose of the job.

Three research implications can be noted for the management service literature: 1) Qualitative or case studies that investigate MFW in jobs or organizational culture should consider whether that firm is embedded within a consumer culture. Wal-Mart is not embedded in a consumer culture context, but Game Stop might be. To what degree does a "gamer lifestyle" shape workers' expectations? Workers likely come to jobs with expectations shaped by how they have intersected with that firm as consumers first. 2) The degree to which the firm and the job aligns itself with the specific mission of the consumer culture may contrast with workers' expectations for advancing the consumer culture's mission. The two dissatisfied employees in this study illustrate where this source of meaning may work against firms. Similarly to the "double-edged" effect in the callings literature (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015) individuals will vary in how passionate they are for the consumer project, thus creating variable standards for assessing the job as vehicle for their passions. 3) Large data sets measuring MFW could be biased if firms within consumer cultural contexts are systematically included in the sample without operationalizing a potential "consumer culture effect." Surveys may consider measuring how strongly workers identify with the consumer culture, if one exists, or if workers chose the job from prior participation as consumers.

5.2. Limitations

Two limitations of the study suggest areas for future research. One, the boundaries determining the "consumer culture" can be ambiguous. Craft beer is driven by the enthusiasm of consumers. To what extent these features transfer to define a comparison case, or another case of the consumer culture, is not clear. We may, for example, ask, "Why beer?" Was there something specific to the commodity's

sociomateriality (Baron & Gomez, 2016; Symon & Whiting, 2019) that allowed these blurred boundaries to become meaningful? Elliott (2022) argues that beer has characteristics lending itself to emergent, decentralized experimentation, which may not be replicable with other commodities. While also being intoxicating, the inherent subjectivity of tasting the flavors—such as what "notes" one person "is getting," whether good or bad, and how some brewery does a particular style—provided consumers and workers with equivalent, subjective grounds for debating distinctions. The intrinsic properties of the commodity being exchanged may have facilitated this connection between consumers and workers. How might such differences between consumer cultures be taxonomized? Further research conceptualizing variables for distinguishing types of consumer culture-market systems would identify cases where such links between consumers, firms, and jobs might be expected.

Secondly, the semi-structured interview, spread across workplaces without representative sampling may have positively biased the presentation of work. Manufacturing or assembly jobs, where technical tasks are highly routinized, were not observed. Occurring only within a handful of regionally-sized (more than 10,000 barrels per year) facilities that happened to be outside the geographic scope of data collection's feasibility, these jobs would involve canning or labelling lines; or loading and shipping orders. During the exploratory phase of this study, these facilities were observed. Three people occupying this category were interviewed informally and expressed overall frustration. One worker said, "This job is just as cutthroat as anywhere else. I screw up and I'm gone. But I'm not just a can in your fridge." This suggests the sample is probably over representing the amount of meaningfulness that exists in the population of craft beer workers, or that other types of job conditions could become a basis for rejecting the external discourse. Future research would more systematically sample characteristics of the firm, the individual, and the local markets where craft beer consumers traffic to observe mechanisms linking consumer culture and MFW.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

Discursive themes animating the consumer culture were found to symbolically offer contexts where jobs connected workers to a broader purpose, thus offering meaningful work. "Collective meaning making" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) intersected with the architecture of jobs to promote pro-social purpose (Grant, 2007). All jobs, even restricted autonomy barbacks and servers, were transformed into roles serving the larger consumer culture project. Workers and consumers shared the experience of tasting distinction in beer—and this practice was viewed as critical to developing and expanding one's personal knowledge. Teaching, learning and sharing within "community" spaces provided roles—parts to play—within an ongoing, collective effort to save American consumers from "Big Beer". These interactions conjured consensus concerning value, thus knitting workers and consumers to shared realities within otherwise amorphous consumer market

environments. More research taxonomizing the types of consumer cultures could allow researchers to observe the boundaries for these market systems, as well as how firms and jobs become embedded within. Consumer cultures could more intensely connect the employees to a broader—non-monetary—purpose for their work—beyond management and organizational culture, thus providing new terrain for conceptualizing meaningful career choices.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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