Marketing Mutuality: Boundary Spanning Approaches to Marketing Strategy

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Marketing Mutuality: Boundary Spanning Approaches to Marketing Strategy
Marketing Mutuality: Boundary Spanning Approaches to Marketing Strategy

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in Business Administration

By

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Dr. Robin Soster
Committee Member
Abstract

This dissertation, arranged in three essays, is grounded firmly in the crossroads of sociology and marketing. Theories of the former inform phenomena of the latter. In particular, the sociological theory of the gift and the rich tradition of anti-utilitarian social science inform contemporary debate regarding the rise of the sharing economy and its much-heralded potential to alter the landscape of the market. Through an ethnography of brand and retail service settings in the particular context of American craft beer festivals, the concept of mutuality is used to provide a line of demarcation between effective and ineffective forms of the sharing economy. The first essay is a conceptual treatment of the theory of the gift and its applicability to modern marketing strategy. The second essay delves into the aforementioned ethnographic data to derive insights for managers and theoreticians on the benefits of effective participation in the sharing economy. The third essay provides a practical take on the abstract and at times esoteric concepts underlying the theory to bolster the utility of the findings for practitioners. Throughout the essay, the efficacy of mutuality and gift theory for resolving tensions and simplifying conundrums in the relevant literature is discussed in detail.
Acknowledgements

It is with a grateful heart that I find myself with an occasion to provide these acknowledgements. I am, of course, grateful to be at the tail end of this life-altering ordeal that we conventionally call a doctoral program, particularly with its culmination in the dissertation that you now hold in your hands. More than that, however, I am grateful to be afforded the opportunity to thank the multitude who have made this arduous journey a tale for me to tell and not a warning tale for others in my absence. It would be quite impossible to thank everyone that played a role, so I will stick only to those that I can in reasonable space mention specifically.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Jeff Murray. He has been far more than a mentor to me, though he has certainly been that. His approach to doctoral student development has left me armed for a career, rather than battered by an indoctrination. From Thanksgiving celebrations to hugs after journal rejections, I owe him a lifetime of thanks.

Second, I would like to thank the committee. Where Jeff and I are limitless sources of grand ideas, Ronn and Robin kept us grounded and on track. Both have provided invaluable advice and support throughout the process, from feedback on manuscripts to help with a move. While not a formal committee member, I would be remiss if I were not to mention the great Eric Arnold, who has been a source of inspiration and friendship to me. From writing recommendation letters to exchanging emails when I was heated and needed a discerning voice to guide me through the tribulations of any newcomer to the field and its woes, he has proven himself a true scholar of the sort that is rarely found in the academy anymore.

Third, I would like to thank my family. While my father, Randy Rose, certainly takes credit for where I am today in the sense of exposing me to the field and encouraging me to pursue graduate studies, I couldn’t have succeeded without the lessons learned from my other
family members. The resilience of my mother, Flossie Drociuk, taught me to endure hardships for long-term goals; the dedication of my sister, Carmen Monts, taught me to strive for them daily; the ingenuity of my uncle, Coleman Hockett, Jr., taught me to work wisely and avoid the backbreak when possible; and the pride and support of my grandfather, Coleman Hockett, Sr., and my aunt, Lori Rose, deceased as they may be, were all of utmost necessity in my completion of this project and of my degree.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly for my sanity, I would like to thank my friends. Buck and Sam Conroy saw me through dark days when I felt as isolated as any prisoner in a cell. Their laughter, friendship, and genuine support meant stability and a light to guide my way through the darkest hours. Daanish Pestonjee similarly provided a priceless source of gaiety and support that I will never forget. Even today, as I write this, he has made arrangements to help me far and above the call of duty for any friend.

Lastly, I would like to thank my fiancée Jennifer Edmonds. When I began this journey, I had no idea for whom I was doing the work. But having found the lines of our lives entwining to form a cord far stronger than either apart, I realize that it is for her that I have done this. To provide a stable and respectable position that can see her through her days, dark and lit, is a loftier goal than I could have envisioned as a twenty-four year old with dreams of German cars. I thank her sincerely for supporting me through perhaps the most trying part of this process—the end. We’ve got a long way to go, but it feels good to have made it this far.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all. Staff at WCOB, cohort friends in other departments, distant family, fleeting colleagues, everyone; if I learned anything of value, it is to never discount relational ontology. You have my debt and a sincere promise to never repay it in
full, but to pay it backward and forward nonetheless, for I would never seek to sever the ties that bind us. Cheers.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to what remains of the spirit of the goddess Athena. She exemplified two elements that are critical to the completion of an academic endeavor. Foremost, she epitomized wisdom, the search for knowledge, and curiosity for its own sake. Those who would called themselves scholars would do well do acknowledge the importance of the role of the striving and, perhaps more importantly, the inability to succeed. All that is knowable cannot be known, and there is more than what is knowable.

Of equal importance to her embodiment of Wisdom itself is her status as a chief deity of strategic warfare. While I am not keen on making metaphors of war, the navigation of a doctoral program and its requisites requires nothing less than a refined strategy. Its execution must be flawless if one is to escape without severe scarring.

Thus, while today’s academy worships at the Altar of Reason and prays to the Gods of Modernity and Enlightenment, I would dedicate this project to the goddess, her memory, and all that she represents in contrast. Those who read this, consider carefully where your faith lies.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brewery</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event Name</th>
<th>Number of Visits</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Floyds</td>
<td>Munster, IN</td>
<td>Dark Lord Day</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founders</td>
<td>Grand Rapids, MI</td>
<td>KBS Day</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bruery</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>Black Tuesday</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foothills</td>
<td>Winston-Salem, NC</td>
<td>Sexual Chocolate Release</td>
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<td>Cigar City</td>
<td>Tampa, FL</td>
<td>Hunahpu Day</td>
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Breweries visited for ethnography.

Table Two (page 43)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Kentucky Breakfast Stout</td>
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<td>Hunahpu's Imperial Stout</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Tuesday Imperial Stout</td>
<td>$1.36</td>
<td>$0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Product offers for each brewery.

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Bottle share in common room at Hampton Inn, Munster, IN. Source: Alexander Rose
Figure Two (page 51)

3Floyds keychain given to author. Source: Alexander Rose

Figure Three (page 52)

Founder’s bottle opener in Holiday Inn, Grand Rapids, MI. Source: Alexander Rose
Candy wrapper from Hampton Inn, Munster, IN. Source: Alexander Rose
Introduction

This dissertation is structured in the form of three essays. Each serves a different purpose. While the content area of the project is within the discipline of Marketing, the theoretical tools are drawn from Sociology and, to a lesser extent, Anthropology. This format was selected for several reasons. Primarily, it provides a springboard for publication. In today’s academic job market, converting a dissertation into publishable form is critical to successfully securing a competitive position. Secondarily, however, the format is conducive to addressing a large-scale issue as is appropriate for a dissertation in a different way than the traditional tome-style dissertation. Specifically, rather than delving into an issue with a series of studies and chapters oriented towards different aspects of the phenomenon, three essays allows for a triangulating approach where each provides a thorough treatment of some aspect. It is to this depth and triangulation that I next turn.

The first essay is a conceptual one; it is intended to serve as an introduction, overview, and expansion of the theoretical framework deployed throughout the dissertation. In this case, essay one is a theoretical exposition on the gift economy, the tradition of anti-utilitarian social science, and the importance of gift theory for marketing. Connections are drawn between the tradition of gift theory in core disciplines and its manifestation in consumer research. Shortcomings of previous work in consumer research are highlighted in order to justify the project as a dissertation-caliber topic. Here, I show that while gift theory has been used in consumer research, it has been scantily attended to in literature on marketing strategy. Given the rise of the sharing economy and the importance ascribed to it by academicians and practitioners alike, this seems a considerable lacuna. By detailing the theoretical framework in a separate, dedicated essay, the groundwork, justification, and opportunities are presented before the empirics of the
dissertation are explored. This allows for a deeper look at the theoretical framework and a more clear, elaborated purpose for the project as a whole.

Essay two is thoroughly empirical. It details an ethnographic exploration of a retail/brand servicescape in the context of American craft beer festivals. From these ethnographic data, insights into the sharing economy, or more appropriately the gift economy and its interface with the market economy, are derived. In particular, a line of demarcation is drawn between ineffective and effective strategies within the sharing economy. With the line established, a marketing doctrine is offered that navigates said line in a favorable manner. This is intended to be immediately importable by interested managers. Beyond this line of demarcation, theoretical themes are offered that are relevant to other streams of research in marketing strategy. These are, broadly speaking, branding, community, sustainability, and pricing. This essay is intended to bridge the gap between the theoretical treatment provided in essay one, managerial relevance, and current research on marketing strategy through empirical analysis.

The third and final essay is intended for managerial audiences. It takes the theoretical and empirical insights from the first two essays and positions them in language geared towards managerial audiences. This essay serves to highlight the applicability of the project in detail. The relevance of the theory and my findings, couched in terms and directed at problems faced by managers, to everyday practice is of paramount importance. By providing practical, actionable insights for managers who are currently participating in or wish to enter markets where the sharing economy is prevalent, the applied status of the dissertation as a study in Marketing is demonstrated.

It to essay one that I next turn.
Essay One

Introduction

Discussions of gifts in the context of marketing are frequently met with incredulity. Often, listeners will consider gifts a non-sequitur to marketing strategy, except insofar as one’s brand may seek to solidify itself as the go-to source for gift selection; visions of Macy’s draped in red and glittering gold in *Miracle on 34th Street* dominating their train of thought. At worst, simple disbelief is the prevailing response. After all, for many listeners, gift giving conjures images of winter holidays and birthdays. For those with children, the thought of seeing their children’s faces light up with excitement; for those without, memories of their own giddy gift reception abound. Indeed, what good could woolgathering on the subject of something as altruistic as gift giving do for marketers during the Golden Age of *homo economicus*?

My intention with this essay is to provide an explication of theories of the gift. In doing so, my hope is that the reader will find the typical listener’s reactions detailed above off base on several grounds. First, if nothing else is taken away from the discussion, let it at least be that gift giving is in no way incompatible with the view of humans as self-interested; it makes no claims on altruism and requires no saintly behavior to function. Indeed, one of the strengths of the grand theories of the gift is that the assumptions on which they rest are *prima facie* quite tenable. Second, my aim is to demonstrate that the gift economy is alive and well, enmeshed in the market. Finally, and not unrelated, I maintain that understanding how extant pieces of the gift economy within the market may be leveraged and/or new pieces introduced is quite relevant for marketing strategy.

There are several cornerstones on which I justify the need for such an exploration. First, at the purely practical level, failing to recognize and in turn utilize a key element of contemporary
exchange systems almost certainly has an adverse impact on the bottom line of many firms.
Similarly, the recognition thereof almost certainly has a positive impact on the bottom line of
those firms’ competitors. By explicating these issues, leveraging should be far more manageable,
if I may be forgiven a professional pun. Moreover, what could be more marketing-oriented than
finding and leveraging—cynics may say exploiting—relevant cultural facts?

Second, up a few levels into the ivory tower, much of the work on the gift that has been
cducted within marketing has technically fallen under the aegis of consumer research. While
this is not in and of itself a bad thing, it does lend itself to opportunism—another hallmark of
marketing—in the form of generating discussion in a new area of the field. Finally, at the
pinnacle of the aforementioned ivory tower, the issue of legitimizing the relevance of dusty,
esoteric anthropological work for marketing practice is a considerable one. While Consumer
Culture Theory (CCT; cf. Arnould and Thompson 2005) has gained its footing in the way of
academic legitimacy, a concerted effort to connect its theoretics to marketing practice would be
nothing if not beneficial to the perceptions of the group.

In order to orient the reader before beginning, I offer a roadmap of the discussion. In the
interest of fair warnings, a disclaimer is required. While some redundancy may be unavoidable,
my intention is to guide rather than bore. The ability of anthropological treatises to bore is well
documented; my hope here is to avoid contributing to the existing evidence in that regard.

To that end, I’ll begin with a treatment of the major anthropological and sociological
theories of the gift. This discussion will be necessarily abstract and generalized with its main
thrust being to illuminate various aspects of gift exchange as a system embedded in the market.
From there, I will move into existing work in marketing and consumer research on the gift.
While there hasn’t been much, it has been relatively rich. This part of the discussion is intended
to shore up what we know about gift giving for consumer research. Next, I will use the big picture provided by the grand theories and the empirical details provided by the extant consumer research literature to construct bridges. These bridges are not gap spotting; they are substantive gaps in knowledge regarding the connections between gift behavior and marketing strategy. I will conclude the essay with some discussion about future work and empirical developments that can cross these bridges and shed some light on the utility of the gift for marketing.

Preliminary responses anticipated, goals established, justifications presented, warnings posted, and map provided, let us turn now to a general discussion of the key theories that comprise traditional academic work on the gift

Theories of the Gift

Any discussion of extant research on the gift and the gift economy must begin—and some might also argue end—with Mauss. Mauss’ seminal book, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950/1990), provides a groundbreaking anthropological treatment of a system that has been (and in some ways still is) prevalent through much of human society, but that provides a radical alternative to the perceived spectrum between Communism, or a purely controlled market, and classical liberal capitalism, or a purely free market. Mauss’ work drew on empirical evidence from the Mediterranean, the Pacific Northwest of North America, and the Asian Rim, particularly Polynesia and Melanesia, for an alternative system of economy and social solidarity based on the giving, receiving, and re-giving of gifts. Here, I will cover the main points of Mauss’ theory, focusing in particular on those most relevant to contemporary marketing issues.
Mauss and the Gift Economy

Mauss was interested in finding a real alternative to the existing economic systems of the day, being a veteran of the First World War and an opponent of Bolshevism. In order to find this, he took an anthropological eye to “archaic” societies in order to understand the basis of their economies. What he found was a system of political economy revolving around the gift, a phenomenon that he referred to as a “total social fact,” a term reminiscent of his academic forebear, Emile Durkheim.

The gift was a total social fact, he argued, in the sense that it could not easily be decoupled from any other aspect of the society in which it was prevalent. The gift economy could just as easily be called the gift culture, as it had ramifications for politics, trade, the division of labor, art, aesthetics, and even religion. While a treatment of such ramifications would be far beyond the scope of this present discussion—indeed it constituted most of his book—I will provide an example in aesthetics. In Polynesia, for instance, particularly prized gifts were baubles made from seashells, decorated by other islanders. These baubles would serve as a combination of today’s art and television for those who possessed them, being stared at and touched and appreciated for hours, all for personal aesthetic pleasure.

The most important aspect of Mauss’ theory of the gift economy, for our purposes, was how it was able to sustain itself and thus maintain social solidarity. Mauss wondered, fundamentally, what it was about the gift in these systems that compelled the recipient to reciprocate. The results of his work, which examined a variety of systems with elements of the gift economy and the market economy in varying degrees, suggested that there were three norms that governed the system of gifts. The first was the obligation to give, or the social expectation that actors give gifts to one another. The second was the obligation to receive, or the social
expectation that actors accept gifts given by another. The third was the obligation to reciprocate, or the social expectation that actors should give gifts to those actors who give them gifts. This should come as a relief to the skeptical reader who may have feared that this gift economy relied on altruism or was inconsistent with the idea of self-interest. Indeed not, as the second obligation in the gift system is the primary obligation in the market system. Rather than being a primitive version of exchange, it is actually a more complicated one than the market system we see today, in the sense that it relied on a greater complexity of social norms in order for it to function smoothly.

But at this point, one might ask, if there is a great deal of giving and giving back, how does affluence emerge? Moreover, what is to stop people from ignoring the first and third obligations and just accruing goods? These are good questions and their answers, rather than undermining the viability of the gift system, actually underscore it. In order to answer the first question, the second must be addressed.

The first and primary driving force behind this system of obligations for Mauss was the hau, a Maori term related by a tribal sage named Rapaniri (Mauss 1950/1990). The hau, according to Mauss’ interpretation of Rapaniri’s parable, is the spirit of an object. The illustration requires three actors and at least two goods. Actor A gives a gift to Actor B. Actor B in turn gives a gift to Actor C. Some time later, Actor C gives a gift back to Actor B, fulfilling his norm. If Actor B were to keep this gift rather than give it or something similar in magnitude (not necessarily in kind) to Actor A, the hau of the gift would punish him for not returning the spirit of the original gift to A. In this sense, the hau was a mystical force, a spirit of objects, that sought to return to its source. Thus, an economic principle was explained by a religious
metaphor. This point is particularly important for Mauss’ critics and I will return to it shortly during the discussion thereof.

Secondly, as in many societies, social control dictates conformity to these obligations. The gift economy relies heavily on honor, as those who give the greatest gifts and who reciprocate gifts in even greater measure accrue honor. What could be more favorable in the eyes of one’s peers, as in the case of the Pacific Northwest American Indians, than taking a lavish piece of copper art from a rival, giving him another equally lavish piece of copper art, but adding in a vast feast and drink? Here a key part of the gift as conceptualized by Mauss emerges. The gift is not altruistic; it is agonistic. Giving another actor a gift breeds an obligation in the recipient. If they take it without reciprocating, they are dishonorable. Indeed, if their reciprocation is not greater than the original gift, then the original giver has gained some “face” at the cost of the recipient.

This phenomenon explains how rival tribes were able to coexist, and prosper, peacefully. Rather than fighting, they would attempt to undermine one another with lavish gifts, costly feasts, and other seemingly-selfless (though in fact not at all) acts of giving. The interested reader may also note parallels between chiefs in a territory and businesses within an industry. So to continue the example from the PNW, if a chief and his tribe were to be hosted by a rival, feasted, given gifts, and made to enjoy themselves, but in turn failed to reciprocate with an equally extravagant celebration for the rival tribe, he would not only be essentially declaring war with his rival, he would be shaming his tribe and undermining them in the eyes of the gods.

Here again the totality of the gift system is obvious, and thus too is the answer to the first question raised above. Physical health was boosted (or even over-boosted; the American Indians of the PNW were notoriously overweight) by the gift; war was declared by refusing the gift or refusing to re-gift; worthiness in the eyes of the gods was determined by participation in the gift
exchange; tribal pride and dignity hinged on the extent to which they could give lavish gifts. Like a thread wrapped throughout these elements is the gift, the mandate of the *hau*, and the honor that the circulation of the gift bestows or removes. To the point of affluence, a system of constantly shuffling gifts wherein each actor is trying to give more than he has received, leads to a society where all actors have and are able to give. Chiefs exchange colossal gifts at festivals; food, drink, art, craft goods, women, warriors, even religious figures can be gifted. In turn, the chiefs gift to their people food, drink, crafts, and tools. The people give back to their chief such things as they can create or gather. The chief uses these creations to give back to the rival chief. An individual tribesman may give a cart of vegetables to his neighbor. The neighbor would return the gift in the form of fish from his catch. The latter begins to shed light on the division of labor. Some may make baubles from shells, some may fish, but all receive from each category. These anecdotal examples are empirically documented in Mauss’ work and the work of other anthropologists.

But despite the importance of and respect accorded to Mauss’ theorizing on the gift, it has not gone unchallenged. Next, I detail three major criticisms of Mauss’ work from three scholars, each articulating a distinct but important critique.

*Criticisms of Mauss’s Theory*

The criticisms of Mauss emerged from three sources and each involved dissent with Mauss’ interpretation of the *hau*. While this may seem a petty issue on which to attack a theory so large, it is actually of vital importance. Undermining this perspective of the *hau* has serious ramifications for the rest of the theory; without it, much of the propositions Mauss offers fall flat.
The first such critique came from Johansen (1954). Johansen challenges neither Mauss’ ethnography nor the principles of his interpretation. Instead, Johansen draws roughly on semiotics to point out that hinging an entire theory on a word related from a mystic is a treacherous task in that any word, and for the Maori hau in particular, has a considerable semantic field. He goes on to say that hau has such a wide semantic field that it’s entirely possible that Mauss has based his entire project on a confused misinterpretation from Rapaniri’s Maori parable. But because Johansen himself cannot be sure of the intended meaning—the native meaning—of hau in Rapaniri’s story, he can offer no solution aside from some semantic pessimism about the likelihood that Mauss got it right.

Next, and perhaps not unrelatedly, Firth (1959) argues that Mauss mistook the source of the hau in Rapaniri’s story, the hau of the taonga, or place of origin, with the hau of the giver. This is a critical difference in that the true hau, according to Firth, would compel the gift back to an origin rather than a giver. This is a subtle difference but one that is closely tied up with Rapaniri’s parable. The original gift from Actor A to Actor B was from the woods where a taonga or shrine had been built by priests. As such, the gift was ultimately based out of the taonga and not Actor A. Thus, the gift should want to return to the woods rather than to Actor A. Here, Firth is essentially arguing that Mauss injected a mystic interpretation into a basic Maori practice. The implication of this distinction for Mauss’ theory is that Actor B would be obligated to get the gift back to the source rather than back to Actor A. As such, much of the solidarity and obligation would be written out of the theory. Without interpersonal dependence as a result of this compelling force, Mauss’ theory changes substantially if it does not dissolve altogether.

The third critique came from Levi-Strauss. Rather than attacking Mauss’ understanding of the Maori parable, he instead attacks Mauss’ perspective more broadly. “Are we not faced here
with one of those instances (not altogether rare) in which the ethnologist allows himself to be mystified by the native?” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 38). The crux of the argument here is that Mauss lent mystical credibility to a Maori metaphor rather than evaluating the structuralist elements of the exchange system. Levi-Strauss goes on to say that Mauss essentially broke a structural system down into parts and then glued it back together with the *hau*, a make-shift construct based on Maori metaphor rather than Mauss’ own anthropological understanding. Here, if the *hau* is just an *ad hoc* component meant to hold together the artificially-broken pieces of exchange, then Mauss’ general theory falls apart. Without a spirit of the gift, even the title of his work is undermined. At best, the notions of social control and competition may continue to stand as explanations, though even the mechanism for those is absent if the *hau* is not to be understood as a compelling force.

So what then to make of these criticisms? All seem reasonable in nature and, with the exception of Johansen, offer some alternative to understanding the Maori— albeit one that changes the color of Mauss’ theory to such a degree that it may no longer bear any resemblance to itself, if it exists at all. In order to satisfactorily address these criticisms, we turn to Sahlins (1972) who, in a brilliant collection of essays, not only reconciles Mauss and his critics, but also offers a detailed sociology of primitive exchange of which gift giving is the heart.

*Sahlins on Primitive Exchange*

Sahlins’ essays are built from the ground up. He begins with a treatment of the relative affluence of hunter-gatherers. The argument is essentially that a people with limited ends—in this case, survivability—will have a relatively large number of means to reach those limited ends. It is only when ends expand that means become insufficient. From there, he argues that the
Domestic Mode of Production (DMP) is characterized by under-utilization of labor and land. With relatively limited ends, there is no incentive to work above and beyond what is required to satisfy those ends. Similarly, relative autonomy of families to meet their limited ends provides a disincentive to congregate. This creates a centripetal force amongst groups of people; they spread out to places where they will not be limiting each other’s resources. Thus, too, is the land under-utilized: with people heavily dispersed, the land is capable of sustaining more than it does (Sahlins 1972).

From there, Sahlins argues that kinship and politics work as centrifugal forces to balance the effects of the DMP. Kinship creates obligations amongst groups. Extended family support one another in times of hardship. Marital bonds serve as connections between groups, providing an incentive for some modicum of proximity. Similarly, chiefs create obligations in subject peoples. These obligations have a similar grouping effect, bringing people together in a particular area as subjects and to keep the political structure functioning. Thus, the economy is forced into increased productivity by kinship and politics. The mechanism here is reciprocity and as we recall from Mauss (1950/1990), reciprocity is a central force of gift exchange. But the *hau* is what drives reciprocity for Mauss (1950/1990). So before detailing Sahlins’ (1972) take on reciprocity, we must first turn to his treatment of Mauss’ critics on the subject of the *hau* in order to resolve the conflicts raised by Johansen (1954), Firth (1959), and Levi-Strauss (1966).

Reading into the original Maori ethnography, Sahlins discovers that while Mauss’ critics were not entirely wrong in their critiques, neither was Mauss entirely wrong in his formulations. In essence, Sahlins (1972) argues that Firth (1959) was, to some extent, right: Mauss had added a mystic interpretation onto the *hau* that was not present in Ranapiri’s parable. What’s more, he had used this to hold together his general theory, thus adding his own interpretation of the
parable and generalizing it, as Levi-Strauss argued (1966). But, on the other hand, Johansen (1954) was too pessimistic. Yes, there is a large semantic field to *hau* for the Maori. But using the context of Ranapiri’s other parables, Sahlins (1972) argues convincingly that the intended meaning can be discerned.

In short, Sahlins reverses Mauss’ interpretation. Where Mauss saw an economic principle explained by religious concepts, Sahlins argues that Ranapiri was demonstrating a religious concept via an economic principle. But this is not the definitive account of the *hau*. Instead, Sahlins turns to the parables preceding the one about the forest and the gift in order to flesh out the meaning of the *hau*. He finds that the *hau* is not spiritual *per se*; it is moral. It offers no attack itself—it does not chase down the person who refuses to return the gift to its source—but it opens the transgressor to righteous attack. In fact, *hau* is never meant to be “spirit” or “reciprocity” in such strict terms. In our own parlance, it can be understood as profit or gains. And while “the term ‘profit’ is economically and historically inappropriate to the Maori… it would have been a better translation than ‘spirit’ for the *hau* in question” (Sahlins 1972: 160-161). This is critical.

An interesting implication here is that an economic function is being explained without economics. It is not pure reciprocity or a naïve mysticism that is performed by the *hau* for the Maori. Instead, it is a cultural concept of the amorality of profiteering at the expense of the source of that profit. “Benefits taken by a man from a source must be returned to that source so that it may remain a source” (Sahlins 1972: 168). Thus, no explicit understanding of economics is at play for the Maori despite the fact that economics is an outcome of their understanding. As such, an anthropological understanding of the phenomena at play is in fact more appropriate than an economic one. But what is clear is that reciprocity is at play, though it is not constructed in
economic terms by the Maori. With that in mind, we turn to Sahlins’ (1972) impressive account of the functioning of reciprocity.

In the way of definitions, I quote Sahlins at length. He refers to reciprocity as “a whole class of exchanges, a continuum of forms… At one end of the spectrum stands the assistance freely-given, the small currency of everyday kinship, friendship, and neighborly relations, the ‘pure gift’ Malinowski called it, regarding which an open stipulation of return would be unthinkable and unsociable. At the other pole, self-interested seizure, appropriation by chicanery or force requited only by an equal and opposite effort on the principle of _lex talionis_, ‘negative reciprocity’ as Goulder phrases it. The extremes are notably positive and negative in a moral sense. The intervals between them are not merely so many gradations of material balance in exchange, they are intervals of sociability. The distance between poles of reciprocity is, among other things, social distance” (Sahlins 1972: 191).

Again, a key element implied here is that an understanding of reciprocity does not hinge on economic tallies and material transactions. Instead, it rests on degrees of sociality. As such, sociology provides a stronger lens for understanding and conceptualizing various degrees of reciprocity than does economics. Indeed, the material side of the transaction is repressed by the social. Sahlins explicitly presents it so: “What are in the received wisdom ‘noneconomic’ or ‘exogenous’ conditions are in the primitive reality the very organization of economy” (Sahlins 1972: 185). Importantly, this conceptual nuance also addresses the theoretical objections of Cheal (1988). Cheal argues convincingly that the gift economy is not a political economy but a moral economy. Rather than material obligations, the gift system relies on moral norms. Indeed it does, but this conceptualization offers no inconsistency to Sahlins’ (1972) perspective.
If reciprocity is the system of organization, then gifts are the currency. While Sahlins provides a brief note on primitive currency, it is with the underscored caveat that such systems are rare and usually “reflect an unusual incidence of balanced reciprocity in peripheral social sectors;” money facilitates the heavy balanced traffic (Sahlins 1972: 229). But the gift is widespread and it functions in much the way Mauss supposed. Gifts create ties through the creation of indebtedness. As the Eskimo proverb suggests, “gifts make slaves as whips make dogs.” In fact, a central element of the gift suggested by Mauss is supported by Sahlins: that reciprocity [and gift exchange] does not dissolve distinctions but rather perpetuates them. Illustrative of this fact is marriage. Marriages are seldom a balanced reciprocation and this is a happy circumstance, truth be told. For “the exchange that is symmetrical or unequivocally equal carries some disadvantages from the point of view of alliance: it cancels debts and thus opens the possibility of contracting out… but if accounts are not squared, then the relationship is maintained by virtue of ‘the shadow of indebtedness’ and there will have to be further occasions of association, perhaps as occasions of further payment” (Sahlins 1972: 222). Hence the role of kinship in sustaining communal relations.

On that note, and to connect the conceptualization of reciprocity and the gift to our earlier discussion regarding the centripetal force of the DMP, reciprocity in turn provides a centrifugal force to match. Reciprocity of hau responds to the repulsion of groups, bringing them together under the aegis of kinship or politics. Indeed, “the entire political order is sustained by a pivotal flow of goods, up and down the social hierarchy, with each gift not merely connoting a status relation but, as a generalized gift not directly required, compelling a loyalty” (Sahlins 1972: 206). Reciprocity through gift exchange can serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies or help
create new ones. As Sahlins points out, “in the first case, ‘to be noble is to be generous,’ in the second case, ‘to be generous is to be noble’” (1972: 207).

Thus, by obviating confusion regarding the meaning of *hau* and placing a socially-oriented continuum of reciprocity at the heart of primitive exchange, Sahlins in one deft movement rescues not only Mauss from his detractors but also Mauss’ theory from ruins. The major outcomes of interest: social solidarity, social and material stratification, interpersonal and intergroup competition, division of labor, and so forth all continue to function as expected by Mauss but as explained by Sahlins. Happily, the new conceptualization still requires no feats of belief in Man’s better nature or mental gymnastics regarding the viability of an exchange system that begins with giving rather than the all-important receiving for which the received wisdom would cry.

With this conceptualization laid out, the next topic of discussion is the extant research on the gift within the consumer research domain. In order to establish directions for additional inquiry, what we as marketers know must be laid bare. So without further ado, we turn to contemporary marketing research on the gift.

**Consumer Research on the Gift**

The work on the gift within the consumer research domain in particular and the marketing discipline in general has been rigorous and insightful. Since Belk (1976) presented a structural network approach to analyzing gift giving, a steady stream of research has flown forth from *Journal of Consumer Research* on the topic from a variety of scholars, some positivist (e.g. Wooten 2000), others interpretivist (e.g. Sherry 1983). The majority of this work has sought to understand either the nature of gifts in today’s marketplace or the social dynamics, including
individual and group level variables, surrounding the gift exchange process. Outcomes of interest have ranged from satisfaction of the giver and satisfaction of the recipient, to the maintenance of social ties and the gendered nature of the gifting activity in today’s culture. I’ll provide a brief overview of these two primary areas and attempt to summarize the insights gleaned from the respective areas.

The Nature of the Gift

This is the smaller of the two domains, with the primary work resting on consumer-object relations in the context of the gift. Researchers have examined the meanings ascribed to, and relationships with, gifts from the perspective of givers and recipients. For instance, Curasi, Price, and Arnould (2004) explore how objects reach inalienable (versus cherished) status, finding that the relationship of the recipient to the object was a key factor in explaining the difference. In a similar vein, Bradford (2009) examined how assets gifted across generations become inalienable wealth. The results of her poignant study suggest that consumers use indexical (representing relationships) and prosaic (facilitating economic exchange) accounts to categorize gifted assets as alienable or inalienable. Further, Bradford finds that assets tend to be considered inalienable once they acquire a symbolic element that represents a family’s essence. And while the objects of her study were quite valuable economically, this added to their symbolic value despite leaving them inalienable.

In terms of the meanings ascribed to gifts, Mick and Demoss (1990) provide a useful lens by studying self-gifts. Their findings reveal that there are three dimensions to gifting: communication, exchange, and specialness. The communication dimension allows for the expression of symbolic meanings; both interpersonal and self-gifts communicate identity messages to the recipient. The exchange dimension is relatively straightforward; gift exchange
allows for the optimization of behavior in the recipient. Finally, the specialness dimension conveys sacredness, deep emotions, and discovery.

McGrath, Sherry, and Levy (1993) offer a deep analysis of the projected meanings ascribed to gifts by givers and recipients. Their findings reveal that gifts are cathetic, often accompanied by frustration, irritation, effort, spontaneity, and/or pleasure. The gift can, according to this projective analysis, ingratiate, insult, hurt, heal, and even act ambivalently, speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Further, the gift can serve even as a telepathic bonding tool, creating a special, unspoken connection between giver and recipient. While Marcoux’s (2009) paper certainly focuses on social dynamics, an element of consumer-gift relations is present in his analysis. In particular, his informants report that they often attach burdensome meanings to gifts (both given and received), suggesting that the gift economy’s social solidarity may not always be welcome; the telepathic bond implied by McGrath et al. (1993) may be more burden than boon. These findings suggest a multifaceted complexity to the relationship between consumers and gifts, both in recipient and giver roles.

_Social Dynamics of the Gift_

One of the more prominent pieces of consumer research on this topic was done by Giesler (2006); here he explicated a consumer gift system, challenging more traditional work in marketing that took dyadic views of gifts. Giesler returned to the foundational work of Mauss in order to underscore the systemic nature of the gift. Giesler’s primary critique was of Sherry’s (1983) anthropological perspective on the gift, which was in fact not particularly anthropological since it adopted the aforementioned dyadic, or non-systemic view, of the phenomenon.
Much of the relational research on the gift has focused on the manner in which gift exchange can be used to manage interpersonal relationships. Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel (1999) offer a comprehensive analysis of relationship management through gift giving. Their data reveal six primary effects: two positive, two neutral, and two negative. The positive effects are strengthening and affirmation, wherein an existing relationship is improved or a positive one is affirmed through effect gift exchange. The neutral effects are negligible and negative confirmation; a negligible effect leads to no changes in perceptions, whereas negative confirmation validates perceived negativity in the relationship. Finally, the negative effects are weakening and severing, which are measures of the same kind. Weakening effects undermine existing relationships, harming the perceived quality thereof, while severing effects dissolve the relationship altogether.

In a related study, Joy (2001) explores the ways in which differing degrees of relational closeness impact gift giving behaviors in contemporary Hong Kong. She finds that gift giving behaviors, expectations, selection, and effort vary depending on the nature of the relationship. For romantic others, emotional expectations are high, and the price varies temporally. On the other hand, for casual friendships, gifts are often instrumental, with low expectations in terms of effort and price. A complementary study by Lowrey, Otnes, and Ruth (2001) examined the ways in which third parties (i.e., individuals who are not a part of the dyad of interest) can influence the nature of the gifts exchanged by the focal dyad. In an impressive twelve-year longitudinal study, they find that individuals incorporate the views of others in their networks when selecting gifts. In this way, the gift selected symbolizes aspects of the relationship between the giver and the recipient, but also their relationship with others in the network. This suggests that in many respects, the personal is, in fact, social.
Moving beyond individuals or even networks of individuals, Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012) study gift giving between sociological groups: namely, socioeconomically different communities within post-Katrina New Orleans. Their findings harken back to the work of Mauss, suggesting that relational solidarity can be built, maintained, and improved through gift giving, whether the occupants of the exchange nodes are individuals or, in the case of their work, groups. This is a key article in that it demonstrates once more the contemporary relevance of classical anthropological work on the gift, an argument on which this essay relies as well.

Taken as a whole, this literature suggests that we know several things. For one, we know a great deal about the ways in which consumers use gifts to manage relationships. This is clearly well grounded in the grand theories of the gift as gifts are explicitly theorized to provide an impetus for social stratification and solidarity. For another, we know that gifts serve as a central symbolic force for people. Whether it is manifest through their selection of particular gifts, their choosing to provide gifts for themselves, or the way in which they classify gifts from important others in their lives, extant work suggests a great deal of importance. This is perhaps not surprising given the salient position of symbols within contemporary culture (cf. Baudrillard 1972). Moreover, this is somewhat implicitly supported by the grand theories of the gift, as well. By privileging the social over the material or economic, Mauss (1950/1990) and Sahlins (1972) set the stage for the symbolic power of the gift.

So with a clear eye toward what we do know, it is apparent that there is still a great deal of work to be done in this area. In order to flesh out a few options, we turn our attention next to the missing links and present several opportunities for additional research. It is on these foundations that the rest of my work can be built.
Future Research

Despite the wealth of knowledge regarding gift giving and consumption, it is equally clear that there is a good bit we do not know about gift giving. The most salient here is that we aren’t entirely sure how it interacts with the market. While Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012) explored the presence of the gift economy at the heart of a market activity, the center of their inquiry was not focused on the nature of the linkages. This suggests an avenue for additional work.

Essentially, looking at the “ground floor” of the interface of the market and gift economies as they did is the solution, but the focus must be on the ways in which the overlap of the two systems has demonstrable effects on each.

Questions that would address this issue include, but are hardly limited to, the following. Are consumers aware of the presence of gift systems within the market? Does the presence of gift systems change the expected functions of the market economy? Or, vice-versa, does the presence of the market change the expected functions of the gift economy? Are there instantiations of pure gift or pure market economies, or are they so intertwined that neither manifests itself in contemporary society without the other? Such questions would shed a great deal of light on the sociological and economic aspects of the presence of the two forms of exchange.

Another notable absence is the ways in which gift systems provide a microcultural context for consumers. How and to what extent do consumers create new norms and microcultural forces within gift exchange contexts? Sociologically, do consumers alter their lifeworlds (cf. Habermas 1985) when they engage in systematic gift exchange? What is the role of the market in this context creation? Are consumers even aware of the presence of the gift economy when the market is present, or in other words, do market forces mask the presence of the gift economy?
Again, answers to these questions would shed considerable light on the impact of the gift economy on the market economy and vice-versa.

Opportunities exist for those interested in sustainability, as well. Fad or not, few can argue that sustainable alternatives to the present economic system need to be considered given the finitude of resources to which society can avail itself. The gift economy presents an ideal alternative in the sense that it is the original degrowth economy (Sahlins 1972). Where the market seeks additional resources in order to grow in perpetuity, the gift economy sees a movement towards redistribution rather than accumulation. This fact has not escaped notice. Bataille (1967/1989) put together a brilliant collection of essays that explains how an alternative to the logic of the market, what he calls the waste logic, is the truly sustainable economy. The gift economy is central to his premise, and although it is not the whole story, his work speaks volumes about the potential of the gift economy to contribute to current work on sustainability.

Furthermore, one wonders about gifts beyond consumer to consumer gifts. If we are to call ourselves marketers, we must consider the role of business as being beyond that of simply proffering the would-be gift products. That Sahlins’ treatment of the sociology of the gift has explicit explanations for hierarchical exchange and power dynamics on the part of givers and recipients while Thompson (2004) has identified the market as an arena of power should beg the question: what are the ways in which businesses enter into gift exchange systems within the broader market economy? What are the outcomes thereof? Are there power dynamics at play? Who is the Big Man, to borrow Hawaiian tribal terminology? Is it the consumer with the purchasing power or the business with the freedom to facilitate? This is a particularly fertile area for study in that it draws on a diverse array of theoretical perspectives from power to financial economics to norm creation and aims them at the interaction of the market and gift economy.
On a final and related note, the issue of business to business gifts may also be considered. For instance, consider a competing airline honoring a consumer’s seat purchased on another airline in the event of a flight cancelation. That is, if United Airlines flies an American Airlines passenger to their destination because American had a flight canceled or delayed, what can be said of these actions? Does it promote value in the eyes of the consumer? If so, for United or for American? Is it competitive, an agonistic gift, as Mauss and Sahlins would suggest? It’s certainly a stretch to think of business actions between direct, mutually-acknowledged competitors as altruistic. Considering businesses as actors in gift exchange could provide useful insights into marketing strategy, particularly in the area of strategic choice.

With these avenues laid out, it seems apposite that I should now present my plans for the empirical development of the theoretical issues presented. Opportunities are only so insofar as they are taken, so the next section details a plan of action for empirical inquiry—the seizure of these theoretical opportunities.

**Empirical Development**

While there are a great many opportunities for empirical exploration as detailed previously, here I will focus on one major effort with two particular goals. The first goal is theoretical; the intention is to conduct an empirical exploration of a context that sits squarely at the crossroads of the gift and market economy so that the theory may be contextualized and developed to reflect the fact that both economies are at play. While much of the extant theorizing has focused on “stone age” or “archaic” exchange, this project will be oriented towards the contemporary. This should provide useful feedback to our theoretical understanding of the play of these two forces.
The second goal is practical. The empirical insights gleaned above will be translated directly into practical prescriptions for marketing professionals. The idea is that theoretical and academic insights can be applied to marketing practice. This will serve several functions. First, it will help to legitimize the relevance of anthropological work to contemporary marketing practice. Second, it will speak positively to the project’s positioning as a marketing project rather than an anthropological one. Finally, it may help to illuminate the utility of an act that may seem *prima facie* to be an unwise investment: giving.

In order to accomplish these goals, an ethnography is proposed. The context must be one where both the gift economy and the market economy are present. Ethnographic data from such a context will provide key insights into the perceptions of individual consumers, the actions of businesses, the norms that develop in such contexts, the degree to which the gift or market system appears dominant, and other aspects that may not be foreseeable.

To that end, the context in which this investigation will be conducted is that of craft beer festivals. In particular, these festivals will be single-brewery-sponsored events for annually released rare beers. The presence of gifts is twofold. First, there is hierarchical exchange in that the brewery is providing a gift to consumers: a rare and valuable beer. Further, the context of this gift provision is one not unlike a potlatch, making it particularly relevant to classical theories of the gift. Second, there is horizontal exchange in the form of bottle sharing between consumers. At such events, consumers are able to bring beers to trade and share. For many, a substantial part of the experience is sharing beers with other connoisseurs. Thus, a great deal of gift exchange goes on at these events.

Importantly, however, the gift exchange takes place in the context of a market economic activity. The brewery is selling the rare beers. The consumers bought the beers they’re sharing.
Even if they are homebrewed, they bought the ingredients, bottles, and put labor into the creation, making it a commodity by many definitions. So under the aegis of the market, gift exchange is taking place *en masse*. This makes it a rich context for exploration of the issues raised in this essay. Furthermore, the craft brewery segment represents a large and growing portion of the beer industry, which is in and of itself a large and profitable one.

In terms of practicalities, there are many of these events every year. All of them are annual because they involve the release of a beer that is only offered once per year. Three are selected for temporal and spatial separation. The first is at Founders Brewing Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is an all-day event at the tail-end of a week-long sale celebrating the release of KBS, Kentucky Breakfast Stout, a bourbon barrel-aged stout. The second is at 3Floyds Brewing Company in Munster, Indiana. It is an all-day event called Dark Lord Day and is the most attended event of this kind. On Dark Lord Day, Dark Lord Russian Imperial Stout is released. This is a massive, 17% ABV beer that is only available on Dark Lord Day. Finally, the third event is at The Bruery in Los Angeles, California. This particular event is called Black Tuesday and on it they release a Russian Imperial Stout called Black Tuesday. While the first two events require tickets in order to purchase the beer, this one is a free-for-all wherein the first to come is the first served. The author has some experience with Dark Lord Day, having attended in 2009, 2010, and 2011, which should help preparation for the events.

**Conclusions**

Sahlins aptly points out that, “it is difficult to conclude with a dramatic flourish. The essay has not a dramatic structure—its main draft seems downhill. And a summary would be needlessly repetitive” (1972: 230). But still there is a motivation to wrap the discussion up.
neatly. To that end, I will conclude with a few brief remarks about the justification for this project, its intended contribution, and the direction in which I hope it will move the academic conversation on gift giving.

In the way of justification, I can think of no better appeal than to that of understanding. It is anecdotally clear that the gift economy is present in our lives, despite the might and majesty of the market. As such, empirical exploration of this with a firm theoretical grounding in anthropology and sociology should help promote understanding of the ways in which the market and gift economies continue to function interdependently. From an academic perspective this is interesting and from a business perspective it is potentially profitable. This is more than gap spotting our knowledge. The gift economy was described by Mauss as a total social fact (1950/1990), meaning it had implications for every aspect of society. If it is still present and functioning within, alongside, below, or above the market economy, it likely still have substantial ramifications for society. Understanding that is a critical point, not a matter of merely filling in the blanks.

In the light of this justification, the contribution is, in part, obvious. Understanding such a considerable force in our own culture is a contribution worthy of note. Beyond that, however, there are other, more instrumental contributions. First, as mentioned previously, applying this knowledge to marketing can potentially be profitable for business. As a result, and thus secondly, the useful application of seemingly-esoteric anthropological theory to marketing practice should help legitimate the relevance of such study for business academics. In a discipline that bills itself as useful and applied, such legitimacy is a crucial component of any aspiring academic’s curriculum vitae.
Finally, in the way of pushing academic discussion, my hope is, first, to bring relevant anthropological work to the forefront of discourse within business schools. As Sahlins put it, “Here has been given a discourse on economics in which ‘economizing’ appears mainly as an exogenous factor! The organizing principles of economy have been sought elsewhere. To the extent that they have been found outside man’s presumed hedonist propensity, a strategy for the study of primitive economics is suggested that is something the reverse of economic orthodoxy. It may be worth while to see how far this heresy gets us” (1972: 230). I couldn’t agree more. Including the social and anthropological elements that organize economic life rather than focusing solely on the economizing aspects of material exchange can only be beneficial in adding nuance, if not accuracy, to our understanding. Beyond that, I also wish to get other marketing academics thinking about the ways in which gift exchange is a prevalent part of our economy. Implications from such a realization are not just the downplaying of the market, but also the opportunity to strengthen firm operations within the market. This is not without some element of paradox, but my aim is to demonstrate that the paradox is a reconcilable one.

Works Cited


Essay Two

Introduction

Social groups come complete with ways of thinking which guide their members decisions and thought processes; these ways of thinking are called institutional logics (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Scott 2001). Institutional logics are socially constructed values, norms, and assumptions that help to define the institutional field and its content (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). These logics are often tacit and exert considerable influence over the way in which people within a given institutional field think (Thornton 2002).

The institution of marketing is no different. Here, the logic is largely defined by the marketing academy, as best practices of firms are typically informed by marketing academics and promulgated by graduates of business schools. This is exemplified by the proliferation of practices and ideas like the “service-dominant logic of marketing” as developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004; Lusch and Vargo 2006) and even the psychologically oriented “general concept of marketing” popularized by Kotler and Levy (Kotler 1972; Kotler and Levy 1969).

But institutions do not think the same way forever. Changes are often a result of institutional entrepreneurs (Lawrence and Phillips 2004; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Institutional entrepreneurs are individuals or groups of individuals who change the dominant logic of their field. Prior research on institutional entrepreneurs focus on those who are dissatisfied with the current logic and structure of the institution and act intentionally to change it. What of emergent forms of alternative institutional logics within marketing? This requires no targeted dissatisfaction on the part of managers, but is merely entrepreneurial—actors seek to conduct institutional activities (e.g. brand management) in new ways according to new logics for different results (e.g. stronger brand communities).
It is this consideration that drives the present research. That is, in what ways can emergent forms of marketing strategy (i.e. alternatives to the dominant logic) be understood and gainfully deployed by other managers? In order to address this question, I conducted an ethnography of craft beer festivals. This context was chosen for several reasons. The first is that the industry is booming without signs of abatement or a bubble (aside from the ones in the products) in the future (Rotunno 2012). The second is that the industry is marked by a grassroots authenticity (Johnson 2013) that makes it a potentially fertile ground for new insights. The third reason is that the small scale of many craft beer operations makes it a likely context for entrepreneurship, of the classical and institutional variety. Fourth, and finally, the context is an apparent exemplar of a known logic that stands as an alternative to the dominant one: the logic of the gift (cf. Godelier 1999).

While it is true that the logic of the gift was initially conceptualized as an alternative to the market (cf. Mauss 1954), my data (and others, e.g. Marcoux 2009; Sahlins 1972; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012) suggest that the two are often at play in the same context. To those who have been watching the recent wave of interest (and activity) in the sharing economy, this may sound familiar. What should also be familiar is the extent to which inconsistent views have been offered on the nature and role of the sharing economy. Some say that the currency of the new economy is trust (Botsman 2012) while others say that trust is irrelevant and desperation is the operative force (Roose 2014). Similarly, some say that the solidarity which follows from gift economic activity is a force for good (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012) while others say that it is a potentially hazardous social trap (Marcoux 2009). Some have suggested that the sharing economy is essentially an effort of neoliberalism to escape regulation (Giesler and Veresiu 2014)
while others imply that it’s a form of creativity that should be allowed to flourish (Downes 2013). So what’s to be made of this inconsistency?

I argue that both perspectives are correct because of the fact that there are two forms of the sharing economy. One is predicated on the logic of the gift and the other on the logic of the market. The line of demarcation between these, I argue, is a concept called mutuality (Arnould and Rose 2015). Mutuality is action underpinned by a normative standard; it is the action of one party towards another that is based on the assumption that the second party would treat the first in a similar, mutual fashion if situations were reversed. This is predicated on the recognition of a mutually positioned actor within a shared, mutual social fabric. The concept has been implicitly present in the business academy for decades (e.g. Berry 1983; Gruen, et al. 2000; Morgan and Hunt 1994) but has only been articulated in sociology and anthropology (e.g. Ekeh 1974; Graeber 2011) until quite recently (Arnould and Rose 2015). I suspect that this is a function of its seeming incommensurability with the logic of the market. Of course, as academicians and the business environment have shown, this is not the case.

Specifically, it seems as if craft beer brewery managers implicitly and explicitly draw on the logic of the gift in formulating their marketing doctrine. I maintain that this is a form of institutional entrepreneurship, as the managers in my ethnography have no formal business training and thus, without exposure, were forced to develop strategies employing logics which are alternatives to the conventional one. What’s more, we can learn from the success of their endeavors how to engage in the authentic, meaningful form of the sharing economy rather than indulging in the sort that gets high-profile negative publicity (Vinjamuri 2014). I argue that we can develop insights from their entrepreneurial approach of deploying mutuality in their strategic
planning and development and incorporate them into our own considerations of the formulation of marketing doctrine.

It is important to note before we continue that I am not advocating for a revolution in the dominant institutional logic of business or the business academy. Instead, I seek to incorporate theoretical insights from an empirical context that can aid managers in their consideration and development of a generalized marketing doctrine (Challagalla, et al. 2014). In this way, we can add nuance and efficacy to the current dominant logic without losing current explanatory power. Perhaps most of all, I seek to highlight the potential of utilizing a mutuality-driven marketing doctrine to lend credible, enduring experiences that generate inclusiveness, community, loyalty, purchase intentions, and ambassadorship.

Theory

As mentioned previously, the gift logic was initially presented as an alternative to the logics of industrial capitalism and Bolshevik Marxism (Mauss 1954). In many respects, this tradition continues today with a focus on anti-utilitarian social science (e.g. M.A.U.S.S. 1996). But for the present purpose of representing an emergent logic of brand strategy, I have elected not to delve into the debate of utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism. The managers in my dataset are employing the logic of the gift and their brands are thriving; the extent to which this is driven by utilitarian or anti-utilitarian concerns is a question for another inquiry. Instead, I focus on the role of mutuality in their strategic considerations in order to highlight the concept’s potential as an organizing principle for marketing doctrine. I argue that mutuality is the delineating variable that separates effective and ineffective forays into the sharing economy. Moreover, I argue that
mutuality is exactly the sort of principle that Challagalla et al. (2014) suggest form the basis of marketing doctrine.

The Gift Logic

The logic of gift exchange hinges on three mutually reinforcing and equally powerful normative obligations. These are the obligation to give, the obligation to receive or take, and the obligation to re-give (Godelier 1999; Mauss 1954; Sahlins 1972). This presents two additional obligations above and beyond the normative compulsion within the market logic to take or receive what is offered or attainable. These obligations lead to specific, consistent outcomes when considered in exchange relations. When we speak of a logic of the gift, we refer to making decisions based on consideration of these three norms. It is noteworthy that, as suggested by the discussion of agonistic gift giving above, no saintly assumptions of human nature are made within the gift logic; there are no appeals to altruism or being one’s brother’s keeper. Instead, actors are expected to recognize advantage based on the use of the three norms of giving, taking, and re-giving rather than on the sole norm of taking, as in the market logic.

Consequently and importantly for our present purposes, this means that such considerations are fundamentally reconcilable with the current dominant logic of marketing. It is for this reason that I believe that the deployment of the logic of mutuality in current, successful businesses constitutes an emergent phenomenon that is worthy of consideration when cataloging our knowledge of successful marketing strategy. In particular, the normative element that underpins the gift economy—what can be called mutuality or generalized reciprocity (Arnould and Rose 2015)—serves as the principle that guides these craft breweries’ marketing doctrine. It is my
intention to excavate this concept thoroughly and demonstrate its utility for navigating the
distinction between effective and ineffective strategic uses of the sharing economy.

*Key Tenets of Gift Theory*

The history of thought on gift exchange and the theory thereof, including the critiques and
reconciliations that molded it to its present form, have been extensively documented both within
marketing (e.g. Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and outside of it (e.g. Godelier 1999; Sahlins
1972). Here, I will touch on the key theoretical components and outcomes of gift theory so as to
lay a foundation for the interpretation of my data. Those who seek additional information should

As mentioned, the logic of the gift is one that revolves around three obligations. There are
several key results of these obligations. One is that exchanges come with a socially binding
character. In a market transaction, an exchange can easily be one-off; you pay for your food and
I give you your food. Afterward, we owe each other nothing else. The obligation inherent in gift
exchange creates what gift theorists refer to as the “shadow of indebtedness” (Graeber 2011;
Godelier 1999; Mauss 1954; Sahlins 1972). This indebtedness makes it difficult if not impossible
to sever social ties for fear of violating one of the aforementioned norms. Because the books are
never balanced *per se*, exchange actors tend to form groups with obligation-based solidarity
(Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012), though this is not always preferable (Bradford 2009). This
indebted solidarity is the first major outcome of gift exchange that is useful for our purposes.

But the aforementioned example assumes a relatively equal exchange. What happens when
one actor is able to give more than another? Because of the obligation to give, that actors is
obligated to give more; because of the obligation to receive, the other actor is obligated to take it,
despite having no way to re-give in kind. This sort of instrumental gift one-upmanship is referred to as the agonistic element of gift giving (Godelier 1999; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999) and it leads to the second major outcome of interest for us. Because the recipient has no material goods to fulfill his/her obligation to re-give, the recipient instead pays honor and prestige to the giver. In this way, gift exchange leads to social hierarchy and the accrual of prestige by those who are able to give most. Importantly, however, such stratification is not alienating. A key component is still social inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Those who cannot participate in the system to the same extent are not pushed out of the system; instead, they are drawn in further to the community or group in a hierarchical role.

Due to the nature of exchange following the gift logic, material resources are distributed throughout the group rather than steadily accruing towards a few with power. It is immaterial resources that accrue at differential rates. The upside of the former point is that the system is sustainable; those with the most to give do give it, so that those with the least end up with plenty as well. The latter point is a consequence of this, as those with the least to give are thus obligated to give more prestige and respect. The result is that the system is sustainable as the exclusionary principle is absent (Godelier 1999) and thus all actors within the system have their material needs met but are still rewarded (albeit socially) for differential efforts.

Recent scholarship suggests that these tenets can be neatly housed under the heading of mutuality. Mutuality implies, as stated before, a generalized reciprocity that is structured completely upon the idea of a mutual inscription in a shared sociality. That sociality is in fact constituted by the functions of mutuality. As friends pick up the dinner bill for one another without keeping accounts or doctors provide services with an allowance of payment plans or,
occasionally, without expectation of compensation at all, so are relationships created amongst the exchange actors.

This is the first tenet of mutuality as a concept. Mutuality driven action invites the other party to behave in a similarly courteous manner if the shoe were on the other foot. In each event, the act of mutuality generates a relationship as each actor behaves with a recognition of what some may elementarily identify as the golden rule. This is the second tenet of mutuality: that it is a mechanism for creating or solidifying groups and communities. It is always inclusive, never focused solely on exchange at the risk of alienation. It functions to and precisely because of its inclusive elements. Of course, solidarity and the constitution of relations are critical elements of mutuality within a marketing context as customer relationship construction has been an explicit goal of marketing since the turn to post-Fordism (Berry 1983). The third point of the mutuality concept is that it is omnipresent within these groups once they are established. Thus, the group is formed and becomes stronger as certain things are shared *pro forma* within the in-group, whether that is a brand community, a strictly local community, or a product following, to name but a few examples of relevant group formation.

It bears explicit mentioning that mutuality does involve a fundamental concession of value by one party to another, whether it be their direct exchange partner or an apparent third term as in instances wherein one actor gives to another who in turn gives to a third, or in which the third actor is a passive beneficiary of the value conceded by the first to the second (Arnould and Rose 2015; Hartmann et al. 2015). Fortunately, the fourth tenet of mutuality is that it “is particularly acute in both the best of times and the worst of times” (Graeber 2011: 178). That is, a struggling business that has fostered mutual relationships with its community will likely find a supportive network. Further, we can recall that there are many forms of value (Schau et al. 2009). So, from
In a practical standpoint, firms may more easily concede some forms of value than others. Thus, while Uber has been held up as a prototype of the sharing economy (Inman 2014), they are still a profit-seeking entity. The value they concede comes in the form of possession, time, or place value. The value they receive in return is monetary.

This idea of value concession and the benefits thereof, as well as the fact that it is not nearly as disastrous a proposition as it might appear on its face, will be explored further in the sections to come. We turn next to the method by which I conducted my investigation and reached my conclusions.

Method

Due to the nature of the research question motivating this project as well as the recognition that emergent forms of strategy are by definition grounded in extant business practice, I conducted an ethnographic exploration. Ethnography has long been advocated for by academics (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) and has recently picked up considerable steam in the private sector, with some calling it the “key to strategy” (Anderson 2009). With ethnography enjoying a considerable methodological history in marketing, I provide a brief overview of the principles underlying the method before moving on to the specifics of my own dataset.

Ethnography, if taken by root words, means cultural writing and this is not far from the truth. When doing an ethnography, the researcher dons the role of participant so as to immerse him/herself in the cultural context. By engaging in this participant observation, the researcher is able to see the cultural context on its own terms and thus develop an empathetic understanding of the ways in which that context functions. The researcher is able to excavate norms, expectations, habit patterns, positively and negatively valenced actions and events, and experiences in the
terms of the context in which they take place. Keeping meticulous field notes, the researcher is then able to take his/her contextualized understanding (called *emic* knowledge) and interpret it based on his/her theoretical understanding (called *etic* knowledge). This process of iteratively moving between *emic* and *etic* views of the phenomenon is called dialectical tacking (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Thompson 1997). The result is a theoretically oriented and empirically grounded interpretation of a cultural context.

To that point, it bears underscoring that a cultural context is the unit of analysis in an ethnographic investigation. The dataset is not comprised of informants, subjects, or participants; people are not formally surveyed or quantified; there is no *n equals* concept. Instead, the investigator constructs a narrative based on his/her memories, experiences, and field notes. In turn, s/he uses this narrative as a textual source for deriving themes based upon that cultural context. I mention this point because when discussing my work with managers, I am often asked about sample sizes, informant compensation, and other, psychologically driven perceptions surrounding social scientific data inquiry. That point made, I turn next to the procedures by which I conducted the study.

*Methodological Procedure*

In my case, the cultural context chosen for ethnographic study was craft beer festivals. As mentioned previously, the context was selected for several reasons. In brief, those reasons are: that the industry segment is growing considerably, especially vis-à-vis the industry as a whole; the authenticity and creativity in the segment make it prime for exploration of emergent phenomena; third, most operations are small, opening the doors for institutionally entrepreneurial thinking; and finally, that it represents an exemplar of the effective use of mutuality in the
development of marketing doctrine. I attended five festivals across the continental U.S., several more than once. I selected only festivals hosted by a single brewery so that attributions about brands and other firm-level activities would not be muddled by collaboration amongst multiple breweries. Moreover, the extent to which mutuality was part and parcel to firm activities and not just the hosting firm or the firm coordinating the festival would be clearer and thus attributions would be cleaner.

Each festival that I attended was ostensibly based on a market exchange. At each festival, a rare beer is sold. For three of the five festivals, it is the only day on which the beer can be purchased. For the fourth and fifth, it is the first day in a small window of availability. These festivals include not just the distribution of a rare beer to consumers from the brewery, but also a great deal of exchange amongst consumers. Attendees bring beer to exchange in what they call “bottle shares,” which resemble the classical potlatch in nearly every respect (Mauss 1954; Godelier 1999; Sahlins 1972) from revelry to bonding to competition, complete with normative standards, rites of passage, and the in-group sharing that is a hallmark of mutuality.

As an attendee, I went through the process like any other. I bought tickets when necessary, brought beer to share when expected (a powerful testament to the function of mutuality in and of itself, that I felt obligated to contribute monetarily to the brewery and in terms of possession value to other participants), stayed in the primary festival hotel, and so on. I did not advertise my status as a researcher a priori, but only if it came up in dialogue with other consumers or with the managers. At no point did I reveal the nature of my study or my expectations regarding
outcomes. At the end of each day, I would return to my hotel room and type up my experiences into a narrative of field notes. These were based on memory, voice recordings, and jottings, consistent with the guidelines recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011).

My decision to keep my role a secret is consistent with one of two approaches to ethnography presented by Emerson et al. (2011). Essentially, one may either advertise their role as a participant researcher throughout the process or do their best to obfuscate it. Given the inquisitive nature of the stereotypically cerebral craft beer crowd (www.beernerds.com), I thought it best to obfuscate my role and thereby my line of reasoning from prying minds. My principle concern was avoiding explaining my theoretical framework in such a way that would contaminate future conversations. Call it a qualitative validity check.

Analytical Procedure

At the end of my data collection, I was left with a text of 391 typed pages. This excluded photographs, artifacts, and other data miscellany that I had acquired or seen in my ethnography. With this text, I engaged in dialectical tacking, moving iteratively between my own theoretical knowledge as a researcher and my acquired contextual knowledge as a participant in the festivals. This was done for each trip to each festival. Then, once the exploration was concluded, it proceeded again with all of the field notes combined. Thus, there were analyses of each individual visit; each brewery; the visits of the year; and the visits in total. I continued in this manner until I had a set of empirical themes that were theoretically coherent and explained my data clearly and concisely. With these procedures clearly established, both on the front and back end, I next turn to a discussion of the results of this analysis.
Results

My ethnographic analysis yielded three primary themes revolving around brand strategy as one arm of the marketing doctrine. These themes speak directly to past research on brand development, sometimes consistently and sometimes with counter-intuitive results. It is important to note that the beauty of these results is that they are a function of an alternative institutional logic built on mutuality—a logic which can incorporated into our current thinking without sacrificing foundational assumptions or throwing the baby out with the bath water of current marketing doctrine formulation. This makes the outcomes immanently manageable, as they are a function of the way in which a problem is considered and its solution implemented. Therefore, the excavated themes should be highly importable to other business contexts.

That said, I will first demonstrate that the logic of mutuality and the gift was being deployed both by managers and by consumers in the context, despite the trappings of a market transaction. It is with this understanding that the rest of the themes can be interpreted as outcomes of mutuality as an institutionally entrepreneurial form of marketing strategy, based in part on our theoretical understanding of mutuality and the gift economy in general. From there, I will provide contextualized details regarding my three primary thematic findings as they pertain to mutuality in marketing doctrine. But first, to allay doubts that what was going on at these festivals did not actually reflect mutuality in form (i.e. in the minds of actors in the exchange system) or function (i.e. as mutuality is expected to work sociologically), I will demonstrate the ways in which mutuality was manifested in both the words and the deeds of actors within this retail setting. This is an important point as it serves to underscore the validity of the presence of the gift economy.
Attributions of Gifting and Mutuality

Recall that the gift logic includes the logic of the market and then some, rather than bearing no common grounds. For this reason, it is conceivable that a transaction that is labeled a market sale (e.g. the sale and purchase of a rare beer) actually functions as a gift exchange. However, it is of critical importance to see if this is how the people in this context think of it. As Sahlins (1995) demonstrates so exceptionally, one must pay heed to the way that “natives” think, whether the people of interest are 19th century Hawaiians or 21st century craft beer consumers. This is of course doubly important here as we are fundamentally interested in the use of mutuality an alternative logic in marketing doctrine. If the participants of my study, particularly the managers, are not thinking as if this is a context of gift exchange, then we are essentially forcing a worldview upon them. What’s worse, we thus would lose our ability to claim that this logic could be gainfully included in our own, considering that it isn’t being gainfully employed in the context of study. This is of particular importance given the overwhelming and totalizing nature of the market (Rushkoff and Goodman 2001) and the tendency for actors within a strong market economy to frame things within the language of the market. An alternative articulation based on mutuality seems an especially stringent test. These beers, it bears mentioning as well, are premium priced products.

As it turns out, my observations and conversations suggest that both the consumers and the managers think and act as if these contexts are organized by mutuality. This is often tacit, with the considerations being of reciprocity and obligation rather than of theoretical terms of gift
theory, but this is hardly unexpected given that emergent phenomena are unlikely to come complete with the baggage of their theoretical and academic labels. But it is not always implied, as the following quote from the brewmaster from the first brewery reveals:

“If that isn’t the ultimate Christmas present in March, I don’t know what it is. Planning, thinking, working, spending countless hours all to have someone look happy on one day.”

-Jeremy

Here, the person in charge of developing the rare beer that is being sold on this day draws specifically from the language of the biggest gift giving day of the year in his culture: Christmas. What is particularly compelling is not just an explicit reference to a major gifting holiday, but also the efforts and burdens on his part that are revealed by his second sentence. We would expect such arduous work to go into giving an exceptional gift. Consider the potlatches of the Pacific Northwest American Indians, the kwakiutl. Here, the most extravagant gifts were ornately carved copper tablets. Those who were in a position to give them accrued tremendous status due to the value of the material and the labor that went into them (Godelier 1999; Mauss 1954). In parallel, we see a beer that is a powerful gift given the value of its material and the labor that goes into it. Further, in both instances, the valued item is given to be destroyed. The kwakiutl destroyed the copper tablets in ceremonial showings of gratitude and respect; the beer drinkers eagerly enjoy their beverage once and once only.

What is additionally revealed by Jeremy’s comment is the inclusive nature of his thought process and thereby the functioning of mutuality in the context. He is conceding labor value in return for monetary value (the patrons buy the beer), but also for the lingering aesthetic value of
seeing pleasure on the faces of those who are enjoying the fruits of his labor. He invokes the inclusive metaphor of Christmas that brings with it the image of a family. Few comparisons are more intimate than parallels to family celebrations of major religious holidays. Rather than positioning the situation as strictly one of exchange, the exchange is a function of his metaphor of inclusion built upon connections to the family and Christmas.

Given our knowledge of the outcomes of giving a particularly valued gift, there are some expectations of how consumers as recipients of this gift would respond to receiving it. Here again it is instructive to draw parallels to classical ethnographic studies of gift exchange. As already mentioned, due to the obligation to receive and the obligation to re-give, a recipient must accept and reciprocate to the best of their ability. The recipient of a *kula* necklace would not be able to reciprocate in kind; they would instead give something manageable (e.g. sweet potatoes) and supplement that gift with honor. In the case of these rare beers, the consumers give a dollar amount in exchange for the beer and if this were a market transaction, the obligation would stop there; price paid, debt settled, relationship concluded. But this is not the case.

“Look at Rubaeus [*a raspberry ale made with fresh, local Michigan raspberries*]. I love Founder’s for Rubaeus. Do you know how expensive those raspberries are? But they make it anyway because it’s good and I love them for that.”

-Smitty

Smitty is a regular at the brewpub and his sentiments precisely echo what we would expect from a gift exchange, not from a market exchange. Notice the extent to which he exhibits the characteristics of mutuality discussed earlier. He is a regular; he comes in often. He praises them
to others. He uses the concept of love to describe his feelings for them, an inclusive notion if ever there was one. He doesn’t say, “It’s worth every penny” or “I can’t believe it’s such a deal,” but instead praises the brewery, building status for them as a function of the quality of their gift and the fact that he seems to implicitly feel that the price paid is not sufficient reward for Founder’s given what he receives. This same phenomenon popped up at all four of the breweries from multiple sources. In each case, managers and consumers alike used the language of mutuality and gifts, though the former were more likely to speak explicitly in gifting terms. This suggests that the managers are employing mutuality and that it is functioning in accordance with theoretical expectations.

It is not just between the breweries and the consumers that this gift exchange is taking place. In each context, the thread of consumer-to-consumer gift exchange is prevalent as well. Thus, even though consumers are ostensibly present to make independent purchases, they spend a considerable amount of time giving gifts amongst themselves, often of those very purchases. This makes perfect sense in an inclusive community of pacific affines that are constituted through the pervasive presence of mutuality.

As I mentioned earlier, massive bottle sharing events take place throughout these festivals, as well as before and after. At one brewery, the majority of attendees stay at a hotel that is the only hotel near the brewery. The night before the festival, the hotel opens up conference rooms for a large bottle share. As you can see in this photo, consumers gather together and place their “offerings” on the table.
Once placed on the table, it is fair game for all other attendees. While there is no formal rule proscribing trying beers at the table without contributing to the table, I noticed a tacit element of normative enforcement of the obligation to give. I walked in with another attendee. He immediately set several beers down and was just as quickly swarmed by other beer drinkers who regaled him with questions about what he had brought, praise, and offers to try others that they had brought. I, on the other hand, was marginalized in terms of offers. No one stopped me from pouring glasses, but no one approached me to make offers, either. When a particular woman was walking around pouring from a bottle, she passed me up but poured some to the man beside me with whom I had walked into the room. It was only when I pulled several bottles out that the group warmed to me. This was strongly reminiscent of the inclusive function of mutuality. Where gifts were made, reciprocity was swift and plentiful. But those who had not made inclusionary gestures towards the group were not treated in the same manner. It was as if the obligation to give was mitigated by my refusal to give; once I had done so, then the obligation to re-give escalated the rate at which people shared their beers with me. This is strong evidence of the presence of gift exchange norms amongst consumers, even tacitly. We will see more evidence of this in later themes as the presence of mutuality unfolds.

Community Development

One of the clear outcomes of my study is that gift exchange fosters brand community and includes solidification of local community ties. Given the components of brand communities and the outcomes of mutuality, this is a natural fit. Indeed, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig scratched the tip of the iceberg of this relationship when they noted that “Consistent with gift-giving theory (Sherry 1983), the company has given customers a gift, the brandfest, without
pushing for direct reciprocity, thereby creating a sense of indebtedness or generalized goodwill on the part of the customer” (2002: 50). As mentioned above, my data suggest that, even with a token of reciprocity (the price of the beer paid), consumers still behave as if they owe the company generalized goodwill, which is to be expected from the shadow of indebtedness inherent in exchange built upon mutuality. And I maintain that this generalized goodwill, or mutuality, is immanently relevant to other business endeavors.

In order to see exactly how brand communities can be built by mutuality, let us consider the aspects of brand community as developed by Muniz and O’Quinn (2001) and refined by McAlexander et al. (2002). The first major point was that there be a consciousness of kind amongst members of a brand community, that they recognize similarities in themselves and other members and differences between themselves and non-members. This showed up in spades during my fieldwork, as is to be expected when mutuality is at play: recall the extent to which mutuality is always inclusive rather than focused solely on exchange. While waiting in line to buy our beer, someone placed several “macro-brews,” a term used with scorn to describe beers produced outside of the craft segment, in an open area beside the line. The idea, as he described it to me, was to “lure out the macro lovers” for scorn and derision. Interestingly, no one took the bait. But the intent was there and clearly based on the perception of commonalities and differences in in-group and out-group members. Recall above how mutuality provides the constitution of in-group norms. Here is a negatively valenced norm that is being used to sift through in- and out-group members.

Similarly, one customer referred to the brewery as a family, including employees and customers. This is suggestive of the kind of similarity we would expect within a dedicated brand community and is a perfectly natural outcome of mutuality’s inclusive component. In fact, it is
not only customers who express their feelings about their relationships with the business in terms of family. Recall the brewmaster above with his reference to Christmas morning. Along those lines, all but two of the breweries I visited used familial metaphors to describe themselves and their customers; the brand communities they cultivated were explicitly inclusionary and familial, suggestive of deep affinity and just the sort of approach that is grounded in mutuality. The two breweries that did not explicitly mention the family term used different verbiage to express similar sentiments of inclusion and sociality.

In a manner parallel to my example above about the bottle share, Sahlins (1972) describes the ways in which gift exchange between a powerful actor (the “Big Man”) and multiple, less powerful ones leads to the formation of polities in Hawai’i. By creating social status for himself, the Big Man is able to eventually develop a mass of those who are indebted to him and view him as prestigious and honorable. From here, consolidating his power and solidifying his position is rather easy. Thus, if we consider the brewery and the brand as the Big Man, then the legion of loyal, communal followers is to be expected as is, indeed, their hostility towards rival factions such as the “macro lovers.” This in-group inclusivity vis-à-vis the out-group is a hallmark of traditional theorizing on mutuality.

The second major criterion for brand community is that there be shared rituals and traditions (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), a criterion strongly reminiscent of the aforementioned in-group procedures and norms for groups built on mutuality. These were visible all around the festivals. Each festival had their own. One involved live music in a warehouse area. Another involved the sharing of food while in line. A third involved a massive celebration after all sales of the beer were completed. In each cases, members came together to celebrate and reinforce the bonds of their community. And just as in gift exchange, exchanges are often highly ritualized
(Godelier 1999). This goes with a certain air of solidarity that is the primary outcome of mutuality as symbolism provides a commonality for members of a group (Levi-Strauss 2013). On the most macro scale, the festivals themselves are rituals of gift exchange as the gift (the beer) is received in that context and that context alone (for four of the five).

The third criterion for brand community is that there be a sense of obligation that binds members and can compel collective action. Given our discussion above regarding the extensive consumer-to-consumer mutuality that occurs at these festivals, the groundwork is clearly laid for this obligation. Evidence comes in the form of demands from consumers to changes in the festivals. At one point, one of the breweries was so inundated with demands for increased organization that they were forced to fully revisit the planning of the event for the following year. This collective action with its consumer-centrism is particularly telling. There is a saying that “to be noble is to give and to give is to be noble” (Sahlins 1972) which suggests that if the breweries wish to remain in good standing with the prestige they have earned, they must continue to demonstrate their worthiness by giving. Hence, many of these festivals have grown considerably over the years both in terms of scope and quality.

This willingness to engage customer interests and provide an increasingly valuable experience (Pine and Gilmore 1998) is precisely the sort of concession of value that was alluded to earlier in the discussion. While the price of the beer remains high, the breweries demonstrate their mutual inscription in society with their customers by responding to demands and expectations in a way that creates value for those consumers. In this manner, value is given and the generalized reciprocity continues.

The fourth criterion offered by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) for brand community is that it not be geographically restricted. I found that many who attended the festivals stayed in touch
after the fact. For my part, I spent an afternoon talking with a couple from Delaware, discussing everything from the Beatles versus the Rolling Stones to our favorite beers. At the end of the day, we had shared laughs and drinks and went our separate ways. As we began to part, however, the wife in this couple reached into her pocket and handed me a keychain. It was a brand keychain from the festival we were attending.

She said it was, “A token of appreciation for letting [them] sit with [me].” We exchanged phone numbers and have exchanged beers via mail service since then. Here, a gift was given (a seat at my table), a gift was re-given (a keychain), and then further exchanges were initiated despite geographic disparity. I acted toward them in a manner that I would hope to receive if the shoe were on the other proverbial foot; they reciprocated not in kind—they never offered me another seat at a table at a later date—but in form by offering me a token of their gratitude. The result was the formation of a social tie, driven by mutuality and built by exchange. As Muniz and O’Guinn point out, the social tie is indeed more powerful than the geographical link.

This is, however, not to say that there are no local elements of the brand community. At one brewery, I stayed in a nearby hotel of which there were many. Upon check-in, I got into my room and began setting up for a foray to the brewery and the evening’s write-up of my field notes. As I inspected the room, a bottle opener caught my eye. It was mounted on the wall by the bar and bore the name of the brewery that I aimed to visit. Here is a town where there are many hotels; indeed, the hotel in which I was staying was a national chain. But here, too, was an
artifact of the brewery. This suggests strong local affiliation with the brand, even filtered through
the standardization procedures of a national hotel chain.

Lest this seem a coincidental example, a similar phenomenon was observed at another of
the breweries. Upon arriving at the hotel that was, in this case, also a national chain but was, in
contrast, the only hotel conveniently located near the brewery. At check-in, each guest was given
a baggie containing water bottles, information about local restaurants, contact information for a
taxicab company, an itinerary for when bottle shares would be held in communal hotel spaces,
and a chocolate bar wrapped in a cross-brand themed paper. This is strongly suggestive of
communal affiliation and tie-ins. Interestingly, it doesn’t seem to be an instance of providing
some differentiation by associating itself with the brewery and event (as a skeptic might wonder
about the previous example of the bottle opener) given that it is the only hotel in the area, having
effectively cornered the market. But an inclusive gesture that recognizes the role of the other in
the process—whether that other be the consumer, the taxi cab companies, the local restaurants,
or some other variant party—is a sign of mutuality and inclusion in a group.

Lastly in terms of the pieces of brand community, McAlexander et al. (2002) point out that
brand community is customer-centric and is built on their experiences. Mutuality accommodates
this as it allows for dyadic relationships with each customer that snowball into communal
consistency. Here a key difference emerges between gift exchange and something like sponsored promotions. By engaging the customers directly, mutuality allows for the fostering of community; it is customer-centric and not brand-centric, as promotions may be (e.g. Nicholls, Roslow, Dublish 1999). This should sound quite familiar in light of the role of inclusion and sociality in mutuality at the expense of exchange (as the primary focus).

The beauty of the findings is that mutuality can be employed relatively simplistically and lead to the construction of brand communities. As Stahl, Heitmann, Lehmann, and Neslin (2012) demonstrate, brand equity has a positive effect on the lifetime value of a consumer. Given that brand communities foster brand equity (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), the syllogism suggests that building a brand community builds value. Thus, there is value in this entrepreneurial institutional logic of mutuality as a source of inspiration for market-oriented decisions, and counterintuitive value at that as the lay inclination when thinking of gifts is often to think of giving something for nothing. Instead, what is conceded is often value of another form while what is gained is considerable expenditure.

*Brand Loyalty Construction*

This is perhaps the simplest outcome of operating under mutuality when managing a firm’s market-level activities. Gifts by definition breed loyalty when the magnitude of the gift exceeds what can be reciprocated. As discussed several times already, both the managers of the breweries and the customers act as if the gift (i.e. the rare beer and the festival) exceeds the price of admission and tend to behave as if they were operating under mutuality rather than strict market exchange. Gift theory predicts that when this is the case, recipients will reciprocate with honor, respect, and loyalty. Signs of this loyalty could be heard all over the festival grounds at each
festival. As one woman remarked, “Now that I’ve experienced [Sexual Chocolate Day], I always make a point to buy Foothills when I see it at the store.” These sort of loyalty-driven purchases are exactly what a manager wants to see. Similarly, I overheard a man saying that he is now confident in “saying that The Bruery is my favorite brewery.”

As Tucker warns in his seminal (1964) study, brand loyalty is to be carefully delineated from preference for certain product characteristics. In a market segment marked by variety of products (e.g. from India Pale Ales to Pilsners to Russian Imperial Stouts), this is of particular importance. A consumer who prefers IPAs may prefer 3Floyds IPAs but Stone Stouts. Interestingly, it appears that the loyalty fostered by these elaborate gift festivals supersedes the preferential difference. I spoke briefly to a man leaving one festival late in the evening. He had a dolly stacked with cases. After chatting for a moment, he said that he “isn’t big on Scottish Ales or Hefeweizens, but [he] grabbed a case of Robert the Bruce [a Scottish Ale] and Gumballhead [a Hefeweizen, both made by the hosting brewery] to take home anyway.” Thus, despite not preferring those types of beers, he bought them anyway because they were made by the firm in question. Similarly, a man noted that he had made it a “personal mission” to try every beer that Foothills had to offer because he had “such a great time” at the event and figured their other beers merit a purchase on that alone. This is the sort of indirect reciprocity for the value given by the firm that is a hallmark of mutuality-driven exchange.

Clearly, loyal consumers are developed as a result of the operation of mutuality. In the one-on-one relationship, loyalty is built through obligation. Then, with a thriving brand community built by the same inclusive effects of mutuality and exchange, loyalty increases even further (McAlexander et al 2002) due to the social bonds inherent in the group. In fact, many of the consumers seem to reveal some elements of brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). For
instance, they often have long-term relationships with the brands, returning year and year or pointing to the fact that they have been buying that brand since its inception. Similarly, they often act certainly and confident in saying that the focal brand offers a superior product or experience than competitors.

“Nothing can beat this, man. Nothing! From the metal music to the art on the label to the staff in the brewpub. It’s the best craft brewery in the country, hands down.”

-Tommy

Emphatic, conclusive, and without hesitation, Tommy speaks about his love for the brand. Note the reference to the music. Given Tommy’s attire of jeans, a baggy tee shirt, and studded leather bracelets, one ventures to guess that he is a fan of metal as a genre; this supposition is confirmed by the excitement with which he engages in the music being blared throughout the brewpub the day before the event. I spotted Tommy again by the stage of a metal concert put on in conjunction with the festival. This is lightly suggestive of the self-brand integration that Batra et al. (2012) mention. Similarly, word of mouth is a predicted outcome of brand love. On that topic, we turn to the next theme.

Brand Ambassador Cultivation

Recall the scene from above of the man pushing a dolly of cases of beer out to his car after the festival had ended. This was not a unique sight. In fact, at each of the breweries where I attended festivals, in each year that I attended, the brewery was forced to post a limit on the amount of beers that could be purchased. Bear in mind that is not the rare beer being limited,
which is always sold in allotments; this is cases of other beers produced by that brewery. For instance, at 3Floyds, a limit of two cases per customer per day was imposed.

While this phenomenon is certainly reminiscent of the sort of purchase intentions that we like to see around strong brands, I was curious to understand the thought process. I approached several people at each brewery and spoke to them, in the pretense of being in line to buy a few cases myself. What I heard shed considerable light on just how far-reaching the effects of the mutuality underlying these extensive brand festivals actually are.

“Back home [in Alabama], I’m in a softball league. We have parties every few weeks during the season, you know, a team bonding deal. Anyway, I love to get cases of beer to take to them and wow them with. Beer you can’t get there. I tell them about the brewery, about the festival, and about the beer they’re drinking. It actually prompted [the man in line beside us] to come with me this year. Guess I’m like a cheerleader for these guys.”

-Robert

Here, Robert reveals that his sense of respect for and connection to the brewery actually leads him to speak on their behalf in other contexts, encouraging others to try the products and promoting the brand story in his daily life outside of the festival and to members outside of the brand community. This is strongly reminiscent of the concept of ambassadorship developed by Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsel (2014), though their construct refers to a commercial place in particular rather than to a brand in general. This concept of ambassadorship showed up often.
“I live in California, so most people have never heard of [Foothills]. But I speak up for them! There is some great beer being made in North Carolina and Foothills is fantastic. Just because they aren’t being exposed to it doesn’t mean it’s worse.”  
-Michelle

Like Robert, Michelle finds herself promoting the brand outside of its distribution zone. In each case, further conversation with both of them revealed that their ambassadorship was motivated by some modicum of indebtedness with elements of the familial inclusivity that was revealed earlier.

“Look at how much they put into it. Did you see the guy at the gyro table? He’s working a double for the second day in a row. I feel like people should know how great these folks are.”
-Michelle

As we have seen throughout this discussion, mutuality breeds generalized indebtedness. Recipients respond to that indebtedness by making positive attributions about the giver, often in vocal and public ways. In this case, those attributions are so strong that the consumers carry the good name of the brand forth and spread it to those who have not encountered it before. After all, this is effectively speaking on behalf of the “family,” so it should come as no surprise that they take up for the honor of their community. In many cases beyond Robert’s, this includes recruiting new attendees for the festivals who in turn have a great time.
“Yeah, I love it. This is something else. Everyone is so friendly, the beer is incredible...

there’s nothing not to like, except the sun in my eyes [laughing].”

-Stephen, Robert’s friend

Thus does the community grow. The ambassadors carry the word forth and recruit new attendees who in turn become devotees. In many respects, some of these more ardent ambassadors may be thought of as missionaries as they often return with converts. Importantly, this means that the brand is reaching more consumers without having to expand, a point to which I’ll return momentarily. What is clear here is that the indebtedness and solidarity bred by deployment of the gift and employment of the logic of mutuality translates into actionable word-of-mouth from dutiful believers in the brand. That this is accomplished by the use of an alternative logic within a market setting makes it a powerful phenomenon for our consideration.

General Discussion

When considering brand strategy (or any number of other marketing phenomena), it is important to consider how we think about problems and solutions. As members of the business academy or business practitioners trained in the business academy, we have a way of thinking about things, an institutional logic (Scott 2001). As Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) point out, institutional entrepreneurs occasionally come around and contribute a novel logic to our own that changes the way we think about things. Here, I have presented evidence that managers without formal business school training draw on an alternative logic, one that is culturally prevalent but not considered frequently in the dominant logic of marketing: mutuality and the gift. This represents a form of institutional entrepreneurship, as they have demonstrable success despite
thinking about the problem of brand management differently than we do—to speak nothing of their conceptions of exchange, fairness, and value.

*An Entrepreneurial Logic*

The managers of the breweries that I visited and studied have a way of thinking about their brands that is different than ours. They draw, typically implicitly but occasionally explicitly, on the logic of mutuality and the gift economy. This logic revolves around three normative practices: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive or to take, and the obligation to re-give. What was most powerfully demonstrated in my field work is that these norms can be activated even when the exchange is, on its face, explicitly marketized, as in the case of a purchase. Mutuality shows up in other ways, as well. One of the managers pointed out that they could take their profits, increase the scale of their production, and make more of a single product to ramp up sales in a large distribution zone. But, he noted, they didn’t want to do that; they’d rather cater quality products to a smaller footprint. The slogan of the brewery is “brewed for us,” which is somewhat ambiguous given that people in the town refer to them as the Founders Family. “Us” may represent what the brewery wants or what the Family wants; it isn’t clear.

What is clear, however, is that this choice to eschew growth in favor of increased quality challenges much of what we take for granted about the goals of business. Where our logic would usually dictate the benefits of growing and expanding an operation, these entrepreneurs are thinking differently: they choose a state of equilibrium (Bataille 1991) over a motive for growth. This suggests and was echoed by the managers that the business is thus sustainable. The footprint is not ever-expanding, the existing customers are happy, the organization is happy, and all wish to continue on relatively consistent footing—perhaps with a bit more profit on the brewery side
or some novel product offerings on the consumer side. While this notion has received academic attention, it is interesting to see it emerging from the field as a logical choice according to managers of successful businesses. It should be noted that this does not mean the businesses do not increase their sales. Indeed, each had posted record sales each year I attended. However, much of this appeared to be a function of consumers coming to them rather than from the firms expanding their reach. If indebtedness can breed ambassadorship (Debenedetti et al 2014), then operating with mutuality can actually bring customers to you. This way of thinking seems a powerful tool, indeed, as it implies a local, sustainable, authentic business that does not threaten to become dangerously commoditized and corporatized at the expense of its relationships with its existing “family.”

A Strategic Tool

Mutuality as a tool takes several interesting forms. Consider the cultivation of brand community. While McAlexander et al. (2002), Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), and O’Sullivan, Richardson, and Collins (2011) have done a tremendous job of exploring the ways in which brand communities function and, to an extent, emerge, there has been less advancement in terms of how to effectively generate and sustain them. Mutuality offers a compelling, consistent way to think about branding decisions that should, if the decisions are made based on that logic, lead to the cultivation of brand community. The principles of the gift economy are fairly simple and they have been shown to work in a variety of cultural contexts in a variety of time periods. Now that we can see it building brand communities and not just political or social communities, it seems only prudent to take advantage of them.
Another way in which the gift logic is a strategically useful tool is in building brand ambassadors. Debenedetti et al. (2014) suggest that commercial place ambassadors are marked by two aspects: selective matchmaking and transmission. To the former point, that consumers bring deliberately chosen friends and relatives to a place they love, my findings are consistent. Robert brought Stephen because they were friends and he had convinced him that the experience was worth having. Likewise to the latter point. The transmission of attachment from one participant to another (without loss of attachment in the first person) was prevalent in my data. Groups would come on the basis of one’s insistence and leave bedecked in branded clothing and straining from the weight of boxes of branded beer. Thus, while Debenedetti et al. (2014) offer a construct for understanding place attachment, my data suggest that this notion appears in branding as well. Further, my findings reveal that the consideration by consumers of “ambassadorship [as] a moral duty” (2014: 925) may be motivated by indebtedness to the brand (or place) as a function of a perceived gift received from the focal firm. Similarly, it could operate as a result of loyalty to an inclusive and extensive in-group with its own norms, rituals, practices, and values. In this way, managers can consider ways in which to give a gift to their customers that the customers will feel compelled to repay through ambassadorship.

In my data, this compulsion was bred because consumers felt that they got more than they paid for and thus that they owed the firms something else. This raises an interesting question. According to the managers at each brewery, these beers and festivals are often— on their face— “living in the red” for the breweries. They’re expensive to brew and are extremely labor-intensive. The festivals themselves require “all hands on deck,” often for double shifts. The assistant brewer at Founders pointed out that they hold a raffle for one person to get the day off for the festival; if you do not win and elect not to work on the festival, you are typically fired.
This suggests a tremendously expensive endeavor. Conventional logic would suggest that they simply make more of another beer or skip the process altogether in favor of other, less labor-intensive promotional strategies. But they do not. Perhaps this is a function of the sincerity of their mutuality.

It is no secret amongst attendees of these festivals that the ingredients and labor that go into one of these beers is considerable and that they are, relatively speaking, generous moves. I would posit that this generosity is intentional but also genuine, as mutuality fundamentally implies a form of the golden rule: would these people whose beer is “brewed for us” not value a similar gesture if the shoe were on the other foot? And perhaps this generosity breeds gratitude and indebtedness. We have just spent considerable time discussing the reciprocal acts that this indebtedness motivates. Thus, the question becomes, is the ROI for these festivals so great because the product is truly exceptional, as market thought might suggest? Or is it that genuine mutuality offers itself freely and is returned in kind? Thereby, is it more beneficial in the long run to engage in acts that may not look on paper like propositions to please accountants if it’s based on genuine efforts at sociality? My data suggest that the repayment for such efforts is considerable. This issue presents a considerable opportunity for future research in the area of mutuality and market promotions. Further, the idea that a genuine principle of mutuality should supersede traditional economic thinking in the context of marketing strategy leads me to my next point of consideration.

*Mutuality as Marketing Doctrine*

I have referenced the concept of marketing doctrine throughout the paper; I’ve waited until now to elucidate the concept because it is an implication rather than the heart and soul of the
Marketing doctrine is defined by Challagalla et al. (2014: 4) as “a firm’s unique principles, distilled from its experiences, which provide firm-wide guidance on market-facing choices.” Its fundamental strength is that it obviates the tension between flexibility and consistency in firm strategy. In my context, mutuality serves as the principle and the experience of interacting with customers and accepting their feedback, as detailed previously, guides the firm in future decision making efforts. The marketing doctrine based on mutuality then is a product of experience and can orient the firm in a variety of market-facing endeavors. With it comes the consistency of having a unified purpose behind all marketing activities as well as the flexibility to deal with diverse issues with the sort of customized attention that the current market landscape demands.

In the case of craft beer, mutuality as the principle underlying the doctrine appears to have been driven by experience as enthusiasts of the industry and craft movements in general. Owners and managers, to speak nothing of the floor staff, production assistants, consumers, and locals, appear to have a genuine interest in creating a product and service that is of real value to people who feel the same way about the product category that they do. Because mutuality is normative action, it is an extremely functional choice for a fundamental principle.

Nearly everyone has been exposed to the golden rule in some capacity. The notion that one should treat others in a pacific manner as you would expect to be treated were the roles reversed is so basic that we have arguably reached a point where we must educate that out of people’s thinking, in the tradition of mainstream MBA education. At my university, there is a course called “how to think like an economist,” which effectively trains students to think in terms of utility maximization and self-interest, inculcating them with a host of mythical fairytales that have led to disastrous consequences (Graeber 2011; Klein 2011; Taibbi 2011). The irony of the
fact that this may actually be less effective than the ideas we are educating “out” of rising business leaders is palpable, but utterly joyless.

Mutuality, though, provides a strong principle on which to organize a manageable and comprehensive marketing doctrine, with all the benefits realized there from. Whether the firm is a craft brewery with limited distribution or a large multi-national corporation, mutuality provides a coherent and readily accessible framework with which to navigate the variety of situations managers face. Applications can vary by situation but remain consistent with the principles of inclusion and recognition that mutuality accommodates—and the benefits those bring.

Of course, there are bound to be those who are skeptical of how the deployment of gift theory can really translate to other situations. Are we not faced with the prospect of decreasing our bottom line in order to realize some of these benefits? And I argue no, that giving product away is hardly a requirement. The evidence for this is the premium pricing of the beers for sale in my context. The lesson is one of value, and leads us to our next point of consideration.

Considering the Gift

All of the mechanisms, outcomes, and prescriptions presented in this paper rest on the theoretical tradition of gift theory, articulated through the nuanced lens of mutuality. Recent discussions in the literature seek to build distinctions between sharing (Belk 2010), collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers 2010), and access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). My context represents an interesting bridge between these domains. On the one hand, there is a great deal of what may be characterized as sharing going on at the festivals. But of course, this is motivated behavior and reciprocity is the central force, particularly when indebtedness is at play. Arnould and Rose (2015) offer a thorough treatment of the problems
inherent in Belk’s (2010) theory and my data support that critique. The resource circulation seen at the brewery-hosted “bottle shares” is motivated by inclusivity and community; it takes the form of reciprocity and revolves around the set of obligations laid out by Mauss (1954), as demonstrated in my analysis above. Similarly, despite the fact that by bringing two beers while waiting in line, one ends up with access to several times that number throughout the wait, this collaboration is not a phenomenon distinct from the gift as conceived by Mauss (1954) and developed by others (e.g. Godelier 1999; Sahlins 1972). In fact, it is virtually parallel to the ethnographic examples that those thinkers drew from in formulating their theories.

The issue of access-based consumption poses an interesting question. Bardhi and Eckhardt define access-based consumption as “transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place” (2012: 881). In my context, obviously the primary gift of interest (the rare beer for sale) would not qualify as access-based consumption under this definition as ownership is explicitly transferred. But the field also contains numerous instances of consumer-to-consumer gifting. Here, we have a non-durable and non-replenishing good. Consumers typically walk about offering pours or simply place the bottle on a communal table to be accessed. Has ownership transferred? Is the liquid consumed owned by the drinker or the pourer? If we argue that the liquid is accessed by the drinker but still owned by the pourer, then this isn’t a gift at all and is instead access-based consumption. In that case, it’s interesting to see brand community emerge despite anonymity and relatively mild rates of collaboration, given that most of the consumers in my dataset did not know each other. Regardless, the issue hinges on the definition of access-based consumption and in particular on the use of the term ownership. I argue that this notion of ownership as the distinguishing factor in modes of consumption is a distinctly Western one, driven by our own institutional logic of the market and proprietary
access. As Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) mention, there is a positive valuation attached to ownership, particularly vis-à-vis access, in the West. This, in a sense, underscores the value of considering alternative logics, complete with different definitions and conceptualizations of issues like property and ownership.

The entire idea of valuation of ownership leads to the most important point when considering the necessity of gift giving when operating under mutuality. The gifts given need not be monetary or literal product. Instead, value can be conceded to consumers in a variety of ways. For one, possession value may be given through the sale of a variety of rare products. On draft at these events was invariably a set of beers beyond the focal brew that were not readily found elsewhere. Similarly, they may offer place value by providing a comfortable and enjoyable space for locals to meet up, for bottle shares to occur, and for the town to use as a focal point in its self-definition. Perhaps the most obvious form of value offered at a craft beer festival is hedonic value; the retailscape created by the firms is impressive in its own right. Small wonder, then, that consumers articulate their participation as the receipt of a gift. These experiences are highly reminiscent of the experience economy articulated by Pine and Gilmore (1988). Give value through an experience and you can profit from it considerably; indeed, you can charge a premium price for it.

Thus, it should be abundantly clear that gift giving can be done in ways that do not involve simply giving product away in the form of a buy-one-get-one promotion or a gift with purchase. Instead, managers should think with genuine and authentic mutuality about what they would want from a product, service, and/or experience if the roles were reversed and how they would want to be treated in their consumption experiences. The result of this is a solution to one of the classical criticisms of Pine and Gilmore (1988): that any experience created as a value
proposition will become inauthentic and then carry with it the stink of the market. Mutuality, though, allows for the constant engagement of authenticity as each decision is made with genuine and open consideration of how others in the managers’ and firm’s shared social fabric would wish to be treated.

Conclusions

In short, it appears as if we may take yet another lesson from Apple’s advertising team: if we think different(ly) by entertaining alternative institutional logics which guide our decisions on market-facing issues like branding, then there may be considerable gain in the form of profit, loyalty, sustainability, ambassadors, and community. If nothing else, it bears examining emergent logics from entrepreneurial practitioners to see if there’s something to be learned outside the classroom, to abuse an expression.

In terms of future research, delving into the relationship between price and indebtedness offers strong opportunities for managers to make calculated decisions that can foster the sort of loyalty we saw in the craft beer context. Along similar lines, exploring the line between access-based consumption and gift giving by unpacking the definition of ownership would yield insights for our way of thinking in many domains. When it comes to ambassadors, additional work should delve into the ways in which ambassadors work, whether they are influenced by factors beyond place and brand, whether there are limits on their ambassadorship, whether they are always selective in who they expose, and whether the loss of their affection silences them or simply changes the valence of their speech from positive to negative. Similarly, additional and more focused explorations of mutuality in market-facing issues like sales encounters bear future consideration.
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Essay Three
Introduction

The sharing economy has become a fixture of the contemporary business landscape. From regulatory strife surrounding Uber to fascination with Airbnb’s vaguely erotic brand makeover, the sharing economy and its key participants are headliners. The inevitable wave of recommendations, prescriptions, proscriptions, predictions, and various other –tions has predictably accompanied this rise in the visibility and success of sharing-oriented firms. Some tell us that trust is the currency of the new economy. Another tells us that the new economy has nothing to do with trust, but instead is a function of desperation. Academics tell us that the sharing economy binds communities together. Still other scholars tell us that it binds people together against their volition (Botsman 2012; Downes 2013; Marcoux 2009; Roose 2014; Vinjamuri 2014; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012). In most discussion, a new economy is heralded, seemingly with complete amnesia as to the pronouncements of a similar economic renaissance a scant twenty years ago—to speak nothing of the aftermath of such messianic pronouncements (Frank 2001).

After several years of ethnographic research in the field, I am of the opinion that all of the above is true, with the exception of the proclamations regarding a new economy. My data suggest that the sharing economy takes two forms and that the line of demarcation between them is a normative standard that overlays action and this standard/action combination is referred to as mutuality. This division accounts for the inconsistencies in commentary regarding the system; they are commenting on two separate forms of the sharing economy. In any event, however, neither form is new.

The first form of the sharing economy, which is aptly described as a subversive attempt to escape regulation and prey on desperation in the wake of the Great Recession, is simply
another version of the neoliberal economics we’ve come to know will suffer no limits on its efforts at growth; there’s nothing new to see here. Taxicab companies’ accusations of ÜUber’s attempts to circumvent regulatory constraints are leveled at this form of sharing and rightly so. The second form is a trust-based economy of morality and reputation capital—true. Airbnb’s growth, which is based on trust in the system administrators and other participants—and the high profile blows to that credibility—is easily understood within this view of sharing. But this, too, is nothing new. It was articulated over a century ago and has existed for millennia before that (Mauss 1990; Sahlins 1972). Thus, to call it new is uninformed at best and disingenuous at worst.

In fact, what many have hailed as a principle benefit of the latter version of the sharing economy has been known for some time under the aegis of the gift economy. Benefits of a gift system of exchange within a contemporary market context have been thoroughly explored already. Several outcomes are of particular note. The first is that the gift economy yields solidarity. Giving and receiving gifts organizes individuals into mutually indebted communities. In a contemporary context, this typically equates to brand and/or place loyalty for participant firms deploying gift systems. This has been documented extensively at the individual and group level. The aforementioned mutual indebtedness belies another benefit of the gift economy. When a gift is exchanged, it beckons reciprocity. So what the firm gives compels obligation in the consumer. This often translates to an obvious point: purchases. This has been shown in the context of service encounters with a fair degree of conclusiveness. Finally, and intimately related, is the benefit of influence. When gifts are exchanged and one participant is not able to adequately reciprocate the gift given by another, the only recompense left is honor, prestige, respect, and loyalty. Thus, if a consumer is given a powerful gift, s/he will first attempt to
compensate in the form of purchases. If that fails, they are left indebted to the firm. The implications of this for brands are considerable; give them more than they can give in return, and they will appreciate it in the form of loyalty (Godelier 1996; Mauss 1990; Sahlins 1972; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012).

I speculate that part of the reason this logic never fully manifested itself in marketing strategy is that it seems fundamentally irreconcilable with the logic of the market. If one is operating on the assumption that the ultimate goal is to get whatever one can (i.e. commodities or currency under the logic of utility maximization), then the notion that the best way to do it would be to give away more than one expects to receive would seem to be anathema to the point. But I argue here and in my other work that this is precisely the case, with one caveat. My data reveal that the same line which demarcates the sharing economy (which is really just a creative mode of the market economy) from the gift economy—and effective strategies within that sphere from ineffective or even disastrous ones—can, when properly employed, lead to the same outcomes as the gift economy without giving product away. In more plain terms, firms can have their cake and eat it, too.

The question then is how to navigate the two zones. How does one steer a marketing strategy into the refreshing waters of trust and solidarity while keeping clear of the whirlpool of manipulation and compliance malfeasance? As alluded to briefly above, my fieldwork has yielded a clear line to guide strategic decision-making in every phase of the marketing decision making process. It isn’t new, either. In fact, it’s a way of viewing the strategic environment that has underpinned much of the turn from the production focus of the Fordism years to the post-Fordism consumption focus. Moreover, it is an anthropological concept that has woven through human society for millennia. That said, its role in these processes and its relevance for
contemporary business practice has yet to be elucidated. The result of excavating the concept and bringing it explicitly to light is that a parsimonious and manageable, if one may forgive the pun, concept emerges to serve as a marketing doctrine (Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014). It is on this front that I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding the formulation of marketing doctrine.

Before delving into the mutuality concept, though, I’ll take a moment to share my research methodology so that readers can understand the nature of my data and the ways in which I have reached my conclusions. The method is not new to this publication, but bears some discussion regardless.

Method

I conducted an ethnographic exploration of a young, vibrant, and growing industry: that of craft beer. Specifically, I visited five craft breweries, some more than once, on the day of festivals that each brewery had individually sponsored. The reason for the festivals was the same in each case: the release of a rare product charged at a premium price. I selected individually sponsored festivals because, despite being less common than coordinated beer festivals, the presence of a single brand would allow for clearer attributions. Obviously this is not an experimental investigation so causal conclusions are limited, but with a single brand, firm, and location in play, the conclusions were cleaner. The sites for my ethnography were chosen carefully by geography to yield maximal confidence that the cultural context that I was investigating was not strictly a function of geographic culture. The firms were located in Michigan, Indiana, Florida, North Carolina, and California.
Ethnographies are explorations, typically qualitative, of a cultural context; the unit of analysis is not an interviewee, a participant, or a subject, but a cultural setting. The purpose of the method is to provide immersive experiences that allow for the development of a native understanding. The data consist of written narratives based on field notes, observations, and experiences. In my case, the yield was 391 pages of field notes. The data were analyzed iteratively for themes, balancing between theoretical concepts and empirical ones from the field notes. Three major themes emerged, but each was explainable by the concept of mutuality that I mentioned above.

The reasons for choosing ethnography for this inquiry are varied (as with the selection of any method), but there are three key reasons that bear note. The first is that I was interested in seeing how things were done rather than asking someone how they thought things are done. My intuition based on theoretical foundations and past research, and which ultimately proved well founded, was that often the sociological forces at play in a given cultural context operate precisely because they fade into the background for those actors who are participating in the situation (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

The second reason for electing to do an ethnography is highly contextual. With a young industry growing at an impressive rate, getting my hands dirty with the reality of the business seemed prudent. Given the confirmatory (rather than exploratory) nature of surveys and experiments, I felt that a young, localized, craft-oriented industry merited ethnographic exploration because existing research was unlikely to adequately capture the cultural context of the industry.

The third reason, which is somewhat related to the first, was that the field provided grounds in which to speak to a variety of actors within the exchange system. I spoke to owners,
production workers, service workers at point of sale, consumers, and locals. This variety of voices helped yield considerable insights to the way in which mutuality-driven marketing doctrines were developed, executed, and received. Given the response rates of surveys, it seemed unlikely that I could have gotten comparable information from a formalized instrument.

Methodological considerations established, let’s move on to the key finding of my inquiry. Namely, I next provide an elucidation of the mutuality concept and how it can serve as the basis for an effective marketing doctrine.

Mutuality

Mutuality, which can be understood as inclusive of generalized exchange (Ekeh 1974; Grabber 2011; Willer, Flynn, and Zak 2012), is a way of interacting with customers, competitors, suppliers, and other relevant stakeholders productively and—my data reveal—profitably. When one recognizes a customer as occupying a shared existence in a mutual social fabric, one is operating with mutuality. When couchsurfing.org users trust that the people from whom they’re renting space won’t simply lock them out or when Zipcar rents a car out and trusts that it won’t be filled with garbage and cigarette smoke, they are operating under mutuality. Want to get in on the success of the sharing economy without the headliner pitfalls? Then mutuality is your ticket.

There are several key features of mutuality that must be understood if the logic is to effectively guide strategic decision-making. First, it is fundamentally an action though it is guided by a normative standard. This action and the norm overlaying it are based on an assumption that the other party would act in a similar fashion if circumstances were reversed, as guaranteed by their mutual inscription in a common social fabric. In that sense, mutuality is not unlike the golden rule; in this case, it is action based on the assumption of the golden rule’s
mutual applicability. A critical function of mutuality, then, is that it operates by inclusion, rather than simply exchange. It invites the other party of the exchange into a shared relationship through an acknowledgement of a pre-existing similarity.

As a result of this inclusion, mutuality also provides a mechanism by which market actors can be transformed into members of a community; if there is a pre-existing community as in the case of my data with local patrons of the breweries, then they are brought even closer under the aegis of the brand. This leads to one of the major benefits of mutuality eluded to earlier: that operating under its logic allows for the formation and strengthening of brand communities at the local and non-local level (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009).

These communities, in turn, foster additional mutuality amongst members as it is part and parcel of virtually any in-group. From my data, those that are members of the craft beer community in general or of a particular brand community all operate with mutuality. Those businesses who participate similarly have realized considerable financial success, as well as a strong supply of the aforementioned prestige associated with giving and giving well.

One of the most helpful features of mutuality-driven exchange is that it is plentiful in good times and bad. From a business perspective, this is an obvious boon as supportive consumers can bolster the firm through downtimes in market cycles. Similarly, a strong local following may be helped during hard time by a well-funded business. In the case of the Michigan brewery, sales prices were cut in order to supply money to a local non-profit that was designed to beautify an area of the city. In each case, the relationships formed and solidified by mutuality can be relied upon in hard times as well as good, so the usefulness of the project isn’t bound to particular cash flows.
Speaking of the unbounded nature of potential exchange within systems of mutuality, it is important to realize that the potential value propositions offered by either party—business or consumer—are not limited to monetary price for goods or services. Any form of value may be offered or accepted by the relevant parties. A business may provide time value by distributing their products in new areas to allow faster access for the non-local contingents of their brand community, as in the case of expanded distribution for the North Carolina brewery in my data set. Similarly, as just mentioned in the case of the Michigan brewery, aesthetic value may be offered through support of local non-profit initiatives. Consumers amongst themselves may offer possession value through the free exchange of product at the festivals, which I saw at every event I attended. The list of potential value propositions is considerable and examples plentiful, but in each case it is guided by mutuality and an inclusion in a group rather than simply by said value proposition. Thus is the communal relationship the driving force and mutuality the operative system.

Marketers have long known that relationships are as important if not more so than the basics of exchange (e.g. elementary economic theory), so this should not be particularly surprising (Berry 1983; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000; Morgan and Hunt 1994). What is powerful, however, is that mutuality provides a parsimonious concept to guide marketing doctrine. It is to this function that we next turn. Understanding the concept of marketing doctrine is critical to grasping the ways in which mutuality can be gainfully deployed by managers interested in harnessing its potential.

Mutuality as Marketing Doctrine
I have made mention of the concept of “marketing doctrine” at several points thus far. It bears some elaboration so that the applicability of mutuality is seen all the more clearly. Recently introduced to the academic literature, the concept of a marketing doctrine is essentially an orientation that a firm adopts that allows for the management of the flexibility/consistency balance through all phases of the marketing process. The formal definition is “a firm’s unique principles, distilled from its experiences, which provide firm-wide guidance on market-facing choices.” The issue that the authors of the marketing doctrine concept seek to address is that when formulating a general strategy, tensions develop between the extent to which the firm is flexible in its decision making with respect to various issues, markets, geographies, products, and so on while maintaining consistency in all phases for the sake of brand image and organizational procedures (Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014).

Key to this point is that it is principle-based. Mutuality is normative action, so it is an obvious choice for a functional principle. Consider, for instance, a firm that needs to operate in culturally distinct markets, such as China and the US. While decisions will necessarily need to be flexible as what’s good for one may not be good for the other, they can remain consistent if they are applied using mutuality. Because it is built on recognition of a shared membership in a shared social fabric, mutuality can be deployed differently depending on that fabric. So whereas a formal gift in the US may be seen as bribery, in China it may function as simply good manners. In each event, understanding the cultural context and making decisions that reflect a shared membership will be an effective way of engaging and including other firms, governmental stakeholders, and consumers. A strength is thus that consistency can be achieved without sacrificing flexibility on the part of the firm.
What’s more, mutuality should be readily trainable at all levels of the firm. Unlike other doctrines that may be complex or multi-faceted (i.e. built on an array of principles rather than falling into a single umbrella principle), mutuality provides a comprehensive and comprehensible standard. Because it is such a simple norm (albeit a powerful one), the ability of parties from the C-suite to rank-and-file store associates to assimilate the doctrine and implement it in their respective tasks should be quite manageable. Sales managers already well understand the importance of normative standards for how one interacts with potential customers (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds, and Lee 1996). Similarly, point of purchase employees can be taught to conduct their operations under mutuality. Because it is such a simple norm (albeit a powerful one), the ability of parties from the C-suite to rank-and-file store associates to assimilate the doctrine and implement it in their respective tasks should be quite manageable for internal training purposes.

For instance, in my fieldwork, I saw the California brewery promote the idea of an inclusiveness surrounding the brand and the brewpub. Regulars, locals, the town itself, craft beer enthusiasts, and first timers were all welcomed to the “family.” That very term reappeared at all but one of the breweries I visited, where the principle was present but the verbiage was different. Expressing this to customers and having it echoed throughout the firm from back of house production assistants to owners contributes to the effectiveness of the mutuality-laden actions. A clear identity is present, assimilated by the employees, and delivered to the customers and it leads to the aforementioned benefits of community, inclusiveness, loyalty, purchase intentions, and brand ambassadorship.

Some questions have been raised about the extent to which marketing doctrines can be sustained. The authors of the concept propose periodic assessments prompted either by a novel
situation or by policy alone. This could easily be done during a standard 360-degree performance appraisal (Edwards and Ewen 1996). When assessing the performance of the employees, have them examine the extent to which the appraised acts with mutuality in his/her position. Similarly, informal inquiries with consumers could shed light on their perceptions of the extent to which mutuality is being implemented. The strongest point, of course, is that when the system is functioning properly, the proof will be in the proverbial pudding. If there is a strong, inclusive community surrounding the brand; purchases are high; repeat customers are plentiful; and brand ambassadors are speaking on behalf of the firm, then mutuality is doing its job.

Mutuality, then, provides the basis for a manageable and comprehensive marketing doctrine. Regardless of whether the firm is a local brewery or a major multi-national corporation, mutuality provides a framework with which to navigate the good and the bad. Applications can vary by situation but remain consistent with the principle of inclusion and recognition that mutuality accommodates. By this point, however, I’m confident that at least a few skeptics have begun to wonder, “so where is the catch? Of course giving product away with a good attitude will get me loyalty, but what will it do for keeping my business running?” So, we turn next to the real prize here: that mutuality does not depend exclusively on giving product away.

Gift Giving at a Premium Price

The single most important revelation of my fieldwork was that all parties in the system of exchange that I observed behave with mutuality and that they do so absent the presence of a formal gift of product from the firm. In other words, here are the benefits of the gift economy without the cost associated with free giveaways and promotions. It is for this reason that I
maintain that mutuality-based marketing doctrines are highly profitable, despite the counter-intuitive nature of participating in a sharing or gift economy *prima facie*. How does this work?

As discussed in the section on mutuality, it is a way of interacting with those around you. It is action with a normative mantle. True, it fundamentally involves the concession of value by one party to another in an effort to reflect recognition of shared sociality. But the form of this value is not specified. Indeed, it doesn’t have to be something that readily translates to value in the traditional economic sense (I realize that the self-titled behavioral economists are rewriting history with these conceptions and claiming it as novel ground, but the various forms of value have been articulated and more strongly by other disciplines before this new trend even gained popular notice (Graeber 2011).

I provided several examples of this value concession above, but it bears additional illustration to drive the point home. Firms may offer hedonic value through the experience of a retail environment. Firms may offer place value by providing a local meeting and socializing spot for their community. Firms may offer possession value by allowing consumers to use firm grounds and products in sharing systems of their own. This was a common event at the festivals I witnessed, as consumers set up “bottle shares” wherein products from the host brewery and others were freely shared in a direct illustration of mutuality. In each event, consumers to whom I spoke attributed their experience to the generosity of the brewery for putting on such an event and allowing them to engage with one another in such a setting. This attribution is precisely what is at stake when a firm sets out to engage customers through a mutuality marketing doctrine. In each event, no product is given away *per se*, but all of the hallmarks of the gift economy are present. Loyalty, honor, community, and reciprocity can all be seen.
Indeed, the products being featured in my exploration were priced at a premium. The average cost of a beer in the US is $3.74 (Average Beer Prices 2014). The average beer featured at these events ran around $20. In each case, consumers were spending effectively exorbitant fees on their product purchases and attributing the entire service encounter as a gift. Thus, the attributions were such that the value ceded was a gift, regardless of its form. While we can all agree that ceding value is not necessarily ideal, the form in which this value occurs have considerable impact on the longevity of the enterprise. Where giving product away is a concession of value that will likely hinder long-term growth, providing place value or time value when the return is community, loyalty, and ambassadorship can still provide for a manageable and sustainable practice.

Conclusions

The implications of this revelation that ceding value on manageable fronts can function in such a way that gifts are perceived even when prices are at their highest can’t be overstated. While it is, like so many things, obvious on its face, the simplicity and potency of the notion are considerable. For one thing, as has been stated repeatedly, it is a manageable concept. How many of us escape primary education without some basic grasp of the golden rule? And how many business disasters could be avoided if representatives of that firm were acting in a way consistent with that rule? Mutuality is simply a development thereof.

Because it is manageable and comprehensible, it can be taught. Training and evaluation are not colossal hurdles to leap, but are instead subject to a bright-line criterion. This places the development, implementation, and assessment of its execution and potency well within the realm of functional management. Unlike as is often the case with academic “big ideas,” the
implementation of mutuality does not require any major revolution or even a paradigm shift. Instead, it requires that one assimilate and synthesize the colossal preponderance of historical experience and academic literature on marketing and relationships into the simple, wagging-finger generalization that acting in a manner that recognizes the role of the other in your endeavor—and ceding some modicum of value to them in honor of that fact—is simply good sense and good business.

This notion of conceding value opens all sorts of doors for creative deployment of value. Consider the experience economy and the difficulty that has faced managers in executing its fundamental ideas (Pine and Gilmore 1998). Mutuality provides a marketing doctrine that can orient decision makers such that they can effectively develop an experience that is of value to consumers, provided of course that this experience hinges on the aforementioned recognition of the mutual importance of the consumer and is represented as a provision by the firm to the consumer. While critics of the experience economy are right in that the experiences can be ideologically co-opted to the point of becoming commoditized and thereby useless in the experiential sense, mutuality provides a clear channel that managers can follow to keep their offerings authentic (Carù and Cova 2003). If a given tactic, subject to re-visitiation at a later date, is built on the recognition of the consumer as a meaningful other in the society in which the business is being conducted, then it will by definition carry with it the authenticity required for sustainable engagement.

In conclusion, it’s startling to say that perhaps the “common sense” contingent is right: good business can be built on startlingly simple propositions, like the idea that treating customers as something other than value propositions and giving them something worth remembering—even if it’s a far cry from free product—is a sustainable long-term business model.
Works Cited


Conclusions

As referenced earlier, such projects often finish with a whimper rather than a bang. This is certainly the case here. With conclusions detailed for each specific essay, I will spare the reader yet another rehashing of my findings and their importance for managerial practice, marketing strategy, theorizing on the gift, and contemporary discussion of the so-called sharing economy. Instead, I will simply say in conclusion that there is a neophilia in academia to its detriment. I would encourage readers to look to old ideas to solve even the newest of problems. Indeed, such old ideas may prove these new problems to be nothing of the sort. Further, I would challenge those working in applied disciplines to dig into the dusty tomes of traditional core scientific thought in order to cultivate a meaningful and substantive understanding of the world today. If we have learned anything, it is the failure of the Chicago School. We will need to go much older than Friedman and much further than economics to solve the challenges facing our world today.