

# **The Brand-Orientated Play-Community: Toxic Play in the Marketplace**

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*This thesis is dedicated to George and Rita: exceptional parents both. It was my wonderful childhood that has enabled me to endeavour such scholarly pursuits. There is no combination of words that can adequately express my eternal gratitude. For everything that you have provided, thank you.*

*Love,  
Sully*



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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

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Stephen Robert O'Sullivan

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## **Abstract**

This ethnographic study makes a number of original contributions to the consumer identity projects and the marketplace culture dimensions of consumer culture theory research. This study introduces the notion of the brand-orientated play-community, a novel consumption community form, which displays, as locus, a desire to play. This contributes to our understanding of the fluid relationship between subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand community. It was found that the brand-orientated play-community's prime brand-orientated celebration, conceptualised as the 'branded carnival', displays characteristics of the archetypal carnival. The community access carnivalistic life and a world-upside-down ethos via the use and misuse of marketplace resources. The branded carnival is further supported by the community's enactment of 'toxic play', which entails abnormal alcohol consumption, black market illegal resources, edgework activities, hegemonic masculinity and upsetting the public. This play-community is discussed in terms of a hyper-masculine playpen, as the play enacted has a direct relationship with the enactment of strong masculine roles. It was found that male play-ground members enact the extremes of contrasting masculine roles as a means to subvert the calculated and sedate 'man-of-action-hero' synthesis. Carnivals are unisex, and hence, women have begun entering the play-ground. Female members have successfully renegotiated their role within the community, from playthings to players – they have achieved player equality, which within the liminoid zone is more powerful than gender equality. However, while toxic play is essential to the maintenance of collective identity within the culture so too is the more serious form of play: the toxic sport of professional beer pong. The author conceptualises beer pong as a 'toxic sport', as it displays the contradictory play foundations of agon (competition) and corrupt ilinx (vertigo via alcohol): this is understood as a milestone step in the emergence of the postmodern sport era, in which spontaneity and the carnivalesque will dominate.

This study also makes an original contribution to ethnographic analysis and representation. The author introduces the concept of the 'ethnographic comic', in which emerging themes can be analysed visually via the combination of photographic content and field note data in a comic book storyboard-like approach. The 'ethnographic comic' is a creative and accessible structure for analysis, triangulation, and representation.



## Foreword

*“Increased attention to typeface personality is especially important now that students have access to thousands of typefaces, many of which can detract from or conflict with the seriousness, professionalism, and competency that students usually intend to convey... Unfortunately, when students are not attuned to typeface personality and its contribution to a document’s effect, students can make inappropriate typeface choices.” (Mackiewicz 2004)*

This thesis is written in Helvetica typeface. The openness and geometry of its form make it highly legible. It is a neutral typeface. There is no intrinsic meaning in its form: undesired meanings are not imposed on words. It portrays the mood and attitude of its surroundings. By adopting such a typeface, it is intended that the conceptual themes and cultural observations discussed will speak for themselves. However, if a contradictory presentation style were adopted the typeface chosen would have to be inherently **carnivalesque** and **TOXIC**.

# **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Introduction**

*This chapter opens the thesis: it offers a discussion on the context, rationale, and aims of this study. Section 1.2 briefly discusses the nature of play, its extremes, such as carnival, and its historical place in the marketplace. Section 1.3 goes on to discuss the concepts of 'linking value' and postmodern tribes, while also introducing the concept of marketplace cultures, with an emphasis placed on the brand community phenomenon. Section 1.4 discusses the shifting cultural representations of masculinity and how marketplace cultures offer a utopian space for the enactment of gender. Sections 1.5 and 1.6 draw this chapter to a close, the methodology chosen for this study is communicated, and the aims and objectives briefly introduced. Finally, section 1.8 outlines the structure of the thesis.*

## **1.2 Play, Carnival, and the Marketplace**

The most intriguing and mystifying feature of play is that it is older than culture (Huizinga 1955): play has accompanied and pervaded culture from its earliest beginnings (Elias and Dunning 1986). Play is a fundamental human function that cannot be explained as deriving from another existential phenomenon (Fink 1968). For Huizinga (1955 p.25):

*"the apparently quite simple question of what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts".*

This suggests that play is complex in nature: it's far from trivial in purpose and instead has to do with religion and the sacred. Thus, play is understood as a quality of action different from 'ordinary' life (Caillois 2001, Sutton-Smith 2001, Kozinets 2002b) – an interlude from the 'profane' nature of day-to-day life. Play is a liminal phenomenon (Turner 1969, Turner and Turner 1978) in which the rules of 'ordinary life' are suspended – this allows for the *"free play of*

*possible realities and identities*” to emerge (Kavanagh, Keohan, and Kuhling 2011 p.161). Play can be understood as a form of emancipation from the constraints of ‘reality’ (Sutton-Smith 2001) – from the constraints of an overly structured society with scant opportunities for spontaneous expression of emotion (Elias and Dunning 1986).

In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate constraints of life (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962). Furthermore, play can take an unconventional or extreme form. Kavanagh *et al.* (2011), building upon the work of Marx, Durkheim, and Nietzsche, discuss the interrelated nature of extreme or ‘mad’ forms of play and the marketplace. The authors discuss, using a variety of historical contexts, the friction that has always persisted between extreme play and the ‘oppressive’ marketplace. Carnival play represents play at its most extreme (Caillois 1962). Contemporary carnivalesque play is a form of emancipation from the oppression of the market (Kozinets 2002b, Thompson 2007, Hanlon 2006). Play during the carnival, categorised as ‘carnivalistic life’, enforces a ‘world upside down’ ethos (Presdee 2000), in which a ‘utopian realm’ of community, freedom, equality and abundance emerges (Hanlon 2006). Historically, carnival was a time of excess, laughter, and joviality in which people experienced a sense of meaningful renewal (Thompson 2007, Hanlon 2006, Presdee 2000).

It is suggested that all playful rituals, regardless of their extremeness, are essential for renewal, the venting of harmful impulses, and the maintenance of feelings of personal value (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962). Such are these foundational qualities of play that it has become institutionalised – ‘play-grounds’ in time and space are made available in a variety of contexts for the expression of behaviours that in ‘ordinary’ time are discouraged, repressed and often forbidden (Belk 1997, 2001, Kozinets, Sherry, Storm, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit, and DeBerry Spence 2004, Sherry, Kozinets, and Borhini 2007, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). It is no surprise that given the human desire to play that it has not only become institutionalised, but also marketized (Belk 2001,

Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Tumbat and Belk 2011). Caillois (1992) states that one of play's fundamental characteristics is that it is not concerned with production of wealth – and it is in this sense that play is ideologically opposed to the commercial market. However, we have observed a relative increase in organised festivals, (Maffesoli 1996, Maclarran and Brown 2005, Hanlon 2006), and spectacular themed environments (Belk 1997, Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Sherry *et al.* 2007, Cova and Caru 2007), of which playful experience is foundational. This suggests that consumers are not only willing to participate in marketer-facilitated play practices (Belk 1997) – but actively seek them out. Thus, the sacred/profane distinction between the market and play is becoming increasingly blurred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

Tumbat and Belk (2011) suggest that the marketization of such play-orientated experiences has resulted in marketplace tensions. However, such pronounced tensions, as documented by Tumbat and Belk (2011), may be exceptional, many forms of playful ritual seem to make unproblematic use of marketplace resources (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007, O'Sullivan, Richardson, and Collins 2011).

Marketplace resources provide deeper relational connections with other humans and appear to be the foundation of contemporary forms of adult play (Cova 1997, Belk 2001, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Consumers utilise marketplace resources to support forms of playful ritual (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001). Often marketplace resources are infused with new meaning, and appropriated as a means to facilitate and support consumer play (Cova *et al.* 2007a). However, interesting questions also arise when the market in turn seems to appropriate and commodify consumer play. What then are the issues surrounding the contemporary manifestations of adult play? How has consumer culture utilised forms of play? This study explores the nature of playful marketplace experiences – specifically investigating how play manifests within a marketplace culture context.

### 1.3 Postmodern Tribes and Brand Community

Modernity was marked less by meaningful experiences of the communal and more by social dissolution and extreme individualism (Cova 1997, Baudrillard 1998, Bauman 2001). The postmodern consumer too is marked by hyper-individual behaviours, freed from the restricting limits of community – differentiation, more so than ‘communion’ (Turner 1982), guides the action of postmodern individuals (Cova and Cova 2002). However, attempts at social recomposition can be observed:

*“The individual who has finally managed to liberate... from archaic or modern social links is embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe on an emotional free choice.” (Cova 1997, p.300)*

Maffesoli (1996) suggests that the postmodern individual cannot be isolated: he or she is tied via consumption to a community form. However, these ‘postmodern tribes’ or ‘pseudo-tribes’ do not display the same qualities of archaic communities, but nevertheless possess the same form (people and place). Postmodern tribes are bound together by consumption rituals and persist no longer than the power of the attraction of these rituals. Thus, postmodern tribes possess many of the qualities of religious communities, only less institutional – they can be considered ‘a sort of faith without a dogma’ (Cova 1997). Postmodern tribes are inherently ephemeral, playful, and fluid, membership of one postmodern tribe does not preclude membership of another (Cova *et al.* 2007a). In order to consolidate and reaffirm their union, contemporary consumption communities form around brands, products, activities, and experiences that possess natural ‘linking value’ (Cova 1997). Linking value is defined as the value that products and services possess beyond their functionality (Cova and White 2010) – in essence, it is the value that marketplace resources possess, which facilitate, support, and inspire, a sense of togetherness among consumers.

Postmodern tribes that exist within the marketplace include 'subcultures of consumption' (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), 'consumer tribes' (Cova and Cova 2002), and 'brand communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This study investigates, using play as a theoretical lens, the cultural system of a postmodern tribe (marketplace culture), which displays most clearly the characteristics of a brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p.412) define a brand community as:

*"a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand"*

Brand communities display three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Brand communities are of particular interest to marketers as their cultural system is based on a *single* brand, unlike subcultures of consumption or consumer tribes, which may encapsulate many brands. Hence, brand communities are a vital element of the marketing environment (Canniford 2011) and can be of significant economical value to marketers (Fournier and Lee 2009).

The marketing literature calls for a greater understanding of the nuances surrounding the unpredictable and irrational behaviour of contemporary consumption communities (Cova and Cova 2002, Arnould and Thompson 2005, Cova *et al.* 2007a, Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, and Canniford 2009, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). This study aims to contribute to the growing understanding of the inherently *playful* nature of marketplace cultures. There is a common blending in the characteristics of subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand communities observed in Canniford's (2011) consumption community typology, in which sociality is used as the basis for conceptualisation. Is such a fluid typology fulfilling its intended purpose – the purpose of aiding our understanding of communal consumption? This author believes not and feels it is timely to approach communal consumption with the

alternative theoretical lens of play, with view of producing novel insights and gaining a deeper understanding of the foundational fabric of these community forms.

## **1.4 Masculinity in the Marketplace**

Arguably, the most culturally dominant identity that defines a human, in the multitude of identities offered to the postmodern consumer, remains that of being male or female, man or woman, masculine or feminine (Avery 2012). However, gender identity is constructed through social relationships, cultural representations, and consumption (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Holt and Thompson 2004, Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012). Traditionally, gender has been constructed as a contrast: what is feminine was generally understood as the antithesis of what was masculine (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Avery 2012). Masculinity has associations with rugged individualism, hedonism, aggression, competition, physical skill, the toxic practices of, drinking alcohol and smoking, and dominance over women (Holt and Thompson 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, more recently cultural representations of gender have shifted and male consumers are required to renegotiate their understandings of masculinity as a result (Patterson and Elliott 2002).

Men are expected to construct masculinity using different cultural practices than those previously understood as being 'not feminine' (Rinallo 2007, Avery 2012). Traditionally, women's things such as personality traits, occupations, and spheres of consumption, signified a lack of 'powerful and valuable' masculinity. However, feminine consumption practices are now being constructed within society as being essential to the contemporary construction of masculinity (Avery 2012, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult for male consumers to negotiate and express masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004).

Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss two masculine ideals: the breadwinner myth and the rebel myth. The breadwinner myth is constructed through supporting families, hard work, and conforming. The rebel masculinity myth is the refutation of restricting cultural norms: the maverick who takes flight from the sober responsibility of the breadwinner role. American men tack back and forth between the two models attempting to enact the desirable characteristics of each. The result is the 'man-of-action-hero' synthesis, at the heart of which is the ideal that men with 'vision, guts and a positive attitude can transform the system'. However, does enactment of this synthesis allow for the spontaneous and emotion filled expression of masculinity male consumers desire? Participation in the rituals of male dominated marketplace cultures allows for the strong expression of a shared utopian masculinity, unrestrained by mass cultural representations (Belk and Costa 1998, Schouten and McAlexander 1995). This study investigates a male-dominated marketplace culture in order to provide insight into the liminoid expression of masculinity as a subversion of cultural representations of gender, and in doing so, advance our understanding of the relationship between gender expression and contemporary play.

## **1.5 Methodology**

As outlined above, this study sought to investigate the complex nature of communal consumption. The author felt that recent methodologies used in the study of communal consumption should be considered. The review of a number of influential studies within the area of group consumption demonstrated the merit of using an ethnographic approach. Ethnography has been successfully used to investigate the consumption systems of Mount Everest climbers (Tumbat and Belk 2011), MG sports car owners (Leigh *et al.* 2006), Jeep owners, (McAlexander *et al.* 2002), and Burning Man participants (Kozinets 2002b). The author's previous experience of using an ethnographic approach for the investigation of playful rituals within a marketplace culture (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), which produced a number of fresh insights about the phenomenon, further supported the merit of using an ethnographic approach



for this study. A further reason for the use of ethnography is the manner in which ethnography could assist an emergent design approach. The author felt that the use of ethnography, would not confine the study solely to the phenomenon of play, but could allow greater emphasis on emergent concepts that might provide meaningful insights into the nature of this particular community's consumption behaviour.

## **1.6 Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to contribute to area of consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson 2005), specifically to garner insight on the dimensions of consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures. While this study focuses on a 'brand community' consumption context it is intended to generate new constructs and theoretical insights, and to extend existing theoretical formulations within the realm of consumer research. This study will investigate the nature of play within a male dominated marketplace culture in order to provide fresh insight into the theoretical foundation of marketplace culture phenomenon, and in doing so, advance our understanding of the ritualized and liminoid nature of these community forms. As such, this study will examine how the market facilitates and supports play forms; the forms of play consumer's desire and enact within the marketplace; how masculinity enacted impacts upon play desires and forms; the relationship between gender and marketplace play ethos, and finally, the evolution of play forms. The overall aim is to examine the marketplace culture phenomenon using the alternative theoretical lens of play and to generate new theoretical contributions thereof.

## **1.7 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter One introduces the themes and areas of interest and attempts to contextualise the study. Chapter Two further contextualises the study with particular reference to the body of consumer literature that coalesces around the brand community phenomenon, an

extensive treatment of the modernist play literature, contemporary masculinity, and finally, the relationship between marketplace culture, play, and masculinity is presented in a theoretical model. Chapter Three outlines the justification of the methodological choices taken during the development of this study, specifically the justification of ethnography as a research strategy and the challenges of the ethnographic method. Chapter Four presents what the author believes to be the key findings of this study. The 'brand-orientated play-community' concept is introduced, along with the play forms of the 'branded carnival', 'the hyper-masculine playpen', and 'toxic sport'. Chapter Five discusses, in relation to the previously present theory in Chapter One, the meaning that may be inferred from the empirical findings of this study. Chapter Six draws the thesis to a close by offering conclusions and highlighting the significance of this empirical study to CCT research. Chapter Six also offers contributions to the application of the ethnographic method and ethnographic representation, and finally, avenues for further research arising from this study are discussed. Appendices include: a detailed reflexive account (appendix A) of the ethnographic study conducted, and a chance for the reader to enjoy the ethnographic comics (appendix B) created during the course of this study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction**

*This chapter serves to highlight the importance and ubiquity of play imbedded within culture and the relative neglect of play theory in relation to consumption community studies. Consumption communities could in fact be understood as adult marketplace play-grounds. Prior to the extensive treatment of the modernist play literature, the author will discuss the historical construction of community, the emergence of neo-tribes and marketplace cultures, with considerable attention given to the brand community phenomenon. The characteristics of brand communities are discussed; consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. How brand communities emerge and concretise is then explored. Following the discussion on brand community, the conceptualisation of marketplace cultures is critiqued. The author highlights play as a common feature of marketplace cultures and thus highlights a need to adopt play as a theoretical lens to investigate the behaviour of marketplace cultures. Play theory is then discussed in detail with a focus on the characteristics of play, the classifications of play, and contemporary manifestations of play. The potential marketization of deviant play forms is then discussed. Following the discussion on play theory, the pressures of contemporary masculinity are discussed with an emphasis on the relationship between subverting cultural representations of masculinity and participation in male dominated marketplace cultures. Finally, the relationship between the conceptual foundations of this study; marketplace cultures; play; and masculinity, are represented in a conceptual model, and the overall aim of research communicated to the reader.*

## 2.2 Community

Community is a core construct in social thought: its intellectual history is lengthy and abundant (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005). For a significant period a consensus regarding the nature of community was present, this consensus mainly derived from the association of community with a physical place (Brunt 2001). However, Warner and Lunt (1941) suggest that it is man, which is foundational and that communities are collections of people sharing certain interests, sentiments, behaviour, and objects, by virtue of their membership of a social constellation. In modern societies we speak of culture in terms of 'cities', 'towns', or 'neighbourhoods', rather than the 'tribe', 'clan', or 'band'. However, a common element of these different social groups remains – place (Brunt 2001). The development of our understanding and definition of community has included words such as 'locality' (Elias 1974, in Brunt 2001), 'place', and 'specific interest' (Warren 1969, in Brunt 2001). These varied notions of community highlight that the foundation of archetypal community stood on two specific requirements: people and location.

However, it is understood that the foundation of a community may be largely invented or 'imagined'. Anderson (1991) puts forth that all communities larger than primordial villages are in fact, to some degree, imagined. That it is in the minds of people you will find images of communities – people feel they belong to a community although they will never know, meet, or even hear fellow members. Anderson (1991) discusses how one's nationality, or sense of belonging to a nation, is treated as if it belonged with 'kinship'. He uses 'kinship' experienced to explain how various vast religious communities have survived for thousands of years without members engaging with each other formally. However, the notion of imagined community is just that – imagined, it is not experienced. The imagined element of community discussed by Anderson (1991) may help explain the relative individualism, and fragmented identities forged by postmodern consumers – an imagined *notion* is not community *experienced*. What then of the archaic structured ideals and rituals

of community? Are they no longer truly experienced but only imagined? What is the nature of the contemporary community form?

### **2.2.1 The Downfall of Community**

While the notion or imagined aspect of community is widely documented (Schau and Muniz 2007, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), could it be that as archaic community forms collapse that individual identity may be realised? That individualism has been a surrogate to community? Cova (1997) suggests that the postmodern individual has never been so alone and cut off from the traditional *spirit* of community, that extreme individualism is a prime characteristic of the postmodern era (Cova and Cova 2002). Postmodern social trajectory has been concomitant with privatised consumer lifestyles and the phenomenon of cocooning, which entails increasingly more fragmented social identities (Thompson and Holt 1996). Broad historical forces such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularism have shaped the modern era (Cushman 1990, Sutton-Smith 2001, Kavanagh 2012).

Humans are not so much surrounded by other human beings as they were in previous ages, but are surrounded by objects (Baudrillard 1998). Since the end of World War II, the configuration of an empty self has emerged – empty because of the loss of a sense of family, the spirit of community, and cultural traditions (Rieff 1966, in Cushman 1990, Reith 2005). The era of the ordinary individual is an age where individuals must take personal action in order to produce and exhibit one's own existence and difference (Elliott 1997, 1999, in Cova and Cova 2002). Consumer individual identity sprouts on the graveyard of community: standing out, being different (Bauman 2001), not being a member of a collective, but being and consuming as an individual.

To establish a self-identity consumers seek differentiation, satisfaction, and justification through the experience of being: the self is continually established by consuming goods (Belk 1988). Hence, the overwhelming increases of materialism. Dealings with fellow man have been replaced considerably by

dealings with goods and corporate messages (Klein 2000). Products and services have progressively freed people from tradition (Thompson and Arsel 2004) and aided the attainment of individual goals, which in turn, has increased isolation and differentiation (Cova and Cova 2002). Happiness and the quest for happiness have been further removed from the collective and are based heavily on individualistic principles (Baudrillard 1998), personalised consumption, and growing materialistic desires.

*“Happiness, written in letters of fire behind least little advert...is the absolute reference of the consumer society.”* (Baudrillard 1998, p. 49)

The elements required now to live a social life rests on things – things bought and sold in the marketplace (Muniz and Schau 2005, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Differentiation and personalisation are the prime characteristics of the affluent age: individuals have never been so free in private and public choices, with regard to personalisation through consumption (Cova 1997, Cova *et al.* 2007). Consumers are currently faced with vast choices that allow differentiation, and individuality: consumers can choose from a variety of make, model, style, colour, etc (Baudrillard 1998) in each product category. Although the human quest for happiness has been inescapably linked to market capitalism (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Kavanagh 2012), a different form of human happiness can be linked with equality.

Equality is a foundational characteristic of community: communities serve as an enclave from consumption competition and provide a sense of ‘happiness’ (Belk and Costa 1998, Baudrillard 1998, Kozinets 2001). Baudrillard (1998) asserts that through the collective characteristics of primitive societies the true sign of affluence is present – relationships with human beings. Community conveys promising pleasures that people traditionally experienced favourably, however, these pleasures are becoming increasingly detached due to the pursuit of personal identity (Bauman 2001). However, the most remarkable thing about community is not that its foundations are people or place, or that it

has an imagined element but that it has *always been*. Hence, could it be that the extreme sense of individualism of the affluent age is community in a state of flux? That community is not withering but merely changing form?

## 2.3 Linking Value and Neo-Tribes

*“Our era, then does not crown the triumph of individualism but rather may herald the beginning of its end... the emergence of a reverse movement...”*  
(Cova and Cova 2002, p. 597)

The postmodern individual, who finally managed to liberate from modern social links, is embarking on a reverse movement, and attempting to recompose their social universe based on an emotional, free choice (Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002). The postmodern consumer identity fostered standing out and stepping aside from community, but the vulnerability of the individual identity has prompted identity builders to seek others, in which, as a collective, they can merge their fears and anxieties (Bauman 2001, Kozinets 2001). Consumers are becoming more involved in postmodern tribes, which are an attempt, in a contemporary manner, to revive the community archetype of village or district (Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002, Goulding and Saren 2007, Langer 2007).

These postmodern ‘tribes’ are communities that are not clearly definable in situated terms, some even use modern electronic modes of communication (Mandelli 2004, Sicilia and Palazon 2008, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). These neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996) are in a state of *statu nascendi* rather than *essendi*, brought into being by the repetitive symbolic and *playful* rituals of their members, but persisting no longer than the power of attraction of these rituals (Maffesoli 1996, Cova 1997, Cova and White 2010, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Sierra, Taute, and Heiser 2012).

For some, belonging to these neo-tribes has exceeded the importance of belonging to a social class (Belk and Costa 1998, Holt and Thompson 2004). Commitment to neo-tribes can be viewed as a 'sort of faith without a dogma' (Cova 1997). These community forms provide consumers with a link to religiosity (Schau and Muniz 2007, Muniz and Schau 2005), transcendent experiences (Schouten *et al.* 2007b) and more importantly, a link with other humans (Cova, 1997, Maffesoli 1996, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and White 2010). Communities are in a sense a 'paradise' achieved through ritual, imagination, and fellowship (Turner 1979, 1982, Bauman 2001, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Kozinets 2001, 2002b).

*"We find that the individual cannot be isolated, but rather he or she is tied, by culture, communication, leisure, or fashion, to community, which perhaps no longer possesses the same qualities as during the Middle Ages, but nevertheless the same form..."* (Maffesoli 1996, p. 81)

Human action can be understood as a process or series of efforts to solve problems (Cohen 1955, in Gelder and Thornton 1997). The term 'problem' incorporates the many tensions and challenges faced by the postmodern consumer. Problems exist in a variety of forms, be it to try a new brand (or not), whether or not to book a dream holiday, or buy different cologne, they all, until resolved, create a certain tension (Gelder and Thornton 1997). Not all actions satisfy and remove this undesired tension, often new tensions arise as consequences from previous choices, and attempts at finding a solution persist. Postmodern consumers attempted and appear to have failed to ease their tensions, or to indeed be 'happy' and find 'paradise' via their differentiated and individualistic consumption practices (Baudrillard 1998).

It is instead suggested that the 'linking value' found in collective forms of consumption is more suited to ease the tensions postmodern consumers experience (Baudrillard 1998, Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002). 'Linking value' is the value that products and services possess beyond their



functionality (Cova and White 2010): essentially the connection with other human beings – a link. Postmodern consumers' desire for community is satisfied through the social interaction surrounding the ritualistic consumption of products or services. Glimpses of communal solidarity are beginning to emerge in consumer culture (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Maffesoli 1996, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002, Arnould and Thompson 2005, Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, and Canniford 2009). Consumers are no longer defining themselves according to sociological constructs but in terms of the activities, objects, and relationships that give their lives meaning (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier 1998, Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002, Muniz and Schau 2005, Arnould and Thompson 2005, Schouten *et al.* 2007b, Canniford 2011).

We can conclude that community is a good thing and in it we are safe (Bauman 2001). The human need for communal affiliation has been at the centre of human life for as long as documented (Kozintez 2002b, Muniz and Schau 2005). However, the structures and ethos of community has evolved. There is a price to be paid for the privilege of being in a community – there is a substantial trade-off between freedom and security, both are equally precious and coveted values. However, the balance of freedom and security appears to be struck in contemporary consumption communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). These postmodern community forms, which are embedded in a liberatory and highly playful ethos, offer consumers a form of consumption sanctuary (Belk and Costa 1998, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Cova 2002, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Langer 2007).

## **2.4 Marketplace Cultures**

There is little sharp distinction between the various categories of neo-tribe proposed by Maffesoli (Canniford 2011). Each of the various forms of neo-tribe addresses the difficulties brought about by the extreme individualization and fragmentation experienced by the contemporary consumer (Thompson and Troester 2002, Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Whether classified as

subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995); brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002); micro-cultures (Thompson and Troester 2002); virtual communities (Sicilia and Palazon 2008); or consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2002), these forms of contemporary consumption community support Maffesoli's (1996) conception of neo-tribalism. Subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand community will now be discussed in greater detail, however, while these three forms of marketplace culture are discussed separately, there is significant observable overlap between these defined categories (Canniford 2011) (this will be discussed in more detail in section 2.9). The relative overlap in the characteristics of subcultures of consumption, brand communities, and consumer tribes, aids in the explanation as to why there is so much interchange between the labels that marketing academics assign to contemporary marketplace cultures. Subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand community will now be discussed, with additional emphasis placed on the brand concept as the community investigated in this study displays most clearly the characteristics of a brand community.

#### **2.4.1 Subcultures of Consumption**

The term subculture emerged during the first half of the twentieth century as a sociological category to describe social solutions to undesirable and estranged conditions (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Members of subcultures, by subverting dominant social institutions, earned status, and capital around alternative social ties (Thornton 1995, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004, Goulding *et al.* 2002). As many of these subversions revolved around consumption activities, the term subculture of consumption emerged. Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p.43) define a subculture of consumption as *"a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity"*. The distinct characteristics of a subculture of consumption highlighted include a hierarchical social structure, which involves entering at the bottom and undergoing a process of socialization, a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs

and values, unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression (Thornton 1995, Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009).

‘Subcultures’ and ‘subcultures of consumption’ have come to be associated with social groups that are perceived to be ‘oppositional’ and deviate from normative ideals of adult society (Hebdige 1979, Thornton 1995, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004, Goulding *et al.* 2002, Canniford 2011). However, membership of subcultures of consumption can have a positive impact on consumers’ lives and wider society (Kozinets 2001, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Haenfler 2004). Subcultures of consumption provide a structure for consumers’ identities, actions, and relationships, and in essence, infuse meaning into consumers’ lives (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Thornton 1995, Kozinets 2001, Haenfler 2004, Leigh *et al.* 2006).

Theories of both subcultures and microcultures are premised on the notion that culture is internally fragmented across socially distributed clusters of meaning (Hannerz 1992, in Thompson and Troester 2002). Similar to a subculture, a microculture suggests a theoretical relationship to the broader culture. Subcultures of consumption incorporate marketplace resources and symbols and define them in ways that are inherently inconsistent with the meanings attached to goods by popular culture (Hebdige 1979), hence, the understanding that subcultures display an ‘oppositional stance’. Microcultures appear to be challenging the utopian vision of science and technology and are steeped in a countermodernist legacy (Thompson and Troester 2002). Subcultures and microcultures form around various modes of human experience, such as sky diving, (Celsi *et al.* 1993), music (Goulding *et al.* 2002), sexuality (Kates 2006), and in an increasing manner, brands (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Canniford 2011).

### 2.4.2 Consumer Tribes

Tribal consumption has at its foundation the search for social links: the 'linking value' produced via shared use of products and services (Cova 1997, as discussed in section 2.3). Consumer tribes do not require brands as their totem (Cova *et al.* 2007a): they establish weaker connections with a variety of facilitating brands, products, services and activities (Cova and White 2010, Canniford 2011). Tribal consumption often produces new forms of linking value that may, directly or indirectly, conflict with marketers desired linking value (Kozinets *et al.* 2008, Cova and White 2010, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Consumer tribes display a number of key characteristics: multiplicity, *playfulness*, transience, and entrepreneurialism (Cova *et al.* 2007a, Canniford 2011).

Membership of one consumer tribe does not preclude membership of another. Tribes rarely dominate the everyday lives of consumers. There is not the same level of extreme commitment as observed in many subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Haenfler 2004, Goulding *et al.* 2009). Consumer tribes are inherently playful, they engage in a form of 'active play' with marketplace props (Cova *et al.* 2007a, Caru and Cova 2007). During the process of play, consumer tribes appropriate marketer's intended meanings. Tribes enact their own bespoke approach to consumption (Holt 2004), which results in products and services being imbued with an alternative, tribal meaning (Cova *et al.* 2007a). While play is incorporated into the conceptualisation of consumer tribes, it has been given scant attention. This study aims to explore further the conceptual link between playful behaviours and marketplace cultures by examining the consumption community phenomenon using play as a theoretical lens.

Consumer tribes are inherently ephemeral: they emerge, reify, and dissipate, as the combinations of people and market resources alter (Canniford 2011). Cova and Cova (2002) suggest that tribal marketing can challenge the way in which traditional customer loyalty, such as one-to-one marketing and other

relationship marketing techniques, can be built (McAlexander *et al.* 2003). Tribal marketing involves companies adopting an ethnomarketing strategy, in which the subcultural tribe is approached humbly, supported, and eventually the brand/brand management proactively participate as full members of the tribe (Cova and Cova 2002), thus enacting a close-to-consumer-philosophy (Fournier *et al.* 2001). Tribal marketing is the process of facilitating consumer tribes by supporting the tribe's rituals and traditions and respecting the tribe's totems. Cova and Cova (2002) illustrate how Salomon successfully implemented a tribal marketing campaign: Salomon *humbly* approached the tribe to firstly support their rituals, not to gain a marketing foothold. They approached the campaign from a close-to-consumer, member first, attitude and only then did Salomon consider bringing products to members of the tribe. Via the process of ethnomarketing, marketers can profit from supporting a tribe and showing them a mutual level of respect by engaging in *authentic* tribal communication.

While consumer tribes may not focus on a specific brand beyond it being a facilitator of tribal functions, brand communities have at their locus the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Brand communities are more intriguing and valuable to marketers as they are centred on *one* brand and not a way of life that may encompass many brands (Fournier and Lee 2009, Canniford 2011). The brand community phenomenon will now be discussed in detail.

## **2.5 Brand Community**

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p.412) define a brand community as "*a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand*". Membership of a brand community can be understood as a positive addition to consumers' social milieu (Cova, Pace, and Park 2006). These communities of loyal and fanatic brand admirers are generally initiated by consumer interest rather than excessive corporate enticement (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Cova 2002). Although a brand community's genesis can be aided by corporate involvement (Muniz

and O'Guinn 2001, Fournier and Lee 2009), it is typically the consumer-to-consumer relationships forged that inspire the reification of these communities (McAlexander *et al.* 2003). Hence, the relative open door ethos involved in brand community membership and their *genuine* and *authentic* appeal to consumers (Leigh *et al.* 2006). An interesting aspect of brand community formation is the fact that consumers are generally unaware of the concept of brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). However, the meaningful social ties that bind them tend to be understood and appreciated (Cova *et al.* 2007b).

Brand communities are most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition, the likelihood is increased due to the symbolic properties of these brand characteristics: these type of brands possess cult and iconic values (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Belk and Tumbat 2005, Schau *et al.* 2009, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). However, it has been recently suggested that brand communities may also form around popular dominant brands, such as Red Bull (Canniford 2011) and Coca-Cola (Sicilia and Palazon 2008). Many brand communities discussed in the marketing literature tend to be male dominated (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova, Pace and Park 2007, Martin *et al.* 2006, Schouten *et al.* 2007a, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), in which communal practices often involve strong displays of the utopian ideals of masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004, Connel and Messerschmidt 2005, Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006, Canniford 2011, Avery 2012) (this will be discussed further in section 2.22).

The size of brand communities varies, ranging from local small group based brand communities (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Schouten *et al.* 2007a) to vast multi-national brand communities (Cova and White 2010). Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) define a small brand community as fewer than fifty members, and a large brand community to contain more than fifty members. The size of a brand community may be of specific interest to brand management, but it is typically the social dynamics and relational aspects that are of considerable

importance to management due to their unpredictable nature (Cova 1997, Cova *et al.* 2007a, Cova and White 2010).

Devasagayam and Buff (2008) suggest there are eight different categories of brand community membership and that the nature of the brand, and the characteristics of the product itself, impact upon members' participation levels. They state that brand community membership can be either synchronous or asynchronous, whereby consumers either participate at a predetermined time, or alternatively, have the freedom to choose when to participate. Committed members will be willing to have predetermined meeting times as the brand community will have a more important function in consumers' lives (Kozinets 2001, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova *et al.* 2007a). Also, consumer membership and participation may be situated in either a virtual or physical milieu (Sicilia and Palazon 2008); virtual participation tends to operate more in the casual memberships sphere, by which consumers communicate via web forums when deemed suitable by them (Mandelli 2004).

Devasagayam and Buff (2008) introduce the extremes of the exchange continuum (transactional and relational) to the understanding of consumer membership and participation in brand community. They state that a transactional brand community is characterised by low frequency of participation and low involvement on behalf of members, where as a relational brand community exhibits a more frequent level of participation and collective action (Devasagayam and Buff 2008). For example at these extremes, the Coca-Cola community (Silica and Palazon 2008) can be positioned as a form of transactional brand community, and the Harley-Davidson brand community (Fournier *et al.* 2001) as a relational brand community, such their relational characteristics.

However, separating and reducing brand communities into eight specific categories is of minor benefit and makes little contribution to the growing body of knowledge concerning the strategic marketization of the brand community

phenomenon (Canniford 2011) or to our understanding of their capricious nature (Cova *et al.* 2007a). There is far too much obvious blending of the categories suggested by Devasagayam and Buff (2008) observed in brand community studies (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova *et al.* 2007a) for this particular study to hold significant value. Understanding the common, and considerably unique, characteristics and dynamics involved in brand community formation, reification, and the wider relationships complexities, is of greater benefit to consumer culture theory. This study attempts to examine these complex characteristics, which are inherently playful in nature. Brand community research is in its infancy, and hence, it remains essential to develop the study of the characteristics and concepts that maybe foundational to brand community membership, value creation, and the evolving marketization dynamics. While many consumer culture theory researchers have alluded to the enactment of play within contemporary community forms (Kozinets 2002a, Sherry *et al.* 2007, Cova *et al.* 2007, Goulding *et al.* 2009, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), consumption community studies have tended to view behaviour enacted within through lenses other than play, making a more rigorous scrutiny of the role of play appropriate and overdue. The author believes that an examination of play will produce the necessary insights essential to developing our understanding of the consumer desire to participate in such community forms.

Brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of community; shared consciousness; rituals and traditions; and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Brand communities also display an imagined element where admirers of the particular brand in question may have never met but still find considerable solace in the notion that like-minded other enthusiastic brand users exist in the wider world (Muniz and Schau 2005, Mandelli 2004).



### 2.5.1 Consciousness of Kind

The most important and influential element of a community is consciousness of kind experienced (Anderson 1991); members of communities must feel a significant connection towards one another. Members must share what Bender (1978, in Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) terms a "we-ness", or a sort of knowing each other at some level even if they have never met (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Anderson 1991). It is through this sense of "we-ness" that brand communities provide opportunities for consumers to experience desired 'linking value' (Cova 1997). Consumers will seek communal affiliation where available and brand communities represent a form of contemporary human association embedded within a commercial context. While the community is built upon a brand, the brand fosters a triangular social constellation – a consumer-brand-consumer triad.

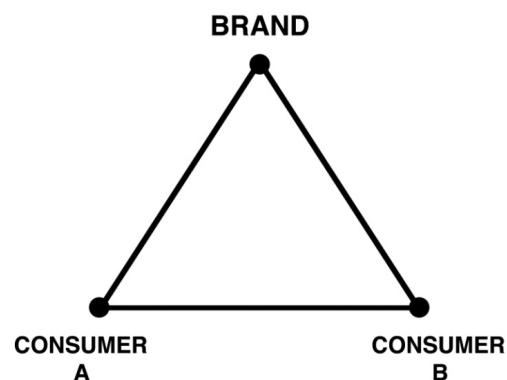


Figure 1. Muniz and O'Guinn's Brand Community Triad

The feelings of 'we-ness' experienced in brand communities are so intense that members engage in distinct demarcation practices. Members of brand communities display a need to acquire a distinct and obvious separation from users of their admired brand and users of other (less important) brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005, Mandelli 2004). Such demarcation typically involves a demonstrative name or reference for brand users, chosen affectionately, in order to establish a contrast with users of other brands. The process of naming brand community members typically involves reference to the locus brand; members feel compelled to 'play' with

the brand name – to imbue community members affectionately with the brand name. Examples include ‘Saabers’, ‘Mac people’ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), ‘Ducatisti’ (Mandelli 2004), and ‘Beamish Brigade’ (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

Consciousness of kind experienced in brand communities is neither temporal nor situated, it transcends geographic boundaries due to the vast opportunities afforded to community members to experience consciousness of kind via social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook, and other Internet related media, such as Skype or Youtube.com (Muniz and Schau 2007, Kozinets *et al.* 2008, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011, O’Sullivan and Richardson 2012a/b). Thus, members can feel part of a unique, unmet, but imagined community centred on a particular brand (Mandelli 2004, Cova and Pace 2006, Silcia and Palazon 2008, Cova and White 2010, Canniford 2011).

Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) attempt to develop this notion of the imagined membership further by categorising brand communities as either a social brand community, or a psychological brand community. According to Carlson *et al.* (2008), a social brand community may include members that never met face-to-face, yet they acknowledge community membership, and enact some degree of interaction, be it either social interaction or virtual communication. They define a psychological brand community as a group of brand admirers who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, yet do not hold membership or engage in social interactions. Psychological brand communities do not conform to the traditional sociological norms that define community, they represent solely the notion of imagined community (Carlson *et al.* 2008). Such a distinction in categories of brand community, be it social or psychological, can rarely be observed in isolation. Despite Canniford (2011) stating that brand communities are easier to manage than other marketplace cultures, that they are ‘remarkably predictable’, brand communities are highly complex phenomena (Schouten *et al.* 2007a) that generally display both highly unpredictable social and psychological behaviours (Cova and White 2010).

Carlson *et al.*'s (2007) conceptualisation of a psychological brand community is more closely related to virtual brand community membership (Mandelli 2004, Sicilia and Palazon 2008) or peripheral social brand community membership (Kozinets 2001). Social brand communities exert normative pressures and veneration of community totems is expected (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). A brand admirer may belong to a community in a psychological sense and be satisfied by such 'imagined' involvement, however, other brand admirers are willing to cross the 'barrier' to committed community membership, social interaction, acceptance of the community pressures, hierarchy, and totems, in order to become a legitimate community member (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Kozinets 2001). Such distinction is observed in the Star Trek community, in which the Trekkie/Trekker distinguishes the highly committed from the less committed members respectively (Kozinets 2001).

Legitimization is a process whereby members of the brand community differentiate between the true members and the less committed members. The general distinction is between those who truly incorporate and know the brand, and those who are using the brand for the wrong reasons, or may not fully respect the community totems (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Algesheimer *et al.* 2005). True community members are expected to conform to community norms, which can range from various rituals and traditions, to fully appreciating and practicing the culture and ethos (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Kozinets 2001, Algesheimer *et al.* 2005, Langer 2007, Goulding *et al.* 2012). Brand communities are concerned with community survival and growth, and hence do not generally reject or deny membership of less enthusiastic members provided that some form of oppositional brand loyalty is enacted, and the community hierarchy is respected (Langer 2007, Leigh *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010).

Oppositional brand loyalty is essential to preserving consciousness of kind; it allows members to experience the shared meaning of a brand.

*“Through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.420)*

The process of opposing competing brands highlights the shared importance of the admired brand, and who the true brand community members are, and are not (Muniz and Schau 2005). An oppositional stance is a source of great unity among brand community members (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Schouten and McAlexander 1995, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Muniz and Schau 2005), it serves to illustrate how community members are one way and outsiders are another (Mandelli 2004). Oppositional brand loyalty generally tends to be playful: the emphasis is placed on the ‘link’ between fellow members, in a brand consumption setting, and not an enactment of hostile opposition to other market narratives (Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002, Maffesoli 1996, Muniz and Schau 2005).

## **2.5.2 Rituals and Traditions**

*“Ritual is a kind of social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorization.” (McCracken 1986, p.78)*

Ritual is an opportunity to transform the meaning of marketplace resources (McCracken 1986). Rituals and traditions represent crucial social processes, by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted to both those within the community, and to those experiencing the community from the outside (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Rituals and traditions of brand communities typically centre on the communal consumption of the brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Schouten *et al.* 2007b, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova and

White 2010), and function to perpetuate consciousness of kind (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Langer 2007, Goulding and Saren 2007) – rituals and traditions are foundational to community longevity (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Schouten *et al.* 2007a). That is why brand communities tend to form more easily around products/services that are publicly consumed, as the symbolic nature of public consumption is easily adopted into communal rituals and traditions (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova *et al.* 2007(b), O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

Celebrating the history of the brand and sharing brand stories are important aspects of rituals and traditions (Belk and Tumbat 2005, Muniz and Schau 2005). The inculcation of history serves to reproduce the community culture; sharing brand narratives is an important means of recreating and maintaining brand meaning (Cova *et al.* 2007b). Sharing brand stories links community members to the brand but also to each other, thus perpetuating consciousness of kind (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Leigh *et al.* 2006). Sharing brand stories and brand related culture allows consumer-to-consumer relationships to emerge, while preserving the apprentice-like hierarchy observed in brand communities (Martin *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan and Richardson 2012a/b).

Advertisements and other brand narratives communicate the meaning of brands to consumers (Patterson and O'Malley 2006) and tend to play an important role in emerging community rituals and traditions of brand communities (Cova *et al.* 2007a). Mass media has been brought ever closer to everyday life, and is often the foundation upon which general consumer communication stands: gossip and normal conversation revolve around film stars and commercial messages (Maffesoli 1996). It is no surprise then to find brand community members engage in lengthy discussions concerning advertisements that represent not only the brand, but to a large degree, the brand community. The advertiser is essentially not only spokesperson for the brand, but also for the brand community.

Paradoxically, the lack of brand narratives and marketing prowess can also be said to encourage communal consumption (Pabst Blue Ribbon for example, in Cova *et al.* 2007a) as members' are afforded the ability to create a bespoke brand meaning, such the lack of mediated experiences of the brand (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). A lack of formal advertising can result in consumers perceiving the brand as being more authentic (Leigh *et al.* 2006), and thus, less commercially profane (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

Brand communities often feel that the marketer has too much of a say over the direction of brand meaning (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The rituals and traditions enacted by brand communities allow consumers to develop a bespoke brand meaning. Marketers can facilitate these consumer practices of meaning transfer in the form of organised 'brand fests' (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Cova and Pace 2006). Brand fests are typically marketer-facilitated events, celebrating the brand in a spectacular or novel environment (Cova and Pace 2006, McAlexander *et al.* 2002). The development of community rituals and traditions, based on novel brand consumption experiences, enhances the longevity of a brand community (Fournier *et al.* 2001, Schouten *et al.* 2007b).

### **2.5.3 Moral Responsibility**

Moral responsibility enacted within a brand community is understood as the sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). It is evident in two vital communal missions: firstly, integrating and retaining members, and secondly, assisting members in their use of the brand (Muniz and Schau 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova *et al.* 2007b).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest that the prime concern is communal survival: members perceive a duty to retain current members and recruit new ones. However, moral responsibility to individual community members only

goes so far, it is usually specifically brand related and involves informing other members about methods of usage, locations to purchase, and other brand/product information, not readily available from corporate outlets (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Martin *et al.* 2006). The information relayed by community members is often more valuable than information presented by the corporation (Muniz and Schau 2005) (this will be discussed further in section 2.8.3). It serves as another linking factor between community members, which reinforces feelings of consciousness of kind and has the ability to forge long-term relationships with other brand community members and the brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, 2003). Following a discussion on the characteristics of brand community, attention now turns to how these communities emerge.

## **2.6 How Brand Communities Emerge: Consumer Conversion Experiences**

Members of brand communities, be they marketer facilitated or consumer orientated communities, display an active willingness to participate in the community. Consumers display zeal in maintaining communal activities, rituals and traditions, all of which typically centre on consumption of the admired brand (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Cova and Pace 2006, Cova and White 2010, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). While brand community affiliation offers consumers certain consumption and social advantages, which may serve as motivation to participate, the factors and process that may lead to the emergence of brand communities remain under explored in the brand community literature. However, it is now suggested that brand communities may emerge due to consumers experiencing an epiphany like realisation during the consumption of a brand, and due a willingness to replicate this sacred brand consumption experience, ongoing consumption becomes centred on the original facilitating brand (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

### 2.6.1 Consumer Conversion Experiences

Brand communities' rituals typically involve communal use of the brand (Fournier *et al.* 2001). A shared brand experience is more powerful when there are a larger number of participating consumers (Cova and White 2010). Consumers often experience the brand in such a significant and spectacular manner that it may result in feelings of transcendence (Schouten *et al.* 2007b). The term 'transcendent customer experiences' (TCEs) refers to a transcendent experience in the realm of consumption. TCEs have aspects of flow and/or peak experiences, they have a considerable and lasting influence on consumers' beliefs and attitudes. Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) characterises flow as a complete engrossment in a certain activity.

*'Flow is performance and experiences wrapped up together in a positive, often playful, and highly fulfilling package'* (Schouten *et al.* 2007b).

Flow produces transcendent feelings, an escape from the mundane, a distance from current reality, and a closer sense of connection to a consumption activity. (Flow is discussed in more detail in relation to play in section 2.11.6.1). A peak experience is an ephemeral, yet powerful, personally meaningful, and potentially transformational experience (Schouten *et al.* 2007b, Maslow 1962). Similar to flow, peak experiences lead to a state of transcendence, however, a peak experience is less like a deliberate process and more like an epiphany.

*'In the midst of a peak experience an individual feels intimately connected with some larger phenomenon, such as nature, humankind, or the infinite'* (Schouten *et al.* 2007b)

TCEs are characterised by feelings of self-transformation, separation from the mundane, epiphany, newness, extreme enjoyment, and a sense of oneness (Schouten *et al.* 2007b). Within brand community studies the effects of transcendent experiences have been well documented (Schouten and



McAlexander 1995, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Schouten *et al.* 2007b, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, O'Sullivan and Richardson 2012a/b). Transcendent experiences are not easily reproduced in 'the normal daily grind' of life but produced through the rituals and traditions of postmodern communities (Quester *et al.* 2006). The effects of transcendent experiences can be enduring: customers seek to reproduce the fantasy and ecstasy like experiences through repeat participation in collective consumption activities (Schouten *et al.* 2007b, Cova *et al.* 2007b, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

A TCE can be so powerful it can result in an identity changing conversion, or what Belk *et al.* (1989) term a 'conversion experience'. O'Sullivan *et al.* (2011), building upon the work of Belk *et al.* (1989) and Schouten *et al.* (2007b), outline the emergence of the Beamish brand community. The authors then suggest that for a brand community to emerge, and reify, the following conditions must be present:

- There is an initial, unanticipated conversion experience shared by a number of consumers.
- The initial experience is sufficiently strong that it invokes a mutual desire to maintain the transcendent nature of the experience through processes of sacralisation maintenance (Belk *et al.* 1989). Efforts at sacralisation maintenance are most likely to focus on the facilitating brand of the initial transcendent experience.
- The collective desire for sacralisation maintenance results in the conscious co-creation of a liminoid zone (Sherry *et al.* 2007) around one particular brand. Through creation of a '*play space*' mutual devotion to the brand can be celebrated, temporarily setting aside their normal day-to-day lives. Hence, brand communities' relative liberatory and playful nature (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).
- Sacredness can be initially maintained through playful ritual alone, but in order for the community to concretise, loyalty to the community icon

must be enforced, which is an overall key component to the process of sacralisation maintenance.

- Social enforcement of brand loyalty will evolve alongside playful practices of oppositional brand loyalty.

De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007) suggest that brand communities emerge from a broader subcultural context. This can be observed in many aspects of tribal marketing (Cova and Cova 2002), in which the facilitating brand eventually becomes the locus of subcultural practices (Cova and Cova 2002, O'Sullivan and Richardson 2012a/b).

Consumers expect to have powerful communal and personally significant experiences in spectacular, organised, and themed environments (Sherry *et al.* 2007, Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Fournier *et al.* 2001, Belk 1997, Caru and Cova 2007). Spectacular environments have the power to positively contaminate those facilitating the experience, either officially or unofficially (Belk *et al.* 1989, Sherry *et al.* 2007, McAlexander *et al.* 2003). Generally, spectacular environments are marketer-facilitated, and consumers' extraordinary experiences become associated with the facilitating brand (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Caru and Cova 2007, Fournier *et al.* 2001). However, consumers often organise successful autonomous brand celebrations, free from marketer knowledge and input, examples include 'Nuttela Parties' (Cova and Pace 2006) and 'Beamish Tours' (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

However, while Schouten *et al.* (2007) and O'Sullivan *et al.* (2011) discuss aspects of sacred consumption, they fail to explore what invokes such feelings, while these authors give passing mentions to 'play', they fail to fully incorporate 'play' in their conceptualisations. Play is a catalyst for the internal states discussed in relation to TCEs and conversion experiences (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962, Turner 1982). Prior to critiquing the conceptualisation of marketplace cultures, and discussing sociological theories of play, the complex web of relationship essential to a brand community, and membership benefits realised by consumers will be discussed.

## 2.7 The Key Relationships of Brand Community

The membership of a brand community incorporates not only a 'detached' individualistic relationship with the brand, nor just a series of independent relationships with various brand admirers, but it incorporates a web of complex relationships (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, McAlexander *et al.* 2003). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest the relationships present within a brand community constituted a customer-brand-customer triad (Figure 1). This social constellation builds on the traditional customer-brand relationship discussed by Fournier (1998) and incorporates the theories of neo-tribalism (Mafessoli 1996) and Cova's (1997) contention of linking value. However, the conceptualisation of brand community includes a more complex and wider set of relationships than the customer-brand-customer triad introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). McAlexander *et al.* (2002) develop our understanding of relationships within brand community further by introducing the customer-centric model of brand community. McAlexander *et al.* (2002) highlight a number of relationships central to brand community's meaningfulness and experience. The customer-centric model of brand community depicts a more complex web of relationships than previously theorised (Figure 2).

*"A brand community from a customer-experiential perspective is a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated. Crucial relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers."* (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, p.38).

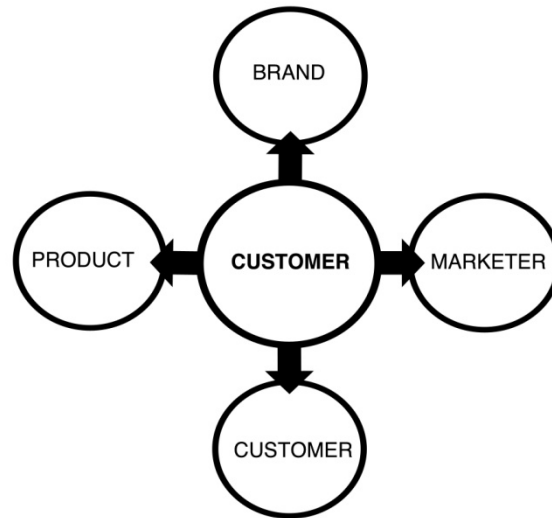


Figure 2. Customer-Centric Model of Brand Community

Interpreting brand communities as purely social connections, between brand users and their relation to the brand, fails to incorporate the series of other avenues in which brand communities are supplied with meaning, commonality, and cultural capital (Holt 1998). The wider set of complex relationships involved is essential to the consumer experience of being part of a brand community (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). The web of relationships highlighted by McAlexander *et al.* (2002) will now be discussed, beginning with the consumer-product relationship; then the customer-marketer relationship; followed by the customer-brand relationship, and finally, the customer-customer relationship.

### 2.7.1 Consumer-Product Relationships

Consumer-product relationship have traditionally been characterised by utility, functionality, and value. However, products provide value to consumers far beyond their intended utility (Fournier 1998). We regard our possessions as part of ourselves (Belk 1988). Belk (1988) argues that one single product cannot represent all of one's self-concept, but rather only a collection of consumption objects may be able to represent aspects of the total self. However, relationships between a person and a single object or product, are

not by any means lacking in meaning (Belk 1988, Fournier 1998, Matzler *et al.* 2007).

Members of brand communities incorporate branded products (of communal veneration) more readily into their sense of selves and treat these branded products in a 'special', or 'respected', manner (Belk and Tumbat 2005, Muniz and Schau 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Davidson, McNeill, and Ferguson 2007). Products are inundated with symbolic meaning (Elliott and Wattansuwan 1998): all voluntary consumption, either consciously or subconsciously, carries symbolic meanings. Symbolic consumption allows consumers to categorise him/herself in society. However, a product may carry varied meanings, and each person, even within consumer collectives, may possess a product for a different symbolic reason.

Branded products that the community has formed around may be symbolically linked with and objectify the sacred (Belk *et al.* 1989). As a result of the secularization of religion, and the sacralization of the secular, the sacred/profane distinction has become applicable to *all* marketplace resources, specifically tangible products. While products may appear ordinary, they are made sacred via myths, rituals, and the signs consumers imbue (Belk *et al.* 1989, Kozinets 2002b, Belk and Tumbat 2005).

*"A sacred stone continues to appear like other stones except to those who believe it has revealed itself to them as unique, supernatural, or ganz andere." (Belk et al. 1989, p. 6)*

Thus, ordinary consumption products, with a specific utility, can serve as sacred icons, and thus, will not be treated in the same manner as the ordinary or 'profane', but will instead warrant special attention and veneration (Belk 1988). Within the MG brand community, members thrive on restoring traditional classic MG motorcars. Members engage in self-work projects that challenge themselves, convey a sense of personal mastery, and self-efficacy

(Leigh *et al.* 2006). In their own way, members of the MG brand community are imbuing such products with meanings and usages that differ from the ones originally conveyed (Cova *et al.* 2007a) – it is no longer simply just a sports car. In essence, through these self-work and redivivus projects, the owner becomes the creator of an authentic MG motor vehicle, it allows the owner to incorporate the vehicle and all its symbolic properties into his or her sense of self (Belk 1988). It results in a sacred attachment to the motor vehicle and what the vehicle now symbolises.

This element of incorporating products into one's extended self is visible in other brand communities, where by community members create, or alter products in use; examples include Nutella recipes (Cova and Pace 2006), and Warhammer figures (Cova *et al.* 2007b). It is important to note the variety of consumer-product relationships (Schau *et al.* 2009): experience based, lifestyle based, or ideology based. Categories of product distinction, and type of consumption is touched upon in Cova and Pace (2006) but warrants further attention with regard to its impact on brand community relational and behavioural dynamics. This study focuses on not a product *per se*, but a branded activity, thus it provides fresh insight into the constellation of relationships and rituals and traditions that may emerge within a brand community context. Thus, contributing to our understanding of the relationship between activity, brand, and linking value within marketplace cultures.

Shared veneration of branded products supplies meaning to the community; it allows consciousness of kind, and the rituals and traditions associated with product use to emerge (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Leigh *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The consumer-product relationship may not be the knit relational factor in band communities but it has a distinctive bearing on the transfer of symbolic meaning from the products in use to the community and its members (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Leigh *et al.* 2006).

### 2.7.2 Customer-Marketer Relationships

Customer-corporate relationships within the brand community setting can be positive, and free from significant tensions, often to the extent that the community respects corporate figures as celebrity-like, or even as mythical God-like figures (Fournier *et al.* 2001, Belk and Tumbat 2005). Other corporate relationships may be deemed as negative, or confrontational, whereby the brand community can be seen as 'pirates' by the corporation (Cova *et al.* 2007a), and/or the corporation seen by the community as overly economically driven and out of touch with community practices (Muniz and Schau 2005) to the point that the community may feel taken advantage of (Cova and White 2010). Corporate-consumer relationships may also be non-existent/dormant (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Davidson *et al.* 2007), and only begin to emerge as the community reifies. In this case the communication process tends to be driven by the community (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

However, relationships developed between customer and corporation can be initiated by marketers' willingness to achieve corporate goals, such as co-creation of value (Schau *et al.* 2009, Cova and Dalli 2009), in which the brand community/consumers collaborate with the corporation to create/design products (Cova and Dalli 2009, Fuller *et al.* 2008, Cova and White 2010). Corporations that have successfully managed to incorporate the brand community into their marketing strategy include Harley-Davidson (Fournier *et al.* 2001), Jeep (McAlexander *et al.* 2002), Ducati (Mandelli 2004), Nutella (Cova and Pace 2006) and Audi (Fuller *et al.* 2008). However, brand communities often (indirectly) oppose the direction in which brand management are taking the brand and feel that they, and not the management, should be directing the brand evolution (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Firms that even simplistically involve brand communities in aspects of their marketing strategy will increase the likelihood of successful brand updates or retro products (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Fuller *et al.* 2008, Ramaswamy 2008).

Developing a favourable relationship with communities of consumers will generate a number of various other associated commercial benefits (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Mandelli 2004). Brand communities are increasingly interacting with the market in an entrepreneurial manner (Cova *et al.* 2007a, Goulding and Saren 2007, Cova and White 2010) and hence, may expect increased facilitation/reciprocation from the corporation (Cova and White 2010). Cova *et al.* (2007a) highlight the importance of the corporation being viewed as an authentic member of the community, in which the corporation *truly* appreciates the values, and meanings, that the brand holds for the community.

Developing a symbiotic relationship with a brand community can reap the associated commercial benefits, of having said relationship. However, this can only be appropriated providing the community is willing to interact with the corporation. Brand communities typically emerge, and continue exist, without the need of a formal relationship with the company that legally owns the brand, and hence, why it can be difficult for corporations to understand how to approach, establish, and maintain a relationship with consumption communities (Cova and Cova 2002, Fournier and Lee 2009, Cova and White 2010, Canniford 2011). This study investigates consumer participation within a brand community context; it introduces the 'brand-orientated play-community' concept in which community members' motivation is firstly to play, and secondly to play with the specific brand. Thus, suggesting corporate-community relationships to be specifically based on the facilitation of communal play. Tensions in this relationship may emerge as a result of a contestation as to what is deemed to be acceptable forms of playing.

### **2.7.3 Customer-Brand Relationships**

Modernity is inescapably linked to market capitalism and its dazzling icon – the brand. The introduction of mass consumer goods, brought with it anthropomorphized brands, which were intended to replace the strong personal relationships previously forged with traditional local retailers



(Fournier 1998, Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2009). Marketing decisions have collectively shaped the personalities of brands over time, which has enabled the link between commercial action and consumer response. Consumers show little difficulty in thinking about brands as if they were human characters (Fournier 1998) and readily accept marketers' attempts to humanise brands. Consumers assign personal animations to brands, which suggest a willingness to entertain brands as vital members of a relationship dyad (Fournier 1998) and in an increasing manner a relational triad (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

People require elements to live a social life, currently these elements are branded things bought and sold in the marketplace (Muniz and Schau 2005). 'Virtually everything is branded in consumer society, including water (Evian) and dirt (Miracle Grow)' (Muniz and Schau 2005, Klein 2000). Consumers' sophisticated understanding of marketing and brands has evolved to the point where consumers incorporate brands in to their lives in order to give additional meaning to their lives (Bengtsson and Firat 2006, Fournier 1998, Cova *et al.* 2007(a)). It is widely acknowledged that brands are not just a means by which one competitor differentiates from another (Bengtsson and Firat 2006); brands are cultural signs that supply people with individual and collective identities (Belk 1988, Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Holt 2002). However, we rarely, if ever, consider the oppression and restrictions that may ensue from the ubiquitous branded culture. This study introduces the notion of the 'branded carnival' in which consumers temporarily, evade the commercial oppression of the brand.

Brand communities often display sentiments towards their admired brand characterised by terms to describe social relationships, such as love (Cova *et al.* 2007a), and passion (Matzler *et al.* 2007). Bengtsson (2003) argues that love for inanimate objects, such as brands, can be at most similar to interpersonal love, as it is inherently less complex. Consumers aim to make

their lives less complex (Baurillard 1998); and this form of emotional connection can aid the consumers decision making process (Sierra, Taute, and Heiser 2012). Brand love can enhance consumers' lives and should be considered a legitimate form of love of some sort.

Brand community members' love for their admired brand can result in a variety of commercial behaviours including; brand evangelism (Belk and Tumbat 2005), oppositional brand loyalty to competing brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), extreme loyalty (McAlexander *et al.* 2002), the purchases of branded products (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Mandelli 2004), product innovation (Fuller *et al.* 2008), and customer created advertisements (Muniz and Schau 2007). The consumer-brand relationship is an integral foundation to brand community formation, reification, and survival. Without a positive brand-consumer relationship characterised by passion, the brand community could not have emerged. Above all, the brand is the foundational tie that binds brand communities, firstly, through the individual consumer-brand relationship and secondly, through the community-brand relationship, in which the brand is understood as the tribal totem. Thus, branded goods have the power to produce meaningful social links in a variety of consumption contexts (Cova 1997).

#### **2.7.4 Customer-Customer Relationships**

Consumers value all the relational benefits of being a brand community member (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). However, the relationships consumers developed with other like-minded consumers appear to be the dominant attraction (Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002). It has been suggested that it is the sense of communion experienced that attracts postmodern persons into neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996, Cova 1997). Consumers within brand communities feel a sense of 'sort of knowing each other' by virtue of consciousness of kind, regardless of the nature of communication (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) (as explained in section 2.5.1).

Members' relationships within brand communities cover a broad spectrum, ranging from virtual relationships via communication on brand-orientated Web pages (Mandelli 2004, Sicilia and Palazon 2008, Cova and Pace 2006) to the creation of social friendships (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Cova *et al.* 2007b, Martin *et al.* 2006). The majority of relationships between customers in brand communities can be categorised between the poles of virtual isolation and social friendships; whereby customers can consider other community members as friends but generally enact friendships only within the realm of community practices (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007). Cova *et al.* (2007b), found that within the Warhammer brand community members frequently mentioned the notion of friendship with other members. However, these relationships can be 'superficial and fragile' as they are centred on community goals and functionality (Muniz and Schau 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006, Martin *et al.* 2006) and exist solely due to an initial mutual connection to a brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002).

Socialisation within brand communities typically focuses on brand related topics/activities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). While brand communities extol liberatory and playful behaviours (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), brand community members also monitor each other, either socially via legitimization rituals, or virtually via strictly monitoring on brand-orientated forums (Schau and Muniz 2007). Positive relational foundations remain but community members exert pressures and judgement on members that fail to respect community norms (Algeisheimer *et al.* 2006). This element of community temperance and respect is particularly evident in the Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers brand community. Members monitor the forum for postings displaying overly explicit content, which results in established members chastising culprits for the 'good' of the community (Schau and Muniz 2007). This should not be viewed as an anti-relational element but rather as a process of strengthening core community bonds. Consumer-to-consumer relationships establish the ethos of the community, which can be understood as a form of utopia, set aside from mundane day-to-day life (Kozinets 2001,

2002b). The 'brand-orientated play-community', introduced in this study, shares a large number of characteristics with traditional brand communities discussed in the literature (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova et al. 2007a), thus, further consideration of the specific characteristics and consumer intentions to engage in communal consumption will be now be elaborated upon further.

## **2.8 Brand Community Membership: Benefits to Consumers**

In a recent study Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) examine, specifically using the McAlexander *et al.* (2002) customer-centric model of brand community, why consumers are in brand communities. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) suggests that a brand community cannot be treated as a single homogenous group, in regard to the motivations of members to participate. Individual members may be involved in the brand community for varied reasons. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) concur with McAlexander *et al.* (2002) and show that the specific relationships of the customer-centric model of brand community are clear attractions.

Their study suggest that consumers can be involved in a brand community due to an interest in one of, a combination of, or all of the relationships discussed in the customer-centric model of brand community. McAlexander *et al.* (2002) integrate the relationship between the corporation and the so-called focal customers into their model and while this is a useful construct, it is important to note that intra-customer relationships appear to be the most important relational attraction for consumers (Cova 1997, Maffesoli 1996, Cova and Cova 2002), as brand communities reify without any formal relationship with the corporation (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). However, corporate facilitation and involvement can accentuate the various attractions associated with brand community membership (Fournier *et al.* 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002). Brand communities are built upon the social interactions between members: consumer-brand-consumer interactions give rise to a number of experiential, personal, relational, and functional benefits.

Benefits of consumer participation in brand communities include; an opportunity to maintain and establish a sense of individual and collective identity (Leigh *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010); a sense of religiosity (Muniz and Schau 2005, Belk and Tumbat 2005, Schau and Muniz 2007); consumer empowerment (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Pace 2006, Cova *et al.* 2007a); and brand guidance (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Muniz and Schau 2005). The numerous benefits associated with brand community membership will now be discussed.

### **2.8.1 Individual and Collective Identity**

Consumers use brands to construct self-identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). This bears important implications for brand managers – brands are not treated as mere objects, but are respected beyond their functionality (Fournier 1998, Muniz and Schau 2005). Brands are meaningful to consumers, not because they are strategically managed by companies, but because consumers incorporate brands into their lives (Bengtsson and Firat 2006). It is central to postmodernism that consumers make consumption choices on symbolic meanings. Consumers use the symbolic properties of brands to construct, maintain, and express identity (Hanlon 2006). Through the brands we use we construct a narrative to give sense and meaning to our lives (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998).

Eccallas and Bettman (2005) suggest that publicly consumed, underdog brands convey greater symbolic meaning, such as the championing of adversity, and winning against all odds (Holt and Thompson 2004). Consumers perceive such aspects of symbolic brand values as more authentic, and hence the marketers voice has a more authentic tone (Leigh *et al.* 2006). Consumers may view niche brands as less commercially profane, and hence, are willing to construct an authentic identity using the perceived de-commodified brand as a foundation.

Brand communities can offer an authentic sense of self, based on social consumption rituals. Individuals can turn to 'radical' means, such as involvement in consumption communities, to facilitate self-creation and realisation (Leigh *et al.* 2006). For example, within the Harley Davidson brand community, women riders use the Harley Davidson brand to construct a sense of identity associated with freedom, overcoming challenges, mastery, risk taking, and as a marker of their independent femininity (Martin *et al.* 2006).

Within certain brand communities, and subcultures of consumption, the collective image serves as community knit, for example the "outlaw" image of the new bikers (Schouten and Mc Alexander 1995), or what Thompson and Troester (2002) term a "New Age" image in the natural health microculture, serve to unite consumers in their preferences towards niche consumption practices. This construction of a collective identity can serve as a refuge for 'misunderstood' consumers. In the Star Trek fan community, members are stigmatized by the mainstream due to their extreme fan behaviour. The Star Trek fans find solace in their utopian shelter via their constructed collective identity (Kozinets 2001). The strong sense of collective identity found within the "Straight Edge" community has lead to stronger positive personal commitments, increased loyalty to the community, and an essential support system (Haenfler 2004).

Within brand communities the collective identity, or sense of "we-ness" produced appears to be an essential foundation for communal longevity (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The practices of oppositional brand loyalty in brand communities serve to distinguish those who are in the brand community from those who are not, thus it aids the establishment of a collective identity. As discussed previously, this usually involves coining community members in relation to the brand in an affectionate and deliberate manner (e.g 'Saabers', and 'Ducatiisti'), in order to construct, maintain, and communicate their sense of collective identity.

Carlson *et al.* (2007) highlight the psychological sense of brand community, which they define as *“an unbound group of admirers, who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, in the absence of social interaction”*. Even though there is no social interaction, this element of psychological brand community allows consumers to construct a sense of individual identity built upon the psychological, or perceived, collective identity (Carlson *et al.* 2007).

*“Community by implication should be perceived as entities consisting of people who consider themselves as being part of the same history or destiny whether they are interacting with each other or not”* (Brunt 2001, pp. 82-83).

Within brand communities members' sense of self-identity is constructed with the aid of the symbolic properties of the brand in question. Members experience a deep connection with other members due to being a part of the same destiny – they are similar to each other because of the brand they use (Schouten *et al.* 2007a, Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). Consumers are searching for new methods of expression and identity construction (Cova *et al.* 2007a). The formal identity associations consumers previously held, such as one's social class, religion, or occupation, are being replaced by the brands they consume:

*“...consumers are consumers primarily in that they take commercial identities as important aspects of themselves and their collectives, that they use these identities to relate to themselves, to other people, and to the world around them through lenses that incorporate a vast range of commercial and commercially produced pursuits, objectives and definitions of the self.”* (Cova *et al.* 2007a, p.4)

### **2.8.2 Religiosity**

Religion is one of humanity's most enduring creations and is fundamental to human existence (Muniz and Schau 2005). There has never been a society in

which material objects did not possess meaning beyond the utilitarian and functional (Muniz and Schau 2005). Religious infused narratives help us make sense of the complex world, the things and people in our lives, which include marketplace resources. Cultural critics have concerned themselves with the death of enchanting experiences and feel that market capitalism stimulated the disenchantment of the world (Schau and Muniz 2007). Muniz and Schau (2005) state the brand is a critical element in the relationship between religion and modernity: modernity forces the religious and the magical to emerge in different contexts and these contexts offer consumers an opportunity to experience enchantment (Schau and Muniz 2007).

Brand communities offer a social identity and communal bonds similar to those created by formal religion but in a more light hearted, self-expressive manner (Cova 1997). Religiosity has been found as an important theme embedded in the Newton (Muniz and Schau 2005); Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers (Schau and Muniz 2007); Apple Macintosh (Belk and Thubmat 2005); Saab (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001); Star Trek (Kozinets 2001); Star Wars (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003); Xena Warrior Princess (Schau and Muniz 2004); Harley-Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1997); X-Files (Kozinets 1997); and Beamish (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011) brand communities. The brand communities listed above are typically either small share, marginal brands, or largely stigmatised, which suggests that these factors may be necessary for the mythical, the religious, and the occult to emerge in marketplace contexts.

Brand communities offer remedies to stigmatization in the form of enclave withdrawal, concealment, spiritualism, nostalgia, and creative production (Henry and Cadwell 2006). These remedies for stigmatization offer a close association to the characteristics of formal religion and can explain consumers' motivations to participate in brand communities. Brand communities and various cult brands (Ragas and Bueno 2002) have emerged simultaneously to the secularization of organised religion (Belk and Tumbat 2005). Belk *et al.* (1989) highlight the religious and sacred aspect of consumer



consumption behaviour. These sacred sentiments and veneration can be experienced at both an individual and collective level. Within brand communities people, places, and tangible things, are regularly accepted and respected as sacred (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001, Belk and Tumbat 2005, Schouten *et al.* 2007b, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

Complex sacralisation rituals employed by brand communities are an effort to maintain sacred associations with unique and personally meaningful experiences (Muniz and Schau 2005, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The mystical and occult associated with religion are important unifying factors for members of brand communities (Belk and Tumbat 2005, Schau and Muniz 2007, Muniz and Schau 2005, Schouten *et al.* 2007b, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Brand communities are simply applying, in a contemporary context, pervasive accessible leitmotifs and cultural scripts, primarily those of the magical, mythic, and religious, traditionally experienced in structured formal religions (Muniz and Schau 2007). Consumers are offered a sanctuary from the transactional nature of the marketplace and granted an opportunity to become re-enchanted with the world, such the magico-religious overtones associated with the ritualistic practices of brand communities (Kozinets 2001, Sherry *et al.* 2007). Brand community participation constitutes a spiritual and religious supplement to consumers' (overly) commercially orientated lives. The significance of these feelings of religiosity lies in the way in which they underpin consumer willingness to support each other in all aspects of brand-related practice. Hence, many of the benefits of brand community membership, such as product support, arguably stem directly from religiosity (Muniz and Schau 2005).

### **2.8.3 Assistance in Brand and Product Use**

Brand community membership also offers more practical, functional benefits. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) state that a clear benefit of participating in a brand community is the opportunity to receive vast quantities of information regarding aspects of the admired brand/product. The shared brand

information generally consists of methods of using, best practice in using, and other specific brand/product information, which is typically of greater value to community members than marketer relayed information. Brand communities relay information in a more effective and guided manner than that of the brand management (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006). Brand community members have a more intuitive understanding of what brand information is important to committed consumers, and recognise that mass information distributed by brand management can be vague and misdirected.

The sharing of information within the community can serve to maintain the communal hierarchy, as valuable information/knowledge relayed can be used as a source of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), earning worthy members 'guru' status (Leigh *et al.* 2006). Members that are more important to community survival, via information sharing, hold a position further up the hierarchy (Leigh *et al.* 2006, Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001).

The donated and embraced information within the Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001), Jeep (McAlexander *et al.* 2002), and the MG car (Leigh *et al.* 2006) brand communities enhances consumers' relationships with their beloved products and also fellow members. Information shared in these communities revolves around servicing, restoring, and where/how to use their products in order to fully appreciate the meaning of the product/brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). Typically, information sharing is more prominent in brand communities founded on high involvement products but glimpses of the process can be found in the Nutella (convenience product) brand community (Cova and Pace 2006). However, what is remarkable about this form of information circulation is that it increases the linking value of the Nutella brand: it is practiced out of passion, not necessity.

The Apple Newton brand community, however, relays information out of necessity (Muniz and Schau 2005). The product's survival and compatibility with advances in technology is dependent on the information shared and relayed by the community. Apple abandoned the Newton product in February 1998 and over ten years since its exit from the market, Newton enthusiasts are still maintaining and updating their Newtons via the highly technical information relayed by community members. Apple long wish to forget about this product, which had numerous faults and flaws, but cannot due to the immense cult popularity of the product.

The loyal consumers of the forsaken Apple Newton brand have taken charge of the brand-sustaining process and by doing so, consumers feel they are challenging the 'branding mill' (Holt 2002) and hence, insist they have an obligation to innovate the brand further (Muniz and Schau 2005). This process often leads to complex software development, and consumer generated advertisements (Muniz and Schau 2007). Consumers are beginning to take action by talking back to the market via their actions (Klein 2000); this could not be possible without communities of consumers sharing valuable directed information globally (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). Sharing information, and assistance in the use of the brand, serves to give members a deeper, more meaningful relationship with the product (Muniz and Schau 2005), the brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002), and also with other members (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Cova and Pace 2006).

#### **2.8.4 Consumer Empowerment**

The collective nature of brand communities, and the speed and scope at which information can be shared via community outlets on the Internet, implies that brand communities represent a form of consumer agency (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova *et al.* 2007a).

*"The existence of groups of united consumers 'implies that power is shifting away from marketers and flowing to consumers,' as consumers saying "no" to*

*forms of marketing they find invasive or unethical' (Kozinets 1999, in Cova et al. 2007, p.19)*

The Internet has enabled communities of consumers to proliferate online in unprecedented numbers (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006, Sicilia and Palazon 2008, Cova *et al.* 2007a). Consumers are beginning to challenge corporate power and the unbalances they are faced with in the market (Holt 2002, Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006, Klein 2000, Wipperfurth 2005). Consumer collectives are beginning to take an oppositional stance to the market and to those dominant brands within it. These communities of consumers believe that marketing should not be *'passively accepted as a one-way information flow'* (Klein 2000). Advertiser's messages are actively being disrupted with new slogans laid over original images in an attempt to relay back to the corporate world consumer culture's disapproval of the aggressive marketing tactics used by corporations (Kozinets 2001). Consumers are rallying in an attempt to display their power and sovereignty; displaying how much power they can assert and continuing to disrupt powerful corporation's commercial goals (Klein 2000, Thompson *et al.* 2006, Cova *et al.* 2007a). Consumer consumption collectives, such as brand communities can escalate a brand to the heights of 'cool' and popular – but they also have the power to damage thriving brands (Cova *et al.* 2007a, Canniford 2011).

However, while some forms of consumer agency are in direct resistance, such as consumer activism, and the emergence of anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006), which oppose rather than admire a particular brand, other forms of consumer agency do not display active resistance. Rather, consumers are 'playing' with the brand and appropriate meanings attached to the brand (Cova and Pace 2006, Kozinets 2007). While consumer actions may not be in direct opposition, degrees of passive resistance and appropriation can be equally as damaging and containing to a brand, which is attempting to evolve in a particular direction (Canniford 2011, Cova and Pace

2006, Wipperfurth 2005). As Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford (2006) suggest 'empowered consumers have become problem consumers'.

Brand community marketing involves a certain degree of give-and-take – a shifting of power, from the marketer to the consumer: it requires marketers to embrace a loss of control of the brand (Fournier and Lee 2009). However, brand management appear reluctant to easily permit such trading of power, and hence, consumers appear to be taking it by themselves (Kozinets *et al.* 2008, Muniz and Schau 2007).

Membership of a brand community thus allows for a number of consumer benefits to be realised, specifically increased power/control of their commercial environment. It suggests 'liberation from the top-down conceptions of a dominating marketplace' (Shankar *et al.* 2006). The power system of the market traditionally pitches consumers and marketers in opposition (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). However, brand community marketing implies a move to a more equal distribution of power, as corporations can simultaneously realise many commercial/economic benefits from supporting a brand community marketing (Canniford 2011, Fournier and Lee 2009, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, 2003).

Having discussed the specific benefits consumers realise from participation in brand communities, the author believes it is necessary to re-think the consumption community concept – to introduce a fresh lens for conceptualising consumption communities, as many of the relationships developed, and benefits realised, have associations with theories of play (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962). Canniford's (2011) typology of consumption community will now be used as a foundation to identify the flows and connections between the playful behaviour of subcultures of consumption, brand community, and consumer tribes. In essence, the author suggests that a re-evaluation of the original conceptual underpinning of these community forms is necessary.

## 2.9 Rethinking Consumption Communities

Canniford (2011) introduces a consumption community typology, consisting of subcultures of consumption, brand community, and consumer tribes. While this paper makes a valuable contribution to the potential management of marketplace cultures, and provides building blocks, so to speak, for our understanding of these various community forms, a blurred separation and linear division of marketing's unpredictable communal environment (Cova *et al.* 2007, Fournier and Lee 2009, Canniford 2011) does little to extend our understanding as to what is foundational to these community forms. In our attempts at understanding consumption communities, researchers and academics are counselled and advocated to employ 'creative' methodologies (Schroeder 2002, Belk and Kozinets 2005, O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013) that encapsulate the complex, nuanced, cultural system's of these community forms in order to garnish fresh insight into consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Thus, constructing and representing consumption communities in a 'square' delineated structure obstructs creativity and limits the development of our conceptual understanding as to what is at the 'heart' of these community forms – thus, potentially suppressing other alternative conceptual foundations. Canniford's (2011) typology will now be critiqued.

Table 1. A Typology of Consumption Community (Canniford 2011)

<b>Feature/Form</b>	<b>Subculture of consumption</b>	<b>Brand community</b>	<b>Consumer tribe</b>
<b>Locus</b>	Activity	Brand	Linking Value
<b>Power structure</b>	Hierarchy of core members	Hierarchy of core members & brand managers	Diffuse, democratic, hybrid network
<b>Purpose</b>	Sociality, response to alienation	Brand use, sociality	Sociality, passion

<b>Time span</b>	Long-term	Long-term	Transient
<b>Structure</b>	Slow to change	Slow to change	Fluid, fast-moving
<b>Social position</b>	Marginalised	Mainstreamed	Mobile

Canniford (2011) himself suggests that it is not always useful to observe these community forms as distinct categories, and that there appears to be certain over-laps between the core concepts. For instance, take for example the Warhammer tribe (Cova *et al.* 2007b), which is discussed as a brand community, the locus of this community is not neatly attributed into any of the community forms discussed above, as it displays as its locus, an activity (imaginary battle), a brand (Warhammer figurines), and linking value (fellow 'gamers' are discussed as 'friends'). A similar example, in which the locus of the community is difficult to clearly observe is that of the MG subculture of consumption (Leigh *et al.* 2006), ironically, the authors in question, when discussing the MG community move back and forth between using the term subculture of consumption and brand community throughout, this suggests that the MG marketplace culture fails to fit neatly into a categorical 'box'.

With regard to the social position feature discussed, these community forms are not so neatly categorised, for instance many brand communities discussed have developed around 'underdog and marginalised brands' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Leigh *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), while also many have formed around more mainstream, dominant brands such as Coca-Cola (Silcia and Palzon 2005/8), Red-Bull (Canniford 2011), and Nutella (Cova and Pace 2006). Thus, such a clear distinction of marginalised/mainstream social position has limited value.

Also let's examine the purpose feature of these communities. This is where Canniford's typology begins to provide some insight, and provide a foundation as to why the buttress of the consumption community concept should be re-focused. Canniford (2011) discusses sociality as a common denominator to

the three community forms. The conceptualisation of marketplace cultures is rooted in Maffesoli's discussion on neo-tribalism (as discussed in section 2.3). To briefly reiterate, Maffesoli (1996) suggests that neo-tribes are dependent upon ritual and only survive due to the power of attraction of ritual. Turner (1979) suggests that sociality within cultures is dependent upon ritual, performance, and spectacle. However, many academics (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962, Turner 1983, Garvey 1990, Sutton-Smith 1997, Elias and Dunning 1986, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011) discuss ritual, performance, and spectacle as symptoms of play – these behaviours stem from our deep-rooted need to play (Huizinga 1955, Giddens 1964, Fink 1968).

While Canniford (2011) suggests, borrowing from the Latin view of marketing (Cova and Cova 2002), that sociality is foundational to these community forms, could it be that another function is foundational to these community forms? While, it may be the case that some Latin based consumption communities are founded upon sociality, other communities situated in the USA or elsewhere in Europe may display differing desires as foundational, a desire to engage in forms of play for instance. The Harley-Davidson subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the Beamish brand community (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011) and the 'Festish' community (Langer 2007) can be understood as play-communities in which activities of the community are resources to engage in contemporary play. That these community forms could be contemporary play-communities, not primarily based on sociality alone, but on the desire to play.

Consumer culture theorists have discussed the playful nature of consumption communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Fournier *et al.* 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Thompson and Holt 2004, Cova *et al.* 2007, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Canniford 2011) but have failed to examine in a scientific manner the relationship between theories of play and consumption communities. The clear overlapping and blending of the typology features Canniford (2011) discusses can be explained by these communities' capricious and playful



nature (Cova *et al.* 2007). Thus, rather than sociality being understood as a sole common denominator, the desire for play could be conceptualised as a fundamental of these community forms.

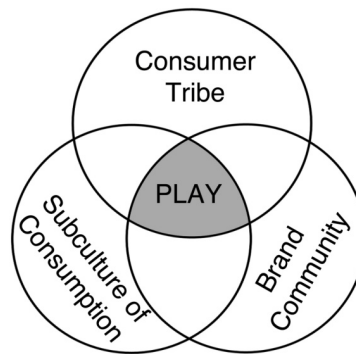


Figure 3. Commonality of Consumption Community

Thus, ‘Posse rides’ (Fournier *et al.* 2001), ‘Jeep Jamborees’ (McAlexander *et al.* 2002) and ‘Beamish Tours’ (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011) can be conceptualised as liminoid (Turner 1979, 1982) consumption focused ‘play-grounds’ (Huizinga 1950), in which, participation, or ‘playing’, can be understood as temporary subversion from day-to-day life which extols work, and thus, not play ((Turner 1982, Kavanagh 2012). Theories of play are grossly underexplored in relation to management, business, and economics studies (Kavanagh 2012), thus an investigation is timely. In essence, this author, in order to garner fresh insight into contemporary consumption, will use play as a theoretical lens to examine a hyper-masculine marketplace culture, which displays most clearly the characteristics of a brand community. Given this study’s explicit interest in play, the play literature, with a focus on the modernist theories of play (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962, 2001, Turner 1979, 1982), will now be discussed in detail.

## 2.10 Play: An Introduction

What is play? Play is understood as something universal, yet it is not universally defined, such its complexity (Reed 2005). Kavanagh *et al.* (2011) suggest that play is eschatological, in that it belongs to the part of

philosophy/theology that deals with the ends, limits, and extremes of the human condition. Grayson (1999) suggests that it is the perpetuating complexity of play, which makes it irresistible to researchers. Psychologist and educationalists have displayed considerable interest in play as a type of behaviour inherent to children (Piaget 1962), however, the social sciences have taken much less notice of forms of adult play (Giddens 1964, Kavanagh 2012, Belk 2001). This study provides an overdue insight into the nature of the adult play-ground in contemporary culture and its relationship with consumption i.e. the manifestation of the consumption community phenomenon.

Play has been a particularly recalcitrant notion (Garvey 1990, Burke 1971), in the sense that various speculations of the nature of play have been discussed (Groos 1898, Huizinga 1950, Caillois 1962, Piaget 1972, Sutton-Smith 2001), but at their core is a complimentary treatment in the literature. To paraphrase Motte (1995) 'play winds through our culture with astonishing ubiquity', this has led to essentialist claims, which postulate play as an *essential* human activity. Huizinga (1955) goes so far as to suggest that *homo ludens*, 'playing-man', describes the essential nature of people better than *homo sapiens*, 'wise man'. Fink (1968) states that:

*"Play is an essential element of man's ontological makeup, a basic existential phenomenon – not the only such phenomenon, to be sure, but still a clearly identifiable and autonomous one that cannot be explained as deriving from other existential phenomenon."*

Beyond play being essential to human life, the diverse forms of play and the myriad approaches taken to its study has led to a proliferation of ideas concerning the causes of play and the functions it may serve (Giddens 1964). Caillois (1962) suggests that language barriers add much confusion to our difficulty in understanding play and the many play forms. For example, when using the English language we speak of play and games, both have distinct

connotations, however, if the French language, such a linguistic distinction does not exist. The French word *jeu* can mean play or game. This problem is extended further when Chinese, Greek, Arabic, and various other tribal languages are incorporated into the study of play. This semantic problem pervades the literature on play (Garvey 1990), however, despite a number of complexities and inconsistencies, there are certain characteristics of play, which are widely accepted as being critical to its definition (Garvey 1990). A general conception of play will now be discussed, and a definition offered to the reader.

## 2.11 The Characteristics of Play

In discussing contemporary models of play, it is deemed appropriate to use the work of Johan Huizinga, the touchstone modernist play theorist, as a foundation when introducing the characteristics of play. In his masterly work, *Homo Ludens: A Study of The Play-Element in Culture*, first published in 1938, he discusses from the outset the significance of human play:

*“Play is more than a mere physiological phenomena... It is a significant function – there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imports meaning to the action... all play means something.” (Huizinga, 1950, p.1)*

From an early beginning in *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga begins introducing what he believes to be the main characteristics of play (p.8-13). Huizinga (1955) believes play to be a free activity, and that it opposes ‘real life’ that it is ‘extraordinary’. He then asserts play occurs in a separate time and space – ‘the ‘play-ground’, in which order prevails. Play needs order, or as Huizinga asserts ‘play is order’ and order brings with it a ‘limited perfection’. Huizinga also states that play induces an element of tension; such is its uncertain nature (Caillois 1962). A defining characteristic of Huizinga’s conceptualisation of play is that it fosters community, that a temporary play-community may become permanent post initial play. The seven

characteristics of play Huizinga (1955) discusses will now be examined in more detail.

### **2.11.1 Play is Voluntary**

Play is understood as a *free* activity: it is a voluntary activity, in which engagement is not forced or demanded (Caillois 1962). It is not an obligatory commitment, it is freely chosen by the player (Garvey 1990). The pleasure and the fascination with play are credited to the spontaneous, capricious, and unconscious involvement it invokes (Kalliala 2006). This highlights the strong relationship between play and pleasure: we desire pleasure and often it is accompanied with a variety of play forms (Caillois 1962, Belk 2001, Goulding *et al.* 2009).

For Huizinga (1955), play is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty'. Caillois (1962) suggests that even the sense of duty involved in a boxing match renders the boxer a worker and not a player due to the possibility of wealth attached: that is no longer free will, it is not without moral obligation (Turner 1982). The boxer has devoted himself to play without free will, and hence is no longer playing. Play is intended as an escape from the obligatory responsibility and routine attached to our lives (Elias and Dunning 1986, Turner 1979, 1982). In essence, play is understood as being the opposite of work (Kavanagh 2012, Giddens 1964), as one must work (Burke 1971). (The play/work dichotomy will be discussed further in section 2.16).

### **2.11.2 Play is 'Extra-Ordinary'**

Sutton-Smith (2001, p.202) cites Huizinga to argue that "play is a most fundamental human function and has permeated all human cultures from the beginning" (2001, p. 202). For Huizinga (1955, p.25):

*"The apparently quite simple question of what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts".*

This suggests that play is complex in nature, and far from being trivial in purpose, instead has to do with religion and the sacred. Turner (1979, 1982) discusses various liminal forms of tribal play in which actors assert direct connection with the sacred and magical. Various liminal play rituals have at their foundation simulation and costume (Caillois 1962). Players may dawn tribal mask, or costume, which either mimic Godly figures or induce a time of sacred association. In contemporary society the tribal mask, has been replaced by identities related to consumption activities (Belk and Costa 1998, Kozinets 2001, Cova and Cova 2002).

*“We find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action different from ‘ordinary’ life.” (Huizinga 1955, p.8)*

For Huizinga (1955), because play is in direct association with seriousness it creates a sphere of action, in which the ordinary is no longer present. Play in a sense is ‘extra-ordinary’: the limits of seriousness and the ordinary do not constrict human action during play (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011, Turner 1982). However extra-ordinary or sacred these play-spheres may appear, they are understood to be temporary. Turner (1982) asserts that play actors are in a realm in which reality and the ordinary structure of society is temporarily suspended, that actors are in a betwixt-and-between sacred sphere (further attention is given to the importance of Turner’s conceptualisation in section 2.15). The temporary nature of play ensures behaviours that are normally discouraged or forbidden during ordinary time can be enacted with zeal. Kavanagh *et al.* (2011) and Caillois (1962) discuss games, such as Poker, in which lying or ‘cheating’ may be acceptable within the realm opposing ‘ordinary’ time, as such it is ‘extra-ordinary’ (Huizinga 1955).

### **2.11.3 Play is Uncertain**

Having a predictable and pre-distinguished outcome, without any potential surprises, is against the very nature of play (Caillois 1962, Kalliala 2006).

Caillois (1962) exclaims that in play – doubt must remain until the end. Thus, as Huizinga (1955) suggests, play has a certain *tension* accompanying it, an uncertainty. Mimicry and role-play are essential to play, there is a freedom granted to an individual player to construct an impromptu, uncertain narrative. This is especially true for child's play (Piaget 1962) in which the imagination is free to test the boundaries of creativity. While Kavanagh *et al.* (2011) suggest that play allows for the free play of possible identities and realities, as being inherently positive, this uncertain nature can also be a potentially dangerous and deviant: parents are often seen to intervene in children's play 'before someone gets hurt'. Caillois (1962) also asserts that if play was certain, modern day sporting competitions could not function, there would be a lack of tension, excitement, and thus, would not be true play.

#### **2.11.4 Play is Unproductive**

Play is *disinterested*: it occurs in an interlude from the pursuit of satisfaction and wants (Huizinga 1955, Motte 1995). Giddens (1964) cites Schiller (1875) to suggest that play can be understood as the 'aimless expenditure of exuberant energy', that it has no productivity benefits other than 'blowing off steam'. In a similar manner, Caillois (1962) suggests that play is unproductive, in the sense that it does not bring success, property, or anything new. Caillois (1962) continues to suggest that when playing is over that the order of the world should return to the same as it were before. Caillois (1962) clarifies his point by discussing games of chance, or gambling, as play; he states that while there may be money traded from one player to another, however, there is no new wealth being created.

Play is said to have no extrinsic goals, and that its motivations are purely intrinsic (Garvey 1990). However many play theorists such as Gross (1898), Piaget (1962), Motte (1995), and Bateson (1955) link play with productive learning; creative problem solving (for example Edward DeBono's (1992) introduction of 'lateral thinking', in which he encourages one to 'play' with problem solving); individual development (Lever 1978); language learning; the

development of social roles; and a number of other cognitive and social phenomena (Reed 2005), which ultimately enhance one's relationship with the external environment (Garvey 1990). However, while play fosters and encourages learning, one must note that typically children do not play to learn, but do learn in play (Piaget 1962, Kalliala 2006).

#### **2.11.5 Play Occurs in a Defined Time and Place**

Play is *limited* by time and space. Thus, as play is separate from the immediate needs of life, it requires a delineated area dedicated to the freedom play creates. Huizinga (1955) calls this space a “play-ground” and describes the play-ground as a “consecrated spot”. He argues that the spaces set aside as play-grounds are effectively so sacred that the tennis court, for instance, is indistinguishable from the temple or the magic circle. Caillois (1962) agrees with Huizinga and suggests that play needs to be isolated from the rest of life, that it should be defined and fixed in advance. However, more spontaneous forms of extreme play such as the carnival and rites of passage (Turner 1982, Van Gennep 1960) are not distinctly physically defined or constructed. Turner (1979) discuss the situational (temporary) nature of these ‘play-grounds’, and states that they may be marked off from mundane structural desires by a physically constructed area and/or by the behavioural roles adopted by tribal members. This suggests that the ‘play-ground’ need not be solely physical, it can also be mentally constructed:

*“African rituals I have observed where sacred space may be demarcated by an improvised fence or merely by anti-clockwise circling of a tree or cleared area by ritual adepts... Often audible markers are used: bell-ringing, shouting, singing, percussion sounds. By such means sacred time is dramatically separated from secular time.” (Turner 1979)*

However, Turner (1982) suggests despite the often spontaneous nature of play, it is highly structured and ordered through ritual and cultural norms.

### 2.11.6 Play is Ordered

A positive feature of play is that it creates order (McMahon 2005, Hanlon 2006). Turner (1979, 1982), Huizinga (1955), and Caillois (1962, 2001) highlight the necessity of distinct norms within play-grounds. Thus, we understand play to be *ordered* and within the play-ground special rules must obtain, be they written or unwritten. However, one must ask: what is the purpose of these “special rules”? Huizinga (1955) argues (p.10/11) that some framework of rules is needed in order to ensure that all participants comply with what is required in order to maintain the transcendent experience:

*“Play creates order, IS order. Into an imperfect world... it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.”*

Thus, play has an elevatory character that temporarily lifts us from the mundane realities of an imperfect world. However, this elevation, or transcendence, can only be maintained if rules are present that enforce it. The rules of the game are binding and if the rules are not complied with the game is over: the whole play-world collapses. The contrast between the rules of the liminal play-ground and the ‘real world’ can be subtle, often so subtle that only those active in the play-ground may understand the nuanced nature of the rules. Garvey (1990) when discussing the complexity of activity patterns associated with ‘play fighting’, or ‘rough and tumble play’ (Reed 2005), states that:

*“The contrast may often be subtle – a fleeting grin or a quick wink may accompany an otherwise stinging verbal insult”*

Reed (2005) believes that a metacommunication occurs in the play-ground, which bridges the gap between an outward display that resembles ‘aggression’ and what is ultimately understood as a form of caring through play. This further highlights the deep-rooted complexity of play and the subtle rituals and rules attached (Turner 1982).



For Huizinga, play is nothing less than an echo of the religious rituals of archaic man, rituals, which were intended to compel the gods to reproduce the natural order of things (Turner 1979, 1982). While Huizinga does not conclude that contemporary play is a form of supplication to or worship of the gods, it is however believed to be sacred in nature (Turner 1982). This sacredness can only be realised through adherence to the rules. The rules provide the framework for a temporary world, within which all that counts are those things that count within the game. Sutton-Smith (2001, p.182) cites Gadamer (1982) to explain that:

*“...the player doesn’t play the game... it is, rather, that the game plays the player. Once you begin playing, you are taken over by the things that are serious within the game, regardless of how serious that... game is estimated to be in the eyes of the non-playing world”*

The benefit of allowing oneself to be taken over by the rules in this way is that the participant can then experience the full pleasure of play:

*“...much of the pleasure of playing lies in the fact that the game plays you; that your reactions are more often reflexive or involuntary rather than voluntary; that the game takes you out of yourself. It frees you from one self by binding you to another”*

#### **2.11.6.1 Rules and Flow**

Rules allow participants to experience ‘flow’ states (Csikszentmihalyi 1975/2000). Flow is discussed as a state of action marked by a fluid and unified sequence of events. It requires no conscious, one is in control of one’s actions yet there is a sense of oneness between the self and the external environment, a temporary timelessness marked by elation – only the ‘now’ matters during flow states (Csikszentmihalyi 1975/2000, Turner 1979, 1982). Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) discusses flow as a state commonly attained when people act with complete involvement during play. Csikszentmihalyi

(1975/2000) assigns to flow six characteristics that distinguish it from similar internal states (Turner 1979):

- Action and awareness are experienced as one
- Attention is centred on a limited stimulus field: rules are necessary limitations to focusing of attention
- Loss of ego: the 'self' is required to negotiate what should or should not be done if one has accepted the framing rules.
- In control of actions and the environment: the skills of play match the demands of playing. An imbalance in the skill/demands relationship results in either inadequacy or anxiety.
- Flow contains coherent, noncontradictory, demands for action and provides clear feedback of performance/action. Flow differs from mundane activity in the sense that it is framed by the specific rules. Thus, cheating breaks flow. One must engage in a temporary 'willing suspension of disbelief' and believe that the rules are in some way axiomatic.
- Flow is autotelic in nature. Flow is its own reward. Being immersed in something for its own sake can thus be understood in terms of there being "no ulterior end" (Holt 1995). A mutual willingness to engage in autotelic activity can provide a "common locus for people who often have few other commonalities" (Holt 1995) – in essence, a communal commitment to the rules produces flow states among multiple players, thus establishing a play-ground community.

### **2.11.7 Play Fosters Community**

*"A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. The feelings of being 'apart together', of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game." (Huizinga 1955, p. 13)*

The above quote from Huizinga, provides the platform for many concepts in the consumer culture theory literature, it relates directly to sacred consumption (Belk *et al.* 1989), transcendent customer experiences (Schouten *et al.* 2007b), and brand community genesis and reification (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). While these consumer culture theorists do make passing reference to Turner's (1982) conceptualisation of 'communitas', they fail to delve deeper into the human ontological make-up, and thus, fail to examine consumption as play, through which communitas emerges (Turner 1982).

Turner (1969) defines communitas as "an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals". Turner (1982) goes on to discuss how it differs from Gurvitch's (1941, in Turner 1982) notion of 'communion'. Turner states that communion fails to preserve individual distinctiveness, however, 'communitas' has something 'magical' about it in which the individual is realised, yet becomes totally observed into a single synchronised, fluid event. The importance lays in the 'being' together, not the 'doing' together. It is this sense of communitas experienced that allows communities to demarcate from those who are true community members and those who are not (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The collective sacredness of play-communities could not be maintained were it not for the willingness of the group to subject themselves to the mutually guiding rules (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Thus, those who do not keep the rules must therefore be ejected (Haenfler 2004) or as Huizinga suggests they may go on to form communities of their own (which may explain how rugby union emerged as a sport in its own right from the more popular sport of association football, and in relation to marketplace communities, how the Confrontation brand community emerged, from an unwillingness to conform to the Warhammer brand's rules (Cova and White 2010)).

In defining play and elaborately discussing thereafter, it appears quite easy to contradict oneself, many modern play theorists, such as Huizinga (1955),

Caillois (1962), and Ehrmann (1968) have all done so on some level (Motte 1995). However, after outlining play's formal characteristics above, play can be defined as:

*'A voluntary activity (Caillois 1962) set apart from 'ordinary life' (Huizinga 1955, Turner 1982). It is not 'serious' (Kavanagh 2012). It is an unproductive activity that does not create new material wealth (Caillois 2001). Play must occur in a clearly defined space and time, and in accordance with specific rules (Reed 2005). These characteristics enhance feelings of solidarity and thus play fosters community formation (Huizinga 1955, Turner 1979, 1982).'*

Having discussed the characteristics of play and offered a general definition, the classification of play, introduced by Roger Caillois (1962), will now be discussed in detail.

## **2.12 The Classification of Play**

Caillois (1962) accords with the majority of Huizinga's suggested characteristics of play. In fact, only one characteristic of Huizinga's conception is not adopted by Caillois: he does not accept a connection between play and the emergence of what Huizinga terms 'play-communities'. However, Caillois (1962, p.38) contradicts himself when he goes on to state that 'play is not an individual pastime... possessors of the same the same toys congregate in an accustomed or convenient place where they test their skill'. Caillois (1962) even asserts that community is often essential to the pleasure of playing, and states that it can be 'painful to play alone'. Caillois (1962) continues to critique Huizinga's work based on an omission of a description and classification of play. Thus, Caillois (1962) advances play theory by classifying play under four headings; agon (competition); alea (chance); mimicry (simulation); andilinx (vertigo). He also introduces a shared continuum in each of these categories – the poles of paidia and ludus. Paidia is a primitive (less structured) play form and ludus a sophisticated (more structured) play form. The paidia-ludus continuum will now be discussed, followed by the four classifications of play.

### 2.12.1 Paidia and Ludus

Caillois (1962) introduces paidia as ‘a kind of uncontrolled fantasy in which improvisation and carefree gaiety is dominant’. One of his more primitive examples of paidia discusses the newly teething infant that finds uncontrollable delight in a constant ‘playing’ with an emerging tooth – the infant continuously rubs his/her tongue against its gum in a game-like fashion. However, paidia has a taste for destruction. The infant who mindlessly plays with an emerging tooth eventually will develop a blister on his/her tongue as a result of the taste for paidia. Similarly, Groos (1898) discusses that there is a certain taste for destruction and a pleasure in disturbing others through unstructured play observed in the behaviour of young primates. There are no rules observed in paidia:

*‘... in every happy exuberance which effects an immediate and disordered agitation, an impulsive and easy recreation, but readily carried to excess, when impromptu and unruly character remain its essential if not unique reason for being.’ (Caillois 1962, p. 29)*

The early manifestations of paidia have no name, and there is no obvious order observed. However, ludus disciplines and enriches paidia. In ludus a ‘civilizing process’ can be observed (Elias and Dunning 1986). The industrial revolution gave birth to a special form of ludus – the hobby (or leisure time) (Giddens 1964). Hobby is a response to the highest functions of the play instinct (leisure will be discussed further in relation to adult-play in section 2.16). Ludus provides an occasion for training and normally leads to the acquisition of skill: it appears to be a makeshift device intended to combat boredom (Caillois 1962).

*“Ludus... relates to the desire to find diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually recurrent obstacles.” (Caillois 1962, p.32)*

The transition from paidia to ludus can be clearly observed in Lever’s (1978) work on the complexity of children’s games. Lever (1978) discusses the

different levels of complexity in children's games, stating how boy's games tend to develop into ludus complexity at an earlier age. For example girl's play tends to be paidia orientated, as they, to a large degree only engage in single-role play, while boy's play tends to be based on a number of actors, rules and achievements, thus displaying characteristics of ludus (Lever 1978). Caillois (1962) discusses tumult, laughter, and agitation as examples of paidia and playing forms such as solitaire, kite-flying, and crosswords as examples of ludus (see Table 2).

Ludus also inspires players with the hope of succeeding the next time they play the game. An example of such may be the hope attaining a high score on a video game (see Gordon (2007) "King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters" for an enthralling video example of ludus play behaviour). Caillois (1962) goes on to assert that ludus transforms into competition-based play, or what he terms 'agon'. For example playing with a Rubik's cube, traditionally an individual game, with the characteristics of ludus, has been transformed into face-to-face competition (agon) also. It is now deemed appropriate to introduce the relationship between play and games. Guttman (1978) illustrates the relationship between spontaneous play (paidia) and more serious forms of competitive play (ludus), which in contemporary culture are generally constructed as games and sports.

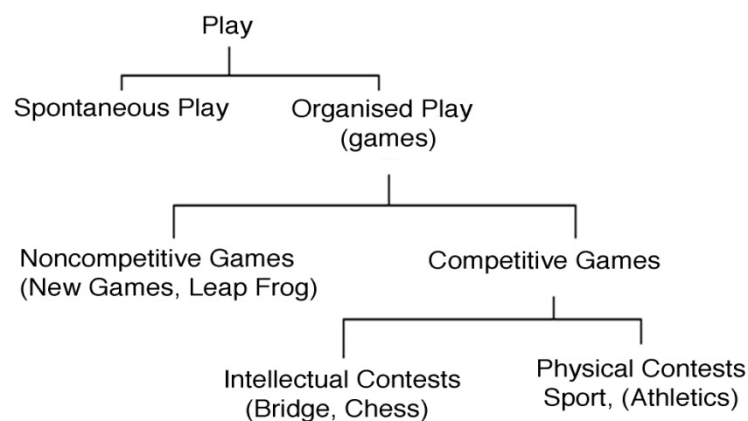


Figure 4. Guttman's (1978) Model of Play, Games, Contests, Sports

Guttmann's model too, although not explicitly, deals with the transition from paidia to ludus. Guttmann (1978) discusses play as foundational to all competitive games, be they intellectual and/or physical contests. He also shows, in a more visually stimulating way than Caillois (1962), how play can take on either paidia-like characteristics (spontaneous play) or ludus-like characteristics (organised play). It is important to observe that sports, contests, and games, have at their foundation play, however the sophistication and complexity of play observed in these play-forms differ greatly (Caillis 1962, Guttmann 1978, Lever 1978, Kalliala 2006). Having briefly discussed the nature of primitive (paidia) and sophisticated (ludus) play, the play categories of agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx, will now be discussed.

### 2.12.2 Agon (competition)



Photograph 1. Archery as an example of Agon.

Agon is the group of games that are competitive, in which equality of chance is created so that players may compete under ideal conditions. This allows value, honour, and prestige to be imposed on the winner (Caillois 1962, Huizinga 1955, Morris 2000). The victor's supremacy will be beyond dispute

(Elias and Dunning 1986, Caillois 1962, Huizinga 1955, Lever 1978). While Elias and Dunning (1986) discuss the brutal and uncivilized nature of wrestling, and boxing, in the ancient Greek Olympics, the motive for competition was supremacy, honour, and immortalization, not to cause injury or death. Agon is not to be associated with motivation to cause injury (Caillois 1962). Never does (should) any continuing pursuit or conflict occur outside of the clearly established agon play-ground.

The establishment of many institutionalised games and contests are based on specific rules that define the limits of the competition. Agon is unknown amongst animals; they have no conception or understanding of rules, or the regulation to abide by them (Caillois 1962, Groos 1978). While unregulated wrestling and children's competitions such as 'who can endure tickling the longest?' (Kalliala 2006) or 'starring at the sun the longest' (Caillois 1962) belong to the agon category they are closer to the paidia-agon pole rather than the ludus-agon pole. Thus, the most sophisticated form of agon is realised in contemporary institutionalised sports (Elias and Dunning 1986, Coakley and Pike 2006) (sport will be discussed in more detail in section 2.17.2) (see also Table 2 for more examples of agon and its relationship with the other categories of play).



### 2.12.3 Alea (chance)



Photograph 2. Roulette as an example of Alea

Unlike agon, in alea (the Latin word for 'dice') it is not he who is 'best' wins, but he who has the best luck (Caillois 1962, Kalliala 2006). For Caillois (1962, p.17) alea is the category of games:

*"...that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary."*

In essence, the winner is more favoured by the 'Gods' of chance: alea is absolute favour or total disgrace. Thus, alea clearly differs from ordinary time, in ordinary time, intelligence, skill and effort are essential, alea renders these ineffective. In direct contrast to agon, alea negates work, patience, and experience. However, it must be noted that agon, due to its uncertain outcome, attracts alea, and games such as football, basketball, and pool (billiards), frequently attract gambling and bookmaking (Polsky 1964, Kaplan 1979, Neighbors 2002). However, what is at 'play' differs for those competing (agon) and those gambling (alea).

One can use the comparison between roulette (no independent action) and archery (independent action) to establish the requirements of these games. There is no *personal responsibility* attributed to alea: it is the capriciousness of chance that constitutes the unique appeal of such games (Caillois 1962, Kaplan 1979, Neighbors 2002). However, alea and agon do share one defining law according to Caillois (1962): the creation of pure equality, denied by real world life.

It must be noted that alea appears to be more attractive to adults: alea contributes a large degree, if not the basis for the creation of adult playgrounds, such as Las Vegas (Belk 1997, 2001, Kozinets *et al.* 2004). One understanding of this is that children are more active and energetic, thus are willing to compete with personal responsibility to achieve degrees of prestige (Lever 1978), and adults, due to constraints of ageing bodies, are no longer able to compete with such capacity. Another understanding is offered by the fact that gambling is intricately connected to the market and monetary gain (Caillois 1962, Belk 2001, Kaplan 1979, Neighbors 2002), thus belonging to the adult-world. Put simply, alea is destiny not control (see Table 2 for more examples of alea based games). In either play form, be it alea or agon, one can escape the 'normal' structures of the world: rules of the real world do not apply or constrain. Another way of achieving an escape from the constraining nature of the real world is through mimicry.

#### 2.12.4 Mimicry (simulation)



Photograph 3. Theatre performance as an example of Mimicry

All play presupposes the temporary acceptance of an imaginary universe – an ‘extra-ordinary’ place and time, that is bound only by the limits of our imagination (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962). Mimicry encapsulates all the characteristics of play besides having precise rules. During mimicry players enter a second reality with its own rules. For Caillois (1962), the rule of the game is unique: it consists of the actors fascinating the spectators, while ensuring to avoid an error that may break the spell (this is termed ‘breaking the fourth wall’ in the acting industry). Mimicry ‘makes believe or makes other believe that the player is someone other than him/herself’, players put their souls into their roles and abandon their own personality (Caillois 1962, p. 20). Mimicry and travesty are complimentary acts: the pleasure lies in passing for another, not deceiving others. During the carnival players don masks, face-paint, and costumes to create a make-believe world – the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the true personality. Mimicry is also essential for spectator sports: spectators mimic the athletes through identification. The exhibition of the performance and feelings of identification serve to double the

play in the field by ensuring that the spectators are 'playing' too, in a manner just like, but different to, the competitive players (Caillouis 1962).

According to Smilansky (1968, in Kalliala 2006), during fantasy play children can enact versions of adult life, which serves to aid socialisation and learning. During make-believe we become actors, scriptwriters, directors, and set designers (Garvey 1990). Thus, mimicry is more essential for children: it eases tensions of the observed adult world and develops the child's imagination and their 'as if' consciousness (Kalliala 2006). Mimicry has a cathartic function for adults also (Giddens 1964). The application of mimicry becomes wider in adult life. Theatre, cinema, and various other drama interpretations belong to the classification of mimicry. For Turner (1979, 1982), contemporary mimicry in western society, such as theatre, has a distinct relationship with tribal societies' carnival rituals. Each of these forms of ritual based play is essential for the subversion of the ordinary structure of society, and thus provides a cathartic function. In essence, through play one can escape the tensions of conformity and the structure of 'normal society', as the make-believe world limited only by the constraints of imagination (Turner 1982).

### 2.12.5 Ilinx (Vertigo)



Photograph 4. A whirling carnival ride as an example of Ilinx

Ilinx is the pursuit of vertigo. It is an *“attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind”* (Caillois 1962, p.22). The idea is to momentarily shake the trustworthiness of perception, thus creating an enjoyable feeling of dizziness (Kalliala 2006). The disturbance that provokes vertigo is commonly sought for its own sake. Animals and humans derive the same pleasure from the intoxication stimulated by high speed (Caillois 1962, Groos 1898).

Take for example the Whirling Dervish, seeking temporary ecstasy by whirling to the beat of a drum. Through the constant and frantic rotation the ilinx state of panic and hypnosis is attained. A more dangerous example includes high-wire acrobats. Many machines have been designed to induce ilinx, take for example, motorbikes (Murphy and Patterson 2011), carnival rides in Las Vegas (Belk 2001), Disneyland, and even smaller scale travelling carnivals (as shown in Photograph 2 and Table 2). These machines induce a ‘pleasurable torture’ and turn people pale with dizziness, often to a state of nausea. However, an important aspect of ilinx is the freedom to accept or refuse the experience, it must have strict and fixed limits – it must be distinctly

separated from normality. The momentarily loss of perception associated with ‘carnivalistic life’ (Bakhtin 1984) is also associated with ilinx states (the carnival will be discussed in more detail in section 2.17.1). The inversion enacted during the carnival encapsulates the vertigo of moral order. Caillois (1962, p.24) states:

*“This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a desire normally suppressed. Reflected in crude expression.”*

Table 2. Classification of Play (Caillois 1962)

	<b>Agon</b> (Competition)	<b>Alea</b> (Chance)	<b>Mimicry</b> (Simulation)	<b>Ilinx</b> (Verigo)
<b>Paidia</b> Tumult, Agitation, Immoderate, Laughter	Racing & Wrestling (unregulated)	Counting-out rhymes, Heads or tails	Children’s initiations, Games of illusion Tag, Arms, Masks, Disguises	Children “whirling”, Horseback riding, Swinging, Waltzing
Kite-flying, Solitaire, Patience, Crossword, Puzzles	Boxing, Billiards, Fencing, Checkers, Chess	Betting, Roulette		Volador, Travelling carnivals, Skiing, Mountain climbing, Tightrope walking
<b>Ludus</b>	Contest, Sports in general	Simple, complex, and continuing lotteries	Theatre, Spectacles in general	

## 2.13 An Extended Theory of Play

Play and games are not always so clearly isolated into an individual category as discussed above. Games tend to combine two of the above categories, and in doing so, these games combine the attractions of each category of play. Caillois (1962) discusses the symmetry between *agon* and *alea*: both require equity and precision. They can be regulated. *Agon-alea* combinations include the game of golf, in which it is the players skill combined with the ‘luck’ of nature (or the golf course) on a given day, and card games in which the player deploys skill with the cards that ‘luck’ dealt. Caillois (1962) also discusses the compatibility of *mimicry-ilinx*, both unregulated. Caillois (1962) suggests the carnival is such a combination: the wearing of a mask is liberating and intoxicating, during which the real world is temporarily abolished through a disorder and whirling panic. He suggests that this form of play is related to the sacred sphere: the carnival is ‘*kratophanous*’ (Belk *et al.* 1989) – its power is equally cherished and feared (McMahon 2005). The carnival removes the player from the regulated world of authority (Turner 1982, Caillois 1962,), it can lead to total frenzy, which in its extreme form appears to be the opposite of play – an enactment of a toxic display (Thompson 2007). This study discusses the ‘branded carnival’, in which such a toxic display is enacted within a marketplace context.

However, Caillois (1962) discusses the incompatibility of *agon-ilinx* based games. They are direct contradictions – *agon* requires skill, control and equilibrium, whereas *ilinx* is the pleasure of vertigo – the momentary loss of control and perception. However, in contemporary play, such games are emerging. Syndor (2000) discusses the emergence of ‘novelty’ games that attempt to combine incompatible aspects of sport culture, one such example is ‘Slamball’, a game that combines the skill and precision of basketball played with four trampolines in front of each net. Thus, artificially combining *agon-ilinx* qualities. Such a combination is also observed in this study, which focuses academic attention on a game that displays *agon-ilinx* qualities. This study discusses the emergence of a ‘toxic sport’, a game, which combines

structure, rules, and finesse with vertigo achieved through the abnormal consumption of alcohol (Reith 2005).

## **2.14 Manifestations of Play**

Caillois (1962) for each category of play discusses three social manifestations: cultural forms circulating on the margin of social mechanism, institutional forms integrated into social life, and 'corrupt' forms (Table 3). Play is intended as a side activity, separate from the influence of the ordinary. Play is not merely an individual activity (Huizinga 1955, Garvey 1990, Giddens 1964). Each of the categories of play/games has a social function. For example, agon – sport, alea – casino, mimicry – theatre, and ilinx – annual occasions for popular merriment (carnivals). However, particular clear in each of these socialized play forms is the clearly delineated departure from the ordinary. Contamination by ordinary life has the possibility to corrupt and destroy the very essence of play (Caillois 1962). This contributes to the explanation as to why the marketization of play creates tensions (Tumbat and Belk 2011). Play and the marketplace historically have had a volatile relationship (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011), as the influence of the ordinary structured world removes necessary characteristics from play. However, the influenced form of play should not be viewed as entirely 'corrupt' as the essence of play is somewhat maintained, although it may now possess a 'profane' monetary ethos.



Table 3. Adaption of Caillois (1962) Forms of Play

	<b>Cultural Forms found at the margins of the Social Order</b>	<b>Institutional Forms Integrated into Social Life</b>	<b>Corruption</b>
<b>Agon</b>	Sports	Economic competition Competitive examinations	Violence Will to power Trickery
<b>Alea</b>	Lotteries Casinos	Speculation on stock market	Superstition Astrology
<b>Mimicry</b>	Carnival Theatre Cinema Hero-worship	Uniforms Ceremonial etiquette	Alienation Split personality
<b>Ilinx</b>	Mountain climbing Skiing Speed	Professions requiring control of vertigo e.g F1 racer	Alcoholism and drugs

Corrupt play discards the characteristics of play. Motivation to partake in this form of play is departed from the free, fun, and uncertain foundations of play. The notion of corrupt ilinx is examined in this study. In contemporary culture, the desired stimulus of ‘pleasurable torture’ has been sought via the use of alcohol and drugs (Caillois 1962, Lyng 1990, 2005, Reith 2005). Caillois (1962) refers to these states as corrupt ilinx, as the freedom to stop at a fixed moment is not present, the time frame of intoxication is dependent upon by the drug not the player.

*“Alcohol and drugs lead man down a road where he is insidiously and irrevocably destroyed. In the end deprived of freedom to desire anything but his poison” (Caillois 1962 p. 56)*

There is a distinct overlap with forms of corrupt ilinx and risk taking (Lyng 2005). The use of alcohol and drugs and can have serious mental and health risks, and even leading to possible death (Reith 2005, McDermott 1992). The sociology of risk taking (edgework) as a risky play form will be discussed further in section 2.17.3.

## **2.15 Play and Culture: From Liminal to Liminoid**

Play is an inseparable part of culture and society. For Huizinga (1955), culture arises in the form of play, in fact he identifies play as being older than culture, while suggesting play as the primary civilizing factor (Elias and Dunning 1986, Motte 1995). The connection between culture and play is particularly evident in the higher forms of social play (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962, Turner 1982). Huizinga (1955, p.46) states that:

*“It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world.”*

The archetypal activities of human societies are all permeated with play (Turner 1982), take for example the Ancient Greek Olympics, which was a defining characteristic of their culture (Elias and Dunning 1986). However, through playing, culture evolves.

*“Play is the source of the fertile conventions that permit the evolution of culture.” (Caillois 1962, p.58)*

Caillois (1962) suggests that an older culture’s sacred rituals/games influence the play and games of current culture, and in doing so, evolves culture. He uses the sacred mask donned during carnival as an example, which in modern developed cultures is used primarily as a play-thing (during Halloween for example). Huizinga (1955) suggests that these rituals may not have been intended as games, however, they had a play-element imbedded.

Briefly reflecting on our own culture, there is no new invention that may not momentarily be used as a toy (guns for example).

Caillois (1962) suggests that cultures evolve from a mimicry-ilinx (unregulated) culture to an agon-alea (regulated) culture. Elias and Dunning (1986) discuss 'the lengthening chains of interdependence' which entail diminishing the spontaneous mimicry-ilinx forms of play, which results in a constraint of our play emotions. Elias and Dunning (1986) suggest that contemporary adult play is far removed from the forms of spontaneous expression experienced in previous cultures. This study examines the contemporary enactment of such behaviours within a marketplace culture: it was found that consumers enact a contemporary carnival based on spontaneous expression within a commercial context.

Turner (1979,1982) discusses performance and play rituals as a form of subversion from such constraints of the structured 'normal time'. Turner discusses that feudal-tribes, which in Caillois' (1962) conceptualisation would be considered mimicry-ilinx cultures, have a less distinguishable divide between work and play; he discusses the temporary nature of play in these cultures as a 'liminal' phenomenon. In these cultures, playful rituals are connected with the religious and are enacted as a sense of *obligation* to the community (Turner 1979, 1982). Thus, within tribal liminality play rituals, however exotic and complex in appearance, can never be much more than a subversive flicker. Examples of liminal play include cyclical tribal carnivals and rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960). However, when discussing contemporary society, Turner (1979, 1982) conceptualises, temporary play as 'liminoid phenomena', as obligation from the player is void.

While liminal phenomena tend to be integrated into the social process, liminoid phenomena develop apart from the central economic and political process in the margins of society. Liminoid phenomena tend to be idiosyncratic, quirky, and bedfellows of the commercial sphere. One can begin

to see the complimentary characteristics between the conceptualisations of the liminoid and the rituals enacted in marketplace cultures (Sherry *et al.* 2007). While there are 'free' play elements in contemporary culture such as Mardi Gras; church; secret societies; and home entertainment, these for Turner (1979, 1982) have a stamp of liminality upon them, as they are quite often 'the cultural debris' of some forgotten sacred ritual. Whereas, liminal phenomena tend to be only mildly subversive, they primarily invert social hierarchy, liminoid phenomena tend to critique society by exposing injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities in mainstream structure, much like a mirror – a mirror inverts but also reflects (Turner 1982). In essence, one *works* at the liminal, one *plays* at the liminoid. Examples of liminoid phenomenon include, books, contemporary carnivals (Hanlon 2006, Langer 2007), painting, cinema, and clubs (Sherry *et al.* 2007). Liminoid phenomena continue to dominate the managerial societies of organised capitalism. The industrial revolution and capitalism's general construction that work is good and play is bad has influenced contemporary society's play activities greatly – so much so that we no longer 'play' as adults.

## 2.16 Work and Leisure (Not Play)

*"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy..."*

*All play and no work makes Jack a big jerk." (Burke 1971)*

Children can legitimately play and adults cannot (Belk 2001). The central argument is that, for adults, work is 'good' and play is 'bad'. Play is often characterised as something trivial. As an activity, it has been frequently denigrated and dismissed; Sutton-Smith (2001) credits the Protestant work ethic in particular with the denigration of play as "*a waste of time, as idleness, as triviality, and as frivolity*" (2001, p.201). Central to Calvinist and Luthern thinking was the idea that hard work and a frugal lifestyle were at the heart of an individual's calling and success (Kavanagh 2012). Weber (2002) has demonstrated the influence Protestantism had on capitalism, and thus, how

work has continued to manifest itself as ‘good’ and play being the opposite of work – as bad. The work-play dichotomy has created the stigma attached to adult play (Giddens 1964, Belk 2001, Kavanagh 2012).

Play was ubiquitous in pre-industrial society (Sutton-Smith 2001). The duality of (irresponsible, frivolous) play versus (sober, responsible) work simply had not arisen (Kavanagh 2012). Play was an integral and regular feature of life. However, once the industrial revolution began, the frequency of play conflicted with the efficient organisation of factory work so play was denigrated, suppressed, trivialised, and to a great extent removed from adult life. Activities that aimed to provide or enhance enjoyment such as sport, acting, or theatre, were considered sinful:

*“... amusements, books, even intercourse with friends, must, if need be, be cast aside; for it is better to enter into eternal life halt and maimed than having two eyes to be cast into eternal fire” (Tawney, 1954 p.166, quoted in Kavanagh 2012).*

This denigration of play was so effective that in fact ‘play’ arguably still has something of a stigma attached to it (Belk 2001). In spite of all this, in recent years play for play’s sake seems to be enjoying something of a resurgence in the form of adult retreats, leisure activities, and festivals (Giddens 1964, Elias and Dunning 1986, Maffesoli 1996, Belk and Costa 1998, Belk 2001). It is important also to note that adult play is not psychologically/socially identical to children’s play since its character is determined by its juxtaposition with work (Giddens 1964, Burke 1971, Kavanagh 2012). Then it must be asked what constitutes acceptable play activities for adults to engage in, and when?

*“It is a matter of ordinary common sense to plan working hours so that the workers can really ‘work while they work’ and ‘play while they play’ and not mix the two.” (Taylor 1911/2010 p.86).*

Thus, adults now have clearly defined 'work time' and 'spare time' (Elias and Dunning 1986). Leisure, play, and recreation, are terms generally used interchangeably to mark non-work time for adults (Giddens 1964). Leisure, rather than 'play', is socially constructed as being a more acceptable term for non-work time. The main function of leisure activities is the relaxation/escape from the strains of work (Giddens 1964, Elias and Dunning 1986). However, the structured constraints of society and the calculated participation in 'leisure activities' leaves little scope for spontaneous and passionate play:

*"To see grown-up men and women shaken by tears and abandon themselves to their bitter sorrow in public, or panic in wild fear, or beat each other savagely under the impact of their violent excitement has ceased to be regarded as normal" (Elias and Dunning 1986, p. 65)*

Elias and Dunning (1986) refer to this process as the 'civilizing process', in which individuals are taught to curb the stimulation gained from sending and receiving emotionally significant messages. People have become so accustomed to practicing this form of constraint that rarely during leisure (playtime) does an activity fulfil its intended cathartic function (Huizinga 1955). This suggests that leisure time is not outside of obligation from social pressures (Giddens 1964), thus it is not play in a pure form (Turner 1982).

In advanced societies, in response to social pressures, leisure activities form an enclave for the socially approved arousal of excitement (Elias and Dunning 1986, Belk 2001, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Kozinets 2002b, Canniford 2011, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Thus, research on adult play should investigate ceremonial adult play organised on a communal basis, as these forms of play tend to serve the necessary cathartic function of play while also critiquing the non-play world of structured society (Turner 1979, 1982). The communal manifestations of contemporary adult 'leisure time', foundational to this study, will now be discussed.

## 2.17 Communal Manifestations of Adult Play

### 2.17.1 Mask and Trance: The Carnival

Since the emergence of community there has always been a peculiar relationship between commercial exchange and human extremes; that 'madness' emerges in market contexts in the form of carnivals and other playful, destructive, and often, deranged behaviours (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). The carnival genre, identified in novels by Bakhtin, culminates the writings of Rabelais during the sixteenth century. Rabelais' carnival in these stories draws strongly on the cultural tradition of *Mardis Gras*, a carnival celebrating Shrove Tuesday, marking the beginning of Lent. Rabelais describes an atmosphere permeated with revelling, dancing, and music, set in contrast with the grotesque of slaughtering, vomiting, excreting, and bleeding:

*"Eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulating, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up another body – all of these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body... The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart, and other organs. Its outward and inward features are often merged into one. (Bakhtin 1984, p. 317-18)*

Within the carnival everyone participates, not in a performance *per se*, but in 'carnivalistic life' – a 'utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance' (Hanlon 2006), it is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, they play in it. The carnival is characterised by four elements, eccentricity, profanities, the suspension of hierarchies, and an emotional bond (Torn 2012). According to Bakhtin (1984), the carnival is a series of extreme or hyper play behaviours, which are in opposition to 'official' time – excluded from public norm while inverting social structure and norms:

*"...the transgressive dimension has been enthusiastically embraced as an emancipatory practice through which consumer can elude and defy the*

*ideological imperatives, conformist mandates, and materialistic temptations of the capitalist marketplace” (Thompson 2007, p.115)*

Play activities enacted during the carnival transmutes the regular world to the ‘world upside-down’ (Presdee 2000); whereby, Bakhtin (1984) maintains the fool is king!

*“...carnival is a playful and pleasurable revolution, where those normally excluded from the discourse of power may lift their voices in anger and celebration.” (Presdee 2000, p.42)*

Reality is thus suspended and transformed. Historically, carnival practices ritualistically mocked the sanctimonious authority of the church and court, and transgressed traditionally sacred boundaries (Thompson 2007, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). Parody brings the higher order down to earth. Those previously separated by social barriers can enter into familiar contact in the carnival playground; masters, slaves, rulers, peasants – all equal and anonymous. Thus, new forms of social relationships can be negotiated and played with.

At the heart of the carnival are excess, laughter, reversal, and ecstasy (Presdee 2000, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). A feature of the carnival is that these ‘subversion’ practices contain no shame (Bakhtin 1984, Presdee 2000); there is to be no shame held in the *toxic* practices of eating, drinking, vomiting, excreting, dancing, singing, and copulating (Caillois 1962, 2001). Carnival is ‘second life’, a true feast of becoming, change, and renewal (Hanlon 2006, Torn 2012). Contemporary carnival is inescapably linked to the commercial sphere (Turner 1982). So then, what forms of subversive carnival have emerged in contemporary culture?

Langer (2007) introduces the notion that behaviour enacted at marketer-facilitated brand community events can display elements of the carnivalesque. Langer (2007) introduces the ManiFest brand community and what he terms the ‘Fetish Carnival’, a branded event that displays quasi-carnavalesque



elements. However, the play behaviour enacted at the Manifest Festish Carnival fails to fully develop into carnival play, and only displays certain characteristics of the carnival. Similarly, Hanlon (2006) introduces the 'heavy metal carnival', in which the grotesque practices of the 'dark carnival' are emphasised; devilish painted faces, noose-hanging, fire-breathing, and blood-spitting are observed consistently in order to break through the noise of commercial culture. Hanlon (2006) goes on to assert that even the dark heavy metal carnival is inherently conservative; it is a creative medium for imagining and living a radical difference from everyday life – a disengagement from the oppressive status quo. The carnival can be seen as an act to celebrate, reclaim, and to re-create 'local' culture and to supply participants with a glocalized meaningful identity (Hanlon 2006).

At best, contemporary consumer carnivals can only contain elements of the carnival, due to their paradoxical association with commercial profit. The list of national and international carnivals that exemplify the carnivalesque is miniscule; these quasi-authorised events only display notions of the carnival. However, the relative increase in organised carnivals, festivals, and themed environments, suggests that consumers are willing to participate in marketer-facilitated carnivalesque play practices (Maffesoli 1996, Maclarran and Brown 2005). However, marketplace carnival relationships may take new forms, consumers may enact practices of inversion using marketplace resources as the foundation of carnivalesque play. Thus, this research explores the manifestation of a marketer-facilitated carnival and explores how commercial resources are used during the carnival to access the community's utopian ideal of 'carnivalistic life'.

### **2.17.2 Sports**

While the carnival is one manifestation of communal adult play, so to speak, there exists also a more competitive, structured form of adult play in the form of sports. The emergence of modern sport is associated with the refinement of culture (Elias and Dunning 1986). Sport is essentially a civilized form of

hunting behaviour; the modern footballer is a member of the hunting pack, his killing weapon is a harmless football, and his prey the goal-mouth, if his aim is accurate and he scores a goal, he then is compelled to revel in 'hunter triumph' as he achieves the symbolic kill of scoring a goal (Morris 2002). Modern sports have evolved from the 'civilization process', whereby sport has moved from blood and fatalities, to be associated with skill and control – from 'force to finesse' (Elias and Dunning 1986, Mehl 1998). This is exemplified in the transition from the medieval carnivalesque forms of organized play to modern professionalism in sport (Guttmann 2000).

There is much confusion in society regarding the definition of sport; sports are socially constructed, and hence a number of conflicting definitions exist (Coakley and Pike 2009). While the word 'sport' may be used to suggest enjoyment and fun, or a lack of seriousness, or any game or pastime, arguably, 'sport' is now most commonly associated with institutionalised athletic activities. Dyck (2000) defines sport as 'a gamelike activity having rules, a competitive element, and requiring some form of physical exertion'. Coakley and Pike (2009) suggest that sports are institutionalised activities that involve either rigorous physical activity and/or complex physical skill, and that participants are motivated by both internal and external rewards. The category of 'sport' has emerged historically, has varied over time, and is in a constant state of flux. No consensus exists on the definition of sport:

*"To insist upon reducing all of the fascinating variation that is entailed in order to shore up a general analytic definition of sport would be to risk losing the object in the act about trying to be sociological about it." (Dyck 2000,p.19)*

Modern sporting events, such as the Olympic games and the World Cup, and many others have become highly commercialized, globally marketed spectacles (the Super Bowl for example). Sports theorists suggest that sport culture mirrors wider culture (Elias and Dunning 1986), hence why branding and sponsorship are ubiquitous in current sport culture (Syndor 2000). It is

proposed that the future of sport will be dominated by 'cyber sports' or 'eSports' based on Internet technology and virtual reality (Hemphill 2005, Jonasson and Thiborg 2010). However, the mainstream acceptance of these virtual 'future sport' alternatives appears distant. As noted by Guttman (2000), the postmodern sport era will be characterised less by instrumental rationality and more by spontaneity and playfulness, however, there is no sign yet that modern sports have lost their ability to excite and enthrall (Guttman 2000). The complexity of contemporary sport culture deserves increased academic attention in relation consumer rituals, brands and other marketplace resources (Syndor 2000). This study examines an emerging contemporary sport form in which contrasting foundations of play and cultural categories are amalgamated to construct a new sport form – a 'toxic sport'. Risk is a prime characteristic of toxic practices (Reith 2005). Thus, the manifestation of 'risky play' will now be discussed further.

### **2.17.3 Edgework Activities: Risky Play**

There is general agreement among members of contemporary society concerning the value of reducing threats to individual well-being, however, there are many who actively seek experiences that involve potential for personal injury or death (Le Breton 1990, Lyng 1990, 2005). Contemporary risky play subverts the safe society. Huizinga (1955) referred to the fact that 'play' could be bloody, or even fatal. The world stands divided into two personality types: those who value and actively seek high-risk experiences and those who fear and shy away from such experiences (Lyng 1990). The concept of edgework allows us to view high-risk behaviour as negotiating the boundary between order and chaos (Lyng 1990, 2005). High-risk forms of play such as, white-water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993) and mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011) and various other forms of extreme sports (Le Breton 1990, Donnelly 2006), in which individuals are committed to testing their own capacity to withstand increasing pain and physical risk (Le Breton 2000) have enjoyed

unprecedented growth over the past number of years (Rinehart and Syndor 2003). Such risky physical play activities and even alcohol drinking games (Borsari 2004) that have potential to harm or kill can be subsumed under the edgework concept (Lyng 1990, 2005, Murphy and Patterson 2011, Canniford 2011).

The term edgework is borrowed from journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who used it to describe a variety of destructive human experiences, specifically his experimentation with drugs. The negotiation between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, and sanity and insanity, were at the heart of Thompson's personal accounts (Lyng 1990).

Activities that can be subsumed under the edgework concept have one central theme: they all 'involve a clear observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's ordered existence' (Lyng 1990, 2005); they can involve both physical risks, such as motorbike driving (Murphy and Patterson 2011), and toxic practices, such as alcohol and drug consumption (Reith 2005, McDermott 1992, Hirschman 1992, Goulding et al. 2002, 2009). The threat of death or injury is ever present in such activities, however, participants extol that only those 'who don't know what they are doing are at risk' (Lyng 1990, 2005). While edgework at its extreme can be understood as toying with the boundary of life and death, it is more appropriately linked with the application of skill and control over one's environment, or play-space *per se*. Thus, skill is important and edgework becomes an exercise to discover performance limits in skilfully negotiating the boundary between order and disorder. Thus, edgework can be understood as a toxic form of ludus (Caillois 1962), in which the individual is competing with his/her own control over the boundary, constantly pushing closer and closer to the 'edge' in order to satisfy their need to engage in risky play.

The unique skill, which applies to edgework forms, is the 'ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos' (Lyng 1990, 2005).

Edgeworkers believe this skill to be a special form of ‘mental toughness’, which brings with it an elitist orientation, as it is only possessed by a select few, who often feel a sense of ‘powerful solidarity’. The levels of solidarity experienced transcend boundaries of interpersonal networks, so much so that people who engage in differing forms of edgework regard each other as equals in the same select group. A consequence of this belief is that individuals accomplished in one type of edgework may often attempt another also. In edgework practices, the ego is called forth in a dramatic fashion:

*‘...the experience produces a sense of ‘self-realization’, ‘self-actualization’, or ‘self-determination’. In the pure form of edgework, individuals experience themselves as instinctively acting entities, which leaves them purified a magnified sense of self’ (Lyng 1990, p.860)*

During the edgework activity fear gives way to exhilaration and omnipotence. Post the activity, one feels capable of dealing with any threatening situation; this contributes to the elitist attitude of some edgeworkers. For those who engage in forms of edgework the experience evokes a sense of ‘hyperreality’ – it is much more real than the mundane day-to-day existence, often described as ‘oneness’ with the environment (Lyng 1990). Edgework is self-competitive play: it challenges one’s innate survival ability, be it mental or physical (Lyng 1990, 2005), it differs from flow states (Csikszentmihalyi 1975/2000), as the rules constructed are emergent and internalised. It is not about the gamble, it is about control; they seek the opportunity to exercise skill in negotiating the boundaries rather than a roll of the dice (alea). In essence, edgeworkers attempt to maintain the boundary between “normal” and “abnormal” consumption – between consumption that enriches the self and that, which may destroy it (Reith 2005).

Canniford (2011) introduces the edgework concept into the brand community literature by discussing Redbull’s facilitation of the increasing high-risk orientation of consumer lifestyle. However, Redbull’s facilitation appears to be more concerned with displaying a ‘risky’ and ‘edgework’ brand image, rather

providing opportunities for typical consumers to engage in edgework practices. Redbull has positioned itself as the tribal totem for all those who wish to engage in adrenaline-pumping madness, from music, dancing, to action-sports and anything that provokes visceral responses. Sponsoring edgework activities, and creating a consumer-orientated spectacle, however, is far removed from the actual facilitation and marketization of edgework practices. There is scant research conducted concerning the marketization of toxic edgework practices beyond that of Goulding *et al.* (2009). Consumer culture theory would benefit greatly from an inquiry into the market facilitation of toxic and abnormal consumption rituals within a brand-orientated marketplace culture. This study investigates how alcohol and drugs are used as supplements to a consumption community's prime brand fest event. Specifically, examined in this study is the BPONG organised World Series of Beer Pong, in which extreme alcohol consumption is facilitated, and thus gives rise to a carnivalesque event. The game of beer pong is constructed as a 'drinking game' in North America. It is one of the most popular drinking games on college campuses and has recently begun to diffuse into the commercial sphere as a marketable 'sporting activity'. Alcohol consumption, as play, in the form of drinking games will now be briefly discussed.

#### **2.17.4 Alcohol Consumption/Drinking Games**

The modern use of alcohol has its cultural origins in rituals and religious belief systems; today the consumption of alcohol remains a symbolic ritual in a variety of life stages such as birthdays, graduation parties, and weddings – alcohol remains at the foundation of many consumer rituals (Beccaria and Sande 2003). The most significant change to alcohol consumption is observed in youth culture: drinking games have emerged in youth culture as a form of edgework practice (Lyng 1990, Hackley *et al.* 2012), in which consumers play with the limits of intoxication and possibly death (Beccaria and Sande 2003). Drinking games are roughly defined as 'situations in which alcohol is consumed with definite, standardized, and previously agreed rules (Beccaria and Sande 2003, Borsari 2004, Borsari, Boyle, Hustad, Barnett,

Tevyaw and Kahler 2007). Alcohol consumption is *mandatory* during drinking games.

Drinking games have emerged as a considerable influence on North American college alcohol consumption over the decades, approximately since the 1950s (Borsari 2004). Drinking games are loosely connected to another practice called 'pre-gaming', however, it differs slightly from drinking games. Drinking games can be played at anytime but pre-gaming occurs exclusively before departing for another social setting. Pre-gaming can include drinking games but generally it is solely concerned with rapid alcohol consumption, so that attendees are 'buzzed' (mildly intoxicated) when arriving at their social destination (Borsari *et al.* 2007). There are over 150 types of drinking game popular on college campuses and they all share a central goal – to ensure intoxication. In general, drinking game participants already intended to drink heavily (Borsari 2004) and drinking games appear to satisfy many functions desired by youth culture (Beccaria and Sande 2003):

- encouraging celebration and fun
- cementing friendships/communal spirit
- relaxation
- flirting and establishing relationships with the opposite sex
- reducing inhibition

There is a vicious cycle involved in drinking games. Many of these games have specially defined abilities, and hence, the more one drinks, the less one is able, the less one is able, the more one must drink, and so on and so forth. Borsari (2004) categorises types of drinking games as those based on: motor skills, in these games, certain motor skills have to be performed (e.g Quarters, requires the player to bounce a quarter into a shot glass); verbal skills, these games require players to repeat long sequences of nonsense words, which becomes more difficult to do as players become more intoxicated; gambling games, one of the more common drinking games, often based on the use of cards and dice, generally the stakes are the amount a player must drink;

media games, these games tend to be more passive and players must drink at a specific cue in a movie or song; consumption games, these have very little rules or skill, and are based on volume, examples include games such as the 100 Minute Club, whereby players attempt to drink a shot of beer every minute for 100 minutes, it normally results in players giving up, vomiting, or passing out before completion; and finally there are team games, these games pit teams of participants against each other, usually in a very raucous atmosphere.

There is an observable connection between the categories of play discussed by Caillois (1962) and the forms of drinking games that have emerged, however, drinking games belong to corrupt ilinx – a form of toxic play. Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, and Castillo (1994) suggest that almost half (47%) of frequent binge drinkers experience five or more drink related problems, which can include liver disease, stomach disorders, mood changes, and in extreme cases alcohol poisoning, coma, brain damage and even death. Participation in drinking games has serious health consequences. One of the most popular drinking games is that of beer pong, which is the also activity engaged in by the culture under investigation in this study, will now be introduced briefly.

#### **2.17.4.1 Beer Pong**

Beer pong is played on college campuses through North America; it has over 100 websites dedicated to the rules and even brands dedicated to providing 'official' beer pong equipment have emerged (Applebaum and DiSorbo 2009). Beer pong normally involves two players per team, an 8ft long table, and ping-pong balls that are thrown into a triangle formation of 10 cups slightly filled with beer on the opposite side of the table. Once a ball is 'sunk' in an opponent's cups, that cup is taken away and the beer drunk. Victory is achieved when all an opponent's cups are taken away. In beer pong distracting an opponent from aiming is allowed, encouraged, and expected. When a competitor is taking a shot, distractions often include so-called 'trash'



and 'smack' talk, and trying to upset opponents' aim by waving limbs. Conduct during beer pong is far from gentlemanly or even decent (Applebaum and Disorbo 2009). The characteristics of beer pong display elements of what Guttman (2000) conceptualises as a postmodern sport, due to its spontaneous and capricious nature – thus beer pong as an emerging form of play warrants further academic attention.

Given the emergence of these varied capricious and deviant play practices, which are embedded in communal consumption contexts, it is imperative to discuss the potential marketer facilitation of such playful, pleasurable, and often harmful, consumption behaviours. Hebdige (1979) suggests that deviance has powerful profit potential. That what may have once been considered a deviant subcultural practice, via the processes of normalisation, becomes attractive to consumers, and hence, highly marketable and potentially profitable. Deviant practices naturally attract market forces (Schouten *et al.* 2007a): marketers recognise the lucrative potential of 'deviance' (Goulding and Saren 2007).

## **2.18 The Marketization of Play and Deviant Consumption**

*"Pursuing and experiencing pleasure is a fundamental facet of human condition and essential mediator of consumer behaviour."* (Goulding *et al.* 2009)

Marketers are increasingly institutionalising hedonic play by reserving times and space for the expression of such 'controlled' hedonic, pleasurable and deviant behaviours (Goulding *et al.* 2009, Belk 2001, Kozinets 2002, Sherry *et al.* 2004, Caru and Cova 2007). Goulding *et al.* (2009) highlight how the illegal practice of the rave is marketized 'successfully' via the societal practice of the 'knowing wink'. In essence, there has been a tacit acceptance of the consumption of the drug ecstasy, which evidently allows both the marketplace and the black marketplace to profit, while also serving to solidify consumers-

consumer relationships within the markets arranged 'play-space'. However, Cova *et al.* (2007) discuss tribal play as being inherently capricious and unpredictable, and thus difficult to 'manage', however:

*"... it is not so important to predict their behaviour as to be able to react to their new aspirations through the maintenance of a continuous relation."*  
(Cova 1997, p. 309)

The understanding of consumer value-creation practices within marketplace cultures needs to be refined (Schau *et al.* 2009); consumer value-creation practices appear to taking a more toxic orientation (Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009, Hanlon 2006a, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The market always has been a playful device (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011) and contemporary consumers are afforded an abundance of potential play resources within the marketplace (Shankar *et al.* 2006). However, given postmodern consumers' ephemeral appreciation of their anatomy of play, their rituals and totems within their specific marketplace culture consumption contexts (Cova 1997), the question it is asked: how do consumers engage with marketers' provision of play practices and what tensions may arise as a result?

While the focus of this study is play, in doing so it also investigates contemporary masculinity. This study explores the play practices of a hyper-masculine marketplace culture and offers a fresh insight into our understanding of the pursuit of masculinity in contemporary culture: it discusses the 'hyper-masculine playpen', a 'liminoid zone' dedicated to the enactment of strong masculine roles in a manner constrained and restricted in contemporary society (Holt and Thompson 2004). The relationship between masculinity, the pressures of cultural representations of masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Rinallo 2007), and marketplace cultures will now be discussed.

## **2.19 The Status of Contemporary Masculinity**

The most dominant identity that defines a human, in the multitude of identities offered to the postmodern consumer, remains that of being male or female, masculine or feminine (Avery 2012). However, gender identity is not a fixed entity rooted in the body or in personality traits of individuals. Thus, gender is constructed by social relationships, cultural representation and consumption (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Holt and Thompson 2004, Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012). Consumer researchers have shown that possessions, brands, and consumption practices are symbolically gendered (Schouten and McAlaxander 1995, Fournier 1998, Belk and Costa 1998, Sherry *et al.* 2004). In contemporary American culture, what is feminine is generally understood to as the antithesis of what is masculine (Shroeder and Zwick 2004, Avery 2012).

Hegemonic masculinity in contemporary culture has been defined as misogynistic and patriarchal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Avery 2012); understood as the pattern of practice that preserves men's dominance over women. Women and women's things, such as personality traits, occupations, and spheres of influence, signify not only femininity, but also the lack of powerful and valuable masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense, but is considered normative; it embodies the most honoured way of being a man, it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, hegemonic masculinity has come to be associated with negative characteristics, it is often used as a term to refer to men's engagement in toxic practices (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). These toxic practices can include excessive/abnormal consumption, violence/intimidation, intoxication, and poly-drug use (Reith 2005) – these practices serve to stabilise gender dominance in particular consumption settings (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Atavistic masculinity has associations with rugged individualism, hedonism, aggression, competition, physical skill, the toxic practices of drinking alcohol and smoking, and a dominance of women (Holt and Thompson 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss such a masculine ideal in terms of the 'rebel myth', as it harkens back to ideals of the mythologized maverick. However, there has been a significant change to the representations of masculinity within consumer culture, which has lead men to experience pervasive anxieties over their manhood.

Traditionally, a characteristic of being male involved consuming female images: females were objects of the male gaze (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Looking signals activity, being looked at, passivity. Thus, the male gaze implied/reinforced masculine dominance: 'the female occupies the passive object, the observed sexual body, eroticized and inactive' (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Advertising was understood as an instrument of the male gaze, however, recently representations in advertising has forced male consumers to invert their gaze: to gaze upon themselves, thus, forced to renegotiate their understandings of masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002).

## **2.20 The Inversion of the Male Gaze**

Patterson and Elliott (2002) discuss how advertising, cinema, television and sport, have changed the representation of masculinity in consumer culture, and subsequently, shaped the modern male's pursuit of masculinity. Male consumers are currently being bombarded with images of perfect male bodies, against which they compare their own (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Schroeder and Zwick 2004), thus, creating a situation in which men are encouraged to gaze upon other men, resulting in an increasing feminization of masculinity (Avery 2012). Men are expected to construct masculinity using different cultural practices than those previously defined as being 'not feminine' (Rinallo 2007, Avery 2012). The widespread changes in the cultural representation of masculinity:

*“... shifts hegemonic masculinity from the realm of aggression, bodily force, competition, and physical skill to the domain of consumption, including taste, discernment, expertise, and bodily appearance” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004)*

While traditionally, women's things such as personality traits, occupations, and spheres of consumption, signified a lack of 'powerful and valuable' masculinity, they are now being represented as being essential to the contemporary construction of masculinity (Avery 2012, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). This coupled with women usurping consumptions spheres that traditionally displayed powerful masculinity (Martin *et al.* 2006), has led to the androgenisation of masculine identity markers. Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult for male consumers to display manhood (Holt and Thompson 2004). Thus, it is asked how are male consumers attempting to construct masculinity in everyday life? Holt and Thompson (2004) suggest that male consumers are enacting a man-of-action-hero role, which is a synthesis between contemporary representations of masculinity and the ideals of atavistic masculinity.

## **2.21 The Man-of-Action-Hero Synthesis**

In a similar manner to Patterson and Elliott (2002), and Schroeder and Zwick (2004), Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss the changing nature of masculinity achieved through consumption. However, Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss the coping strategy enacted by male consumers, rather than the catalyst of insecurities in the form of cultural representations. Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss two masculine ideals' the breadwinner role and the rebel role. The breadwinner role is constructed through supporting families, hard work, and conforming to the mandates of corporate economy, thus, sacrificing personal autonomy. It is grounded in the American myth of success.

*“Breadwinning men are represented as paragons of family values and community pillars” (Holt and Thompson 2004)*

However, American culture is as quick to portray these men who have become part of the establishment, as 'sell-outs', petty bureaucrats, as cowards, or emasculated, broken men. The rebel masculinity represents *"uncivilized, anarchic, and fiercely independent men who survived through courage, physical skill, and cunning"* (Holt and Thomson 2004). The rebel is portrayed as a warrior, a womanizer, and trickster. The rebel masculinity in a sense is the refutation of restricting cultural norms: the maverick who takes flight from the sober responsibility of the breadwinner role. Thus, breadwinners are broken men, and lawless rebels serve no purpose in society. So how is this dilemma negotiated?

American men tack back and forth between the two models pursuing the calculated desirable characteristics of each. Holt and Thompson (2004) suggest that men embody the rugged individualism of the rebel while maintaining their allegiance to collective interests, thus, they attempt to elude the negatives connotations associated with each role. The result is the synthesis: the 'man-of-action hero' role, at the heart of which is the ideal that men with 'vision, guts and a positive attitude can transform the system'. Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss the man-of-action hero role as a continuous process, not the enactment of the breadwinner role during the week and subverting the role through enactment of the rebel masculinity at the weekend. However, such distinct extremes of switching between masculine roles can be observed in liminoid zones, such as Harley Davidson posse rides (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001), Mountain Men rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998), and Beamish Tours (O'Sullivan et al. 2011). The gap between the atavistic ideal of maverick-like masculinity and the modern representations of masculinity, influenced by conformity, femininity and the inverted male gaze, has produced an identity crisis that men have tried to resolve through consumption (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Holt and Thompson 2004, Avery 2012). Masculine consumption communities allow for the expressions of a shared

utopian masculinity within a socially acceptable context, unrestrained by mass cultural representations (Belk and Costa 1998, Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

## **2.22 Male Dominated Consumption Communities: Utopian Ideals of Masculinity**

Rossin (2012) suggests that 'real' men are an endangered species and ask: where have all the men gone? She suggests that strong masculinity has almost disappeared from social life: traditional American symbols of masculinity are now rarities in the androgenised world. However, it appears that atavistic masculinities, utopian ideals of what it is to be a 'real man', are being enacted on the margins of society, within male-dominated consumer collectives (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998). Within these collectives men can be men, they subvert the confusion of the cultural representations of masculinity, the anxieties of negotiating their masculinity, and enact a utopian vision of masculinity with like-minded others.

Within these masculine enclaves, enacting lionized masculinity with gusto and emotional expression becomes essential to the ethos of these communities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Take for example the Mountain Men (Belk and Costa 1998), within this liminoid zone men are enacting (mimicking, playing) the life of the romanticized nineteenth-century patriarchal pagans, in which masculinity was grounded in autonomy, self-reliance, and freedom, thus temporarily subverting the pressures of contemporary society (Turner 1982). Similarly, the Harley-Davidson subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001) has embedded an ethos of liberation from conformity. Within the Harley-Davidson community the confines of contemporary masculine consumption are distant: they construct themselves as rebellious men who live for 'the open road' (Holt and Thompson 2004).

In a more recent example, O'Sullivan *et al.* (2010, 2011) discuss the Beamish brand community in which a group of young male adults engage in the toxic practice of the 'Beamish tour'. The Beamish tour entails participants engaging in abnormal/binge consumption of a beer, constructed in Irish culture as a 'traditional man's drink', namely Beamish Stout. For participants, the Beamish tour marks a break from mundane consumption. Pubs visited are marked by old-fashioned, traditional Irish decor, a subversion of the contemporary 'hot-spots' associated with typical beer consumption. During Beamish Tours participants engage in other toxic practices associated with ideals of Irish masculinity such as smoking cigars and consuming snuff (participants do not engage in these practices other than during the Beamish Tour). The community is also constructed as a 'Guild' and its rules named the 'Constitution', both intertwined with ideals of a distant masculinity. One particular ritual enacted on 'Beamish Tours' is the awarding of a ceremonial prize to the 'Barwoman of the Day', thus, enacting a form of the male gaze within their utopian masculine liminoid zone. While the Beamish Tour is a capricious practice, their play is serious (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010): it is a practice of subversion from the contemporary expressions of masculinity. While play appears to be a possible foundation of marketplace cultures (as discussed in section 2.9), play enacted within male dominated consumption communities appears to be significantly influenced by their construction of a utopian ideal of masculinity. The author feels it is now timely to discuss the relationship between play, masculinity, and marketplace cultures using a theoretical model.

## **2.23 The relationship between Play, Masculinity, and Marketplace Cultures**

Previously discussed is the notion that playtime, is 'extra ordinary' (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962), thus it is governed by different set of socially acceptable norms (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005) than those evident in 'normal' time (Kavanagh 2012), or what Turner (1979, 1982) terms 'structured society'.



Structured society restricts our ability to express playful desires (Elias and Dunning 1986) and influences how we negotiate gender identity (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Holt and Thompson 2004). Turner (1982) suggests that through play and ritual we separate from mundane 'structure' and engage in 'anti-structure' behaviours marked by *communitas*. Thus, through ritual we enter into a liminoid zone, marked by subversion. Marketplace cultures are discussed in the consumer culture theory literature as liminoid zones (Sherry *et al.* 2007), in which the freedom to express playful desires (Kozinets 2002, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010) and utopian ideals of gender identity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998, Holt and Thompson 2004) are central. However, this discussion has been brief and requires further academic investigation (Holt and Thompson 2004). There is an observable relationship between utopian visions of play and masculinity and participation in male dominated marketplace cultures. This is illustrated in the below theoretical model.

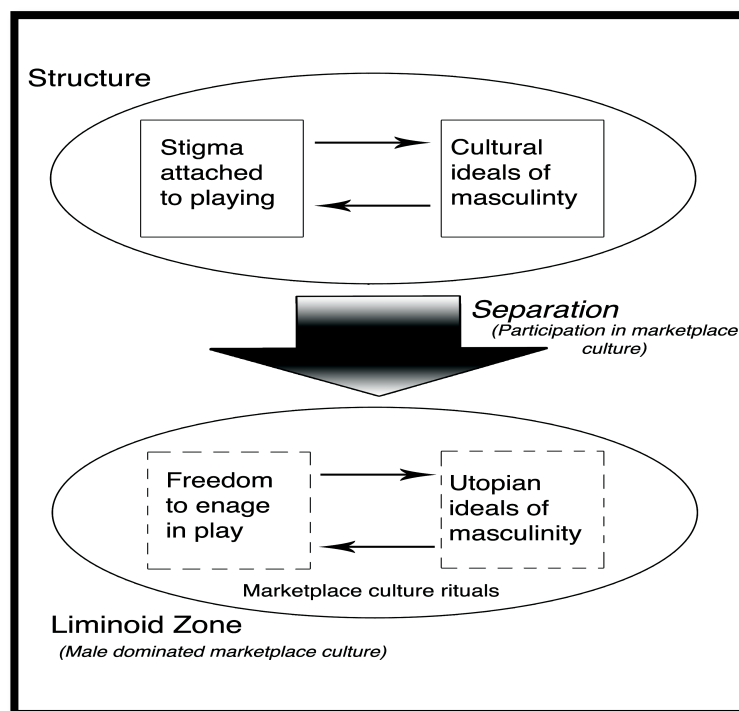


Figure 5. The Relationship between Play, Masculinity and Marketplace Culture

## 2.24 Establishing a Research Question

As discussed in section 2.9, this author believes a re-examination of the conceptual foundations of marketplace culture is overdue. The conceptualisation of marketplace cultures is founded upon Mafessoli's (1996) 'neo-tribalism' and Cova's (1997) conceptualisation of 'linking value'. There is general consensus amongst consumer culture theory (CCT) researchers that sociality *is* a feature of consumer participation within marketplace cultures, however, this author suggests that it has been given the forefront without adequate attention paid to other possible theoretical foundations. In fact, other theoretical foundations are touched upon in the marketplace culture literature, but are not developed fully. CCT researchers allude to theories of play and concepts related to play, yet there has been a reluctance to delve deeper into the play concept. The following table highlights the numerous shallow references made to play within the marketplace culture literature:

Table 4. References to Play in the Marketplace Culture Literature

Reference to play:	Author(s)
"...marked by its <b>playfulness</b> , its rejection of the too sombre and too self-righteous modernists and most relevant here, its informed celebration of mass material culture."	Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)
"...the consumer tribe engenders a kind of ' <b>active play</b> ' with marketplace resources"	Cova <i>et al.</i> (2007a) in Canniford (2011)
"Such fantasy environments typically evoke <b>playful</b> activities and attitudes and create a climate of escape,	Belk and Costa (1998)

pleasure, and relaxation”	
“... <b>play</b> can be inherently important for consumers seeking to assert and maintain a distinctive sense of identity and purpose. It is thus highly significant to understand how an individual brand came to be the focus of one community’s <b>playful activities</b> .”	O’Sullivan <i>et al.</i> (2011)
“At marketer-facilitated consumption activities... customers experienced <b>flow</b> , both individually and communal”	Schouten <i>et al.</i> (2007b)
“... this research suggests an increased need in consumer research for attention to intertwined roles that entertainment, fantasy, stigma, legitimation and <b>utopian play</b> in contemporary culture and consumer behaviour.”	Kozinets (2001)
“Along side the serious issues of empowerment and identity rides another motivating force: <b>fun</b> – a traditionally male kind of fun that in the past has easily excluded women.”	Martin <i>et al.</i> (2006)
“...consumers find freedom or emancipation in reflexively – perhaps <b>even playfully</b> – subverting market signs in favour of meanings that are more expressive...”	Kozinets <i>et al.</i> (2004)
“ <b>Playfulness</b> in these rituals becomes not a side-benefit, but an expression of their very essence...”	Sherry <i>et al.</i> (2007)

<p>“... consumers forge more ephemeral collective identifications and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and <b>leisure</b> avocations”</p>	<p>Arnould and Thompson 2005</p>
<p>“It is as if consumption, freed from its normal adult status as duty, can return to <b>playfulness</b>; the material world can become seat of the sacred again; consumption can become (re)enouled.”</p>	<p>Kozinets (2002)</p>
<p>“As we observed, clubbers entertain themselves in the queue, fuelling a <b>carnival atmosphere</b>, ensuring that those who gain entry have already embarked on a transformative experience”</p> <p>“we can suggest that losing it becomes a means for people to rediscover empathetic community through shared illicit risk taking, sensory stimulation, <b>and ritualized, highly energetic play</b>”</p>	<p>Goulding <i>et al.</i> (2009)</p>

This study aims to expand on CCT researcher’s numerous shallow references made to play and examine play as a possible foundational element of marketplace cultures, and in doing so, asks the following research question:

***How does play manifest within a male dominated marketplace culture?***

By investigating the nature of play within a male dominated marketplace culture fresh insight will be garnished for the possible re-conceptualisation of the marketplace culture phenomenon and the advancement of our understanding of the ritualised and liminoid nature of these community forms. In investigating the outlined primary research question in the male-dominated BPONG community, masculinity will also be explored. As discussed in section 2.22, male consumer's participation in marketplace cultures appears to be a liminoid escape from the pressures of contemporary masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004). Thus, this study will provide overdue insight into the masculine play activities of these community forms and its relationship with cultural (structural) (Turner 1979) representations of masculinity. In attempting to satisfy the overall aim of this study, the following questions will guide data collection:

*How do brand fest events facilitate play? In what manner do consumers play at marketer facilitated events?*

*What forms of masculinity are enacted within marketplace cultures? How does masculinity influence the rituals of a marketplace culture? How does masculinity influence female behaviour within the culture?*

*How does beer pong inform about contemporary play?*

These research questions will guide data collection and intend to inform of the nuanced nature of the relationship between play and marketplace cultures. These questions guiding data collection ensure investigation of prime brand rituals, the relationship between marketer facilitated play and consumer initiated play. They provide for the possibility to examine the influence of masculinity on the community's prime brand celebration events, the rituals enacted, and gender expressions therein embedded. These questions provide an opportunity to explore the variety of potential play expressions typically enacted by consumers within liminoid zones: carnival joy, (un)ritualised gender roles, toxic edgework activities, and contemporary sport. Thus, these

specific questions guiding data collection ensure that this study satisfies its aim of providing an overdue insight into the relationship between play and marketplace cultures. The research methodology employed during this study will be discussed in detail in the succeeding chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

*This chapter outlines the justification of the methodological choices taken during the development of this study. Firstly, this chapter deals with the issue of research philosophy and the epistemological approaches that a researcher may select from. The main body of the chapter deals specifically with the justification of ethnography as a research strategy, the challenges of the ethnographic method, and a discussion on the unique methodological structures that ensure a well-conducted ethnography has been carried out. The adaption of a realist ethnographic reporting style, which is used for this study, is then discussed. Finally, the ethnographic comic concept, which was used during this study to supplement traditional analysis, inference, and reporting, will be introduced.*

*“You can know the name of a bird in all the languages of the world, but when you’re finished, you’ll know absolutely nothing what(so)ever about the bird... So let’s look at the bird and see what it’s doing — that’s what counts...”*

*(Richard Feynman 1918 -1988)*

### **3.2 Epistemological Perspectives**

Social scientists are faced with two basic epistemological approaches, positivism and interpretivism. Positivists attempt to build knowledge of a reality that exists beyond the human mind; human experience of the world, according to the positivist paradigm, reflects an independent and objective reality (Weber 2004). The term positivism characterises epistemologies that seek to explain and predict the social world, the overall goal of this strand of research is to create theories that are generalisable.

*“In this tradition (positivism), the goal of social research is to discover a set of causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human behaviour.” (Esterberg 2002, p. 10)*

Positivism relies on quantitative and experimental methods to test hypothetical, deductive generalisations. Quantitative research involves enumerating phenomenon – particularly using numbers to describe relatively large groups or people (Esterberg 2002) – it’s limited in application. It’s not particularly useful for the investigation of the meanings people ascribe to the social world, nor is it useful to understand social process in context (Esterberg 2002). The traditional methods used in positivist studies are thought to be limited in value when compared to the insights produced from more in-depth holistic studies.

*“More discoveries have arisen from intense observation than from statistics applied to large groups” (W.I.B Beveridge, quoted in Kuper and Kuper, 1985, p.95)*

While positivist approaches to social research have received tough critique; the conventional, quantitative approach has dominated the social sciences (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

The alternative to the positivism paradigm of research is what can be termed the anti-positivism paradigm; more frequently referred to as interpretivism. At the core of interpretive research studies is the aim to understand the world: to prescribe rather than predict the human behaviour. Interpretivists acknowledge that the insights and knowledge they contribute to social science reflects their particular goals, cultural experience, and history (Weber 2004). Interpretive research is conducted under the premise that the social world can only be understood from the point of view of individuals that are directly involved in the activity under investigation (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Interpretive studies are typically conducted using a qualitative framework; qualitative methodologies attempt to understand the social world in *context*.



Qualitative research acknowledges the subjective nature of human life: not only are the experiences of those being studied reflected but also the subjective experience of the researcher.

*“... in social research, humans are the researchers as well as the object of study, which means that pure objectivity is impossible... We are not different to what we study!” (Esterberg 2002, p.11)*

Interpretive research incorporates an iterative approach, moving back and forth between theory and evidence. This category of research displays a more holistic relationship with the phenomenon being studied than that of quantitative research, which displays little more than a ‘snap shot’ of a particular phenomenon (Stewart 1998).

Traditionally consumer research has been dominated by quantitative research, mainly due to its associations with scientific rigour (Holbrook and Hirschman 1992). While qualitative research historically held connotations of bias, subjectivity, and selectivity, over the past three decades qualitative research within marketing and consumer studies has received an increasing acceptance (Goulding 2005). The increased acceptance of interpretivist techniques has been mainly due to a number of particularly insightful/valuable studies using qualitative techniques (Belk *et al.* 1989, Holt 1995, Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Kozinets 2002b, Cova and Cova 2002, Goulding *et al.* 2009, Tumbat and Belk 2011), and the advancing view that qualitative research possesses methodological rigour (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Stewart 1998, Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Goulding 2005).

### **3.3 Ethnography: A brief history**

Ethnography refers to the practice in which researchers spend long periods of time immersed within a specific culture; its aim is to analyse and develop patterns of action that are cultural and/or social (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Van Maanen 1988, Stewart 1998, Lofland and Lofland 1995).

Ethnography was originally employed by scholars in Britain and France to understand the 'alien worlds' of their empires (Elliott and Elliott 2003). The ethnographer typically spent long periods of time immersed in an exotic culture with the view of relaying an account of the differences between the world of those being studied and that of the audience. A significant development occurred in the 1930s when critical sociologists of the Chicago school began exploring the culture of cities as if they were an exotic far-away land (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004); this gave rise to many ethnographic studies of 'deviant subcultures', which in turn has resulted in the ethnographic method being applied to the study of contemporary consumer cultures (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Kozinets 2001). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) suggest that four distinct features guide ethnographic practice:

- Ethnography gives primacy to systematic data collection and recording of human action in a natural setting
- Ethnographic research involves extended periods of experiential immersion/participation in a specific cultural context
- It aims to produce interpretations of behaviours that the persons studied and the intended audience find credible
- Ethnography incorporates multiple sources of data to generate varying perspectives on the context of interest; the sequence of data collection efforts are dictated by the nature of the phenomenon under investigation

Ethnographers seek to develop 'thick description' of a social world; in order to achieve this it requires researcher participation in cultural life – this enhances the development of a richer understanding of the cultural system. The adaption of ethnography for this study will now be discussed.

### 3.4 Adaption of Ethnography

Ethnography is a particularly well-suited methodology for this study. This study examines, using the theoretical lens of play, the cultural system of a marketplace culture and the relationships between actors and their social environment. Firstly, when investigating communal relationships it is advantageous to adapt a longitudinal approach. Taken as independent, and interconnected phenomenon, relationships are complex; they often have deep-rooted dynamics and characteristics that are only visible with a period of prolonged investigation (Fournier 1998, McAlexander *et al.* 2002). Fournier (1998) highlights the complex nature of relationships: marketplace relationships involve an interdependent aspect; they are purposive; they range across several dimensions and take many forms; they evolve over time, and are in a constant state of flux.

The use of ethnography as a research method provides greater possibilities for the complex nature of the deep relationships within a particular culture to be accessed (Van Maanen 1988, Goulding 2005). It was necessary for the methodology chosen for this study to allow the researcher to examine consumer intentions and actions in the context in which they are occurring (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Stewart (1998, p. 7) expresses the following sentiment:

*“culture/society is an integrated whole and... individuals can only be understood within the context of that whole”*

Rather than studying relationships between individual consumers and the marketplace in a separate isolated context (Bengsston 2003, Fournier 1998) it was felt that the behaviour of consumers should be studied in an overall community environment. Immersion into a community, via the use of ethnography, allows for an in situ view of developing relational dynamics of a consumption community: relationships between fellow community members, and also relationships between the community and the market.

Therefore, the researcher must seek to attain a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the consumption context under study. The adaption of ethnography for examining consumers in the marketing sphere has become frequent in the past number of years (McAlexander and Schouten 1995, McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Cova *et al.* 2007a/b, Tumbat and Belk 2011, Avery 2012). Kates (2006) further extols the value of ethnography as a research tool in the brand and marketing spheres; he states that consumers co-create the meaning of brands, and in order to understand the varied and complex meanings consumers assigned to brands an ethnographic investigation is required.

McAlexander *et al.* (2002), and Cova and White (2010), further highlight the complexities at the core of relationships within marketplace cultures, specifically within brand communities, in doing so they also draw attention to the particular relevance of the ethnographic method for the investigation of such complex relationships. Therefore, considering the brand-consumer focus of this study, the choice of ethnography as a methodology is particularly advantageous. The appropriateness of ethnography for this study is further supported by its utilisation in other studies of group consumption.

Table 5. A Comparison of the Ethnographic Approaches Employed in the Study of Group Consumption

<b><u>Author(s)</u></b>	<b><u>Context</u></b>	<b><u>Research Design</u></b>
Schouten and McAlexander (1995)	Harley Davidson New Bikers	3 year part/full-time ethnography, informal interviews, photographs, cultural artefacts
Belk and Costa (1998)	Mountain Men Rendezvous	Participant Observation, interviews at events, Photography, In-depth Interviews
McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002)	Harley Davidson/Jeep Owners	Mixed method, Ethnography, participant observation,

		photography, informal interviews, videography, interviews, autoethnography
Kozinets (2002)	Burning Man Festival	Ethnography, netnography, cultural artefacts, participant observation, interviews, videography, member checks
Leigh, Peters and Shelton (2006)	MG Subculture of Consumption	5 year ethnographic immersion, participant and non-participant observation, photographs, videotape and audiotape, cultural artefacts, informal interviews, members checks
Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009)	Numerous Brand Communities	Naturalistic observation, participant observation, in-depth interviews, member checks
Cova and White (2010)	Warhammer and CouchSurfer Tribes	Ethnographic and Netnographic approach, participant observation, non-participant observation, active interviews
Tumbat and Belk (2011)	Mount Everest Climbers	Prior participant observation, prior interviews, 2 month ethnography, follow-up interviews and member checks

Ethnography has enjoyed widespread acceptance within both the consumer and marketing research spheres (Brown 1998, in Goulding 2005). Since the inception of the brand community phenomenon (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), ethnographic research has been foundational to its advance (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Cova and Pace 2006, Cova and White 2010, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Ethnography is not only well suited for the study of communal and anti-structure relationships (Turner 1982) but also for the investigation of playful experiences within the marketplace (Sherry *et al.* 2007, Belk and Tumbat

2011, Kozinets 2002, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). This suggests that ethnography is particularly well suited for the investigation of the manifestation of play within a marketplace culture context. It must also be noted that in the above studies referenced in Table 5, also make continued references to play, which further accords the appropriate use of ethnography for this study (see Table 4, previously presented).

Finally, it was also felt that an emergent design approach was necessary to this exploratory study (Mouton 1990, Belk *et al.* 1989), in order to ensure that the dynamics of community play would regulate the possible new directions of the study (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, Kates 2006). Given the relatively ephemeral nature of some marketplace cultures, their play practices, and their rituals and traditions (Cova and Cova 2002), the author deemed it appropriate to implement an exploratory method that facilitated the investigation of emergent themes.

### **3.5 Ethnography: Methodological Issues**

The roots of ethnography lie in cultural anthropology, however, with a particular focus on individual societies. The original central concept remains equally important today; ethnography is concerned with 'the nature, construction, and maintenance of a culture' (Goulding 2005). Ethnography involves direct contact with the culture being studied: it is concerned with data collection and the recording of human behaviour within the culture's natural setting.

*"The trick of ethnography is to adequately display the culture (or, more commonly, parts of the culture) in a way that is meaningful to readers without great distortion." (Van Maanen 1988, p. 13)*

Each research approach, regardless of the philosophy of science, is required to assess trustworthiness of the research. Ethnography as a research method has received a substantial amount of criticism due to the underdeveloped

discussion concerning methodological norms (Stewart 1998). While a formalisation of the ethnographic method is limited (Van Maanen 1988, Fetterman 1989, Stewart 1998, Goulding 2005), if not impossible, considering the idiosyncratic nature of the research, a number of discussions exist detailing the necessities of 'good' ethnographic research (Stewart 1998, Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Lofland and Lofland 1995, Van Maanen 1988, Elliott and Elliott 2005).

*"... the ethnographer must be faithful to the truth... communicate conclusions that can be shown to 'transcend' the perspective of the individual researcher... must generate understandings that are 'applicable' to the study of human behaviour." (Stewart 1989, p.15-16)*

The exploratory and iterative nature of ethnographic research (Fetterman 1989, Mouton 1990) makes it difficult to replicate a frequent methodology. Positivist inquiry has developed a set of criteria for assessing trustworthiness, these criteria include: internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. However, these criteria are not appropriate when applied to research based on an interpretive philosophy that employs ethnographic methods, due to the mechanical and systematic meanings of the positivist terms (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). However, despite the emergent design approach central to ethnographic research, an attempt to further legitimize the methodological steps has been taken. Terms that are frequently used in the traditional sciences to claim credibility have been transferred and adapted to the ethnographic method in an effort to claim reliability and integrity. These will now be discussed in detail.

### **3.6. Veracity**

In the evaluation of positive research, validity is concerned with examining to what degree the research has measured what it claims to measure. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest that such positivist terms are inconsistent with an interpretivist philosophy. The pertinent question for ethnographers is not have

they measured what they think they have measured but have they really observed what their descriptions claim (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Many interpretivist researchers have coined phrases that attempt to satisfy the concept of validity in ethnographic research, such phrases include: ‘credibility’ (Lincoln and Guba 1986, Wallendorf and Belk 1989), ‘verisimilitude’ (Van Maanen 1988), and ‘veracity’ (Stewart 1998). However, it is Stewart’s (1998, p.15) term *veracity* that best encapsulates the concern. Veracity refers to a “*devotion to the truth... the power of conveying or perceiving the truth...conformity with the truth or fact.*”

### **3.7 Research Requirements for Achieving Veracity**

The primary data collection method is lengthy participant observation. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) define participant observation as establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience, and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting. Participant observation not only involves immersing oneself in a new social world but also producing written accounts that brings a version of that social world to others.

#### **3.7.1 Prolonged Immersion**

*“... the less the time for fieldwork, the less the ethnography will be an ethnography.” (Stewart 1998, p.20)*

Ethnography requires an extended period of immersion in the field, prolonged fieldwork is the single most influential tactic an ethnographer has to achieve or enhance veracity. By spending a lengthy period in the field the researcher develops a deeper contextual understanding of the relationships within the culture, the emerging complexities, and the appropriation of consumption practices in a playful market context (a particular goal of this study) (Foster, Scudder, Colson, and Kemper 1979, in Stewart 1998). Also, sufficient



(extended) time spent in the field allows for a broader perspective of the culture to be established before focusing on a particular aspect or themes imbedded in that context (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989).

The more time spent in the field, the more opportunities for learning are presented to the researcher. Thus, there are also more opportunities to overcome the challenges of the field, such as; the size and localities; informants' misrepresentations; the breaking down of old understandings in order to develop new insights, and finally, to produce a holistic understanding of the culture.

### **3.7.2 Disconfirming Observations**

Prolonged immersion enhances greatly the opportunity for revisits into the field, while revisits in certain studies are rare; they are extremely valuable for the study of continuity and change (Stewart 1998). The greatest value presented by revisits is the opportunity to seek out disconfirming observations; revisits increase variation in what can be observed. Seeking out disconfirming observations, a process sometimes referred to as negative case analysis (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), is the process in which researchers seek to revise and reform their assertions based on the deliberate attempt to encounter instances that provide negative support for their original assertions. The search for disconfirming observations warrants researcher rationale; some cases will appear to be exceptions, even though original assertions may be quite valid (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). At its basic employment, seeking out disconfirming observations adds a much-needed element of reflection on the culture being studied and serves to eradicate possible over-zealous assertions of the researcher. It also encourages reflection on the researcher's relationship with the specific culture.

### **3.7.3 Participative Role relations**

Ethnographic learning is a joint production of the etic perspective (that of outsiders), the emic perspective (that of insiders), and the interaction between these perspectives (Stewart 1998). Outsider, or researcher involvement can range from the 'peripheral member researcher', through an 'active member researcher', to the 'complete member researcher'. While each of the participative roles fashion opportunities for inquiry: a complete member researcher role enhances the opportunity for deeper inquiry. An important element to ethnographic enquiry is the apprentice like transition of the researchers participation role: the transfer, or progression of the participant role allows the researcher to view the culture holistically (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). The progressive participation within a culture provides opportunities to witness the spectrum of the performances of actors, while also allowing the researcher to experience the full range of cultural nuances personally. Often the researcher may have to develop specific tribal skills (Goulding *et al.* 2012), these can be either physical or mental, in order to earn subcultural capital (Thornton 1997), which in turn, allows for greater access to cultural norms (Learned 1995, in Stewart 1998). It is particularly important however, for the researcher to be cautious of the danger of being *too* familiar with the phenomenon or the culture being studied: the researcher must cultivate a critical stance (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), which should include periodic reflection and debriefing by peers.

Less obvious for ethnographers is the need to not only report the research roles as they affect the data collection and the development of the study, but also there is a need to report how private roles, such as friendships may affect the research. Virtually all research sites have cliques; no individual can participate in all of them, despite this, it's the responsibility of the researcher to consciously attempt to witness the variety of actors and insider roles along the participation spectrum within the culture.

*“...the most highly ‘native’ of the ‘natives’, the most highly expert of the experts in a culture, are not representative of that culture.” (Stewart 1998, p. 26)*

Not only is it difficult to disclose the meaning and development of such participant relationships, it is necessary to maintain and leverage the value created from the relationships in order to enhance holistic learning (Mann 1974).

### **3.8 Multi-Sited Ethnography**

Understanding a culture or consumption community holistically has its challenges. The increasing rise in global consumption communities (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007) has been enhanced greatly by technological capabilities. Hence, it is becoming more appropriate to include a multi-sited dimension in order to comprehend the culture/cultures of a specific global complex community (Kjeldgaard, Faurholt, and Ger 2006). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) highlight the non-geographically bound nature of contemporary consumption communities, and further evidence of this has been stated frequently in consumer research (Kozinets 2001, Cova and Pace 2006, Mandelli 2004, Cova *et al.* 2007, Thompson and Arsel 2004).

*“And the classical assumption of cultures as unified wholes has become more and more dubious in complex, differentiated societies, especially, as we shall argue, with the continuous advancement of globalization.” (Kjeldgaard, et al. 2006)*

Multi-sited ethnography argues that the researcher must be immersed deeply in a transnational phenomenon; one must abandon the privilege of locality and ‘go with the flow’ (Burawoy 2000, Hannerz, 2003, in Kjeldgaard, Faurholt and Ger 2006). The rise of multinational communities has predominately been accredited to the increasing rise of Internet capabilities, sophisticated software, and the media (Robertson 1992); these communities develop, not

only in a virtual sphere but in a social sphere across various localities: each presenting possibilities for deeper understanding of the broader culture (Kjeldgaard *et al.* 2006). Robertson (1992) suggests that an aspect of contemporary consumer life is the attempt to bring the global into conjunction with the local – Robertson terms this process ‘glocalization’. The process of globalization leads toward an increased transnational social reality. Hence, marketing and consumption phenomenon, such as postmodern transnational consumption communities, can no longer be holistically understood by a reliance on single-sited analysis (Schau *et al.* 2009). Globalization and glocalisation require:

*“...innovative forms of multi-locale ethnography necessary to do justice to transnational... cultural forces that traverse and constitute local and regional worlds.”* (Clifford 1997, in Kjeldgaard *et al.* 2006)

Single-sited ethnographies, focusing on a solitary and local experiences of a broader culture are constraining and unembellished in a fast-paced modern world in which few places are untouched by global forces and flows. It is important for the ethnographer to employ greater levels of reflection when embarking on a multi-sited ethnography; there is a danger of the study becoming a comparative study based on a standardized methodology and not capturing the flows and connections among sites (Kjeldgaard, *et al.* 2006). Capturing the intricate flows and meanings within a culture is greatly increased by employing multiple modes of data collection across the culture (Stewart 1998).

### **3.9 Multiple Methods of Data collection**

Achieving a holistic understanding of a culture is the prime goal of ethnographic research, the attainability of such an understanding is enhanced by employing various tactics, tactics such as; prolonged immersion in the field, seeking out disconfirming observations, revisits, and developing good participative role relations. However, another valued tactic that is appropriate

for ethnographic inquiry is conducting multiple modes of data collection – this promotes veracity. Veracity is limited without a variety of sources of data (Stewart 1998). The following table discusses the multiple modes of data collection employed during the study and their contributions to the goal of attaining a holistic understanding of the culture.

Table 6. Hybrid of Ethnographic Practices Employed During This Study and Their Contribution

<b><u>Mode of data collection</u></b>	<b><u>Contribution</u></b>
Participant Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First hand experience of the culture</li> <li>• Acceptance as Complete Member Researcher</li> <li>• Experienced range of actors</li> <li>• Insights into the construction of identity within the culture</li> <li>• Informal Conversations</li> <li>• Development of emergent themes</li> <li>• Disconfirming observations</li> </ul>
Non-Participant Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowed for observation of intra-community relationships</li> <li>• Critical observation of structure/anti-structure relationships</li> <li>• Experienced peripheral member role/range of actors</li> <li>• Comparison of personal experiences to that being observed</li> </ul>
Netnography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to observe communication outside of organised events</li> <li>• Observed/contributed to discussions on 'hot topics'</li> <li>• Observed the brand-community relationship during 'off season'</li> <li>• Comparison with field note data</li> <li>• Transnational insights</li> <li>• Identification of cliques within the community</li> <li>• Identification of emerging</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tensions</li> <li>• Various informal Facebook conversations</li> <li>• Access to photographic &amp; video content</li> <li>• Deeper understanding of individual actors</li> <li>• Disconfirming observations</li> </ul>
Multi-sited Ethnography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced local appropriation of cultural activities: rituals and traditions</li> <li>• Understanding of glocalized brand meaning</li> <li>• Comparison of local sub-tribes</li> <li>• Identification of flows of meaning between sub-tribes</li> <li>• Broader understanding of communal roles</li> </ul>
Photography & Videography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual capture of behaviours</li> <li>• Support to participant observation</li> <li>• Ability to relive consumption context a number of times</li> <li>• Supplement to the presentation of findings</li> <li>• Exposure to a broad range of actors</li> <li>• A contrast to interview data</li> <li>• Historical context of culture</li> </ul>
Long Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore emergent themes further</li> <li>• Search for disconfirming observations</li> <li>• First hand tales of lived experiences</li> <li>• Generation of new insights</li> </ul>
Study of Cultural Artefacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historic understanding of the culture</li> <li>• Comparison of mediated experienced to current lived experiences</li> <li>• Milestone cultural evolution</li> <li>• Emic and etic constructions of communal practices</li> </ul>
Member Checks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of emergent themes</li> <li>• Community voice incorporated into presentation of findings</li> </ul>

Participant observation comprises the core activity of inquiry in ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson *et al.* 2001). However, 'good' ethnography should allow for triangulation of data collection methods as an important tactic to serve veracity. Triangulation requires a researcher to test an interpretation in data gathered using several different methods (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Triangulation is important because no one type of data collection method is error free – each has limitations. Interviews are especially useful as such the opportunity for both spontaneous and directed, conversation with actors is presented. The long interview (McCracken 1988) is an especially suitable supplement to ethnographic enquiry (Stewart 1998) due to the semi-structured preparation and open-ended questions: the researcher can maximise the value of the time spent with each respondent (McCracken 1988).

However, interviews can be distorted in content, interviewees often give personal accounts of what they may have wished to have experience rather than what actually occurred (Arnould and Wallendorf 1998). This deception may not be deliberate although it can occur that participants purposely alter responses. In both situations verbal personal accounts should be conducted in conjunction with prior long-term participant observation, as this enhances the researchers ability to assess whether the interview data is credible – the evaluation of personal accounts from actors needs to be supported by the researchers observation of events.

In conducting ethnography, the coupling of interviews and participant observation is considered appropriate, if not necessary; other modes include documents produced by insiders, documents produced by outsiders, physical artefacts (Stewart 1998), and more recently accepted is the use of photography and videography to supplement participant observation (Pink 2001, 2006). Visual ethnographic methods attempt to capture a 'visual record of the culture' (Schwartz 1989): they offer a reality as loyal as possible to the context (Pink 2001). During this study two activities of visual ethnography

were utilised: making visual representations (studying culture by producing images/video) and 'examining existing visual representations' (studying images/video for information about the culture) (Pink 2001). However, it is not the videos or photographs which inform but rather the analysis of them (Belk and Kozinets 2005). Visual records show concrete details of cultural practices and the context in which they occur, the analysis of such supplement insights garnished through participant observation and visa versa (Schwartz 1989). The analysis of visual content (photographs and video) during this study paid attention to the four key areas suggested by Pink (2006):

- The context in which the image was produced
- The content of the image
- The contexts in and subjectivities through which images are viewed;  
and
- The materiality and agency of images

Analysis should not only focus on the content and meanings of the images but how the images relate to meanings and interpretation generated in the other research contexts employed. Belk and Kozinets (2005) suggest that visual ethnography is a particularly well-suited method for the study of toxic practices such as alcohol consumption and the investigation of spectacular/experiential consumption settings. This study investigates play in a variety of contexts, thus it is deemed appropriate to employ visual ethnography (Pink 2001, 2006) as a supplement to traditional ethnographic fieldwork. Visual ethnography was foundational to the creation of ethnographic comics, which combined photography, netnographic data, interview data, observational data and theory. The ethnographic comic (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013), as an alternative supplement to ethnographic practice will be discussed in more detail in section 3.13 (and it's contribution to consumer research in section 6.8).



The issue also arises of the necessity of incorporating 'netnography' (Kozinets 2002, 2006), which is the transfer of ethnography to the Internet, to supplement participant observation. The use of 'netnography' is particularly valuable to the current study given the dispersed geographical nature of the community and the high levels of intra-community communication occurring in a virtual 'place' (Amine and Sitz 2004). The consumption community under investigation has a significant on-line presence: it engages in a variety of online activities, namely participation on the community forum and computer-mediated communication through the use of social networking sites. Netnography supplementing ethnographic research is becoming conventional, if not essential, when investigating marketplace cultures (Kozinets 2001, Schau and Muniz 2007, Cova and White 2010, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011).

An overall consensus among ethnographers is that multiple modes of data collection are needed to capture data across all contexts of a culture, multiple modes of data collection allow for a more holistic understanding. Jones (1997) suggests that the adaption of a mixed method approach, including elements of both quantitative and qualitative, will enhance the overall quality and holistic view of a phenomenon. However, Ozanne and Hudson (1989) put forth a more compelling argument, in that the type of study should determine the necessary methods of data collection to be used, and not the other way around, as 'different approaches address different questions and they will not come together to form a single well-integrated picture of a phenomenon' – triangulation across incommensurable paradigms will not accomplish the aims of ethnographic research. Hence, supplementing ethnographic inquiry with quantitative methods was not deemed appropriate for this study.

### **3.10 Further Issues with Ethnography**

In selecting ethnography as a methodology the doctoral candidate must also be aware of the conflicting ontologies underpinning alternative possible approaches to ethnography. Interpretivists hold a social constructionist ontology (Burr 1995); that reality must be viewed holistically and parts of this

reality cannot be separated from their natural setting and studied in isolation: humans participate actively in creating and shaping their environment rather than reacting to their environment (Ozanne and Hudson 1989); ethnographic enquiry is in frame with a social constructionist view of reality. Ethnography can be defined as *'simply an account resulting from having done fieldwork'* – from participant observation (Marcus and Cushman 1982). However, participant observation not only involves immersion into social worlds, but also *'written accounts and descriptions that bring versions of these worlds to others'* (Emerson *et al.* 2001).

Geertz (1973, in Emerson *et al.* 2001) highlights that participant observation is more than describing, it is in fact inscribing. This sparked growing recognition that the ethnographer is the scribe as well as the explorer. Some efforts have begun to clarify the presuppositions evident in polished ethnographic accounts and the notion that there is a seamless process following from conducting fieldwork to producing an ethnographic account is being reported as a false one (Van Maanen 1988, Marcus and Cushman 1982).

*"Ethnographic description is by no means the straightforward, unproblematic task it is thought to be in the social sciences, but a complex effect, achieved through writing..." (Marcus and Cushman 1982)*

Producing a polished ethnographic account requires moving from the field towards the world of research and writing. Remembered and jotted scenes are transformed to text via taming, and reducing complex lived experiences to concise stylised re-examinable accounts – these accounts can be written in a variety of different styles (Emerson *et al.* 2001).

Van Maanen (1988) identifies three major writing styles to organise and depict fieldwork writings: realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionist tales. Confessional tales move the researcher and experience to the central stage; impressionist tales move 'striking stories' to the centre stage and, finally,

realist tales, which are marked by an almost complete absence of the researcher from the finished text. The construction of realist ethnographic accounts will now be discussed in greater detail, as it is the reporting style chosen for this thesis.

### 3.11 Realist Accounts

*“By far the most prominent, familiar, prevalent, popular, and recognized form of ethnographic writing is the realist account... a single author... narrates the realist tale in a dispassionate, third person voice. On display are the comings and goings of members of the culture, theoretical coverage of certain features of the culture, and usually a hesitant account of why work was undertaken in the first place.” (Van Maanen 1988, p.45)*

Marcus and Cushman (1982) suggest that existence of the individual was suppressed due to the overwhelming concern to establish culture or society as a legitimate focus for inquiry and this has resulted in dry, unreadable, texts. While the absences of the researcher may heighten the sense of scientific objectivity and serve to sever the relationship between *‘what the ethnographer knows and how he came to know it’* (Marcus and Cushman 1982), Van Maanen (1988) argues that the realist account has become the most popular form of ethnographic writing, due to the strive for authenticity in reporting the culture. By removing the voice of the author, and the dominance instead placed with the voice of the scientific narrator, the collective and authoritative third person (“the X do this”), replaces the more fallible first-person (“I saw the X do this”) (Marcus and Cushman 1982).

*“...Ironically, by taking the “I” (the observer) out of the ethnographic report, the narrator’s authority is apparently enhanced, and audience worries over personal subjectivity become moot.” (Van Maanen 1988, p. 46)*

Fieldworkers writing in the realist style, due to an increasingly professionalization of the 'craft', take on an institutional voice – satisfied to remain in the background, not to be identified as natives, but to 'lurk' as scholars. In the realist tradition, the ethnographer should launch into depiction and theory, and not to be over concerned with how the ethnographer came to acquire that knowledge (Stewart 1998). The audience is expected to rely on the researchers zeal for truth and precise analysis to evaluate the written account.

*"...good-faith assumptions surrounds realist tales... this assumption of good faith permits readers to hold the attitude that whatever the fieldworker saw and heard during a stay in the studied culture is more-or-less what any similar well-placed and well-trained participant observer would see and hear..." (Van Maanen 1988, p. 46-47)*

Realist tales, in an attempt to allege to 'total ethnography', focus conventionally on the often mundane, although representative life of the people studied. This style is used to draw the audience into the world of the studied, into the *typical* culture at large, thus, outliers are minimised in realist tales. Extensive quotations characterise realist tales; they represent the natives' point of view. This serves to act as a marker of 'having really been there' (Marcus and Cushman 1982). Other techniques to convey the experience of the field include the extensive use of cultural slogans, clichés, and, commonly heard, setting-specific terms, and increasingly the use of photography (Pink 2006). By presenting photographs within a written ethnographic text it provides the reader with multiple channels to understand the culture under investigation, supplies an animated cultural backdrop, which draws the audience closer to the lived experience of cultural members, and also highlights photography to be a valuable medium of communication (Schwartz 1989, O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013).

Gertz (1974, in Van Maanen 1988) argues that it is no longer adequate for a fieldworker to *just* report the everyday activity of the native, it is necessary to

inquire what the native makes of all this as well. Realist ethnographies claim to have the native point of view represented in final texts through allowing the natives have a say (through the authors pen) or by formal elicitation techniques.

*“To do ethnography in the realist mode these days is to offer the perspective as well as practices of the member of the culture... retelling informant stories allow highly personalised and unique experiences to enter into the realist tale. This is, of course, a breach of realist conventions, and such breaches are typically few and far between, introduced perhaps to keep reader awake and the realist tale alive.”* (Van Maanen 1988, p. 50)

In recent works there has been a far richer and more colourful portrayal of culture in ethnographic accounts – so much so that Marcus and Cushman (1982) suggest that the traditional boundary between fact and fiction has been severally strained. Marcus and Cushman (1982) also claim that despite the sever restrictions both spatially and temporally, the distinctive style of reportage is pushed towards generalizations, rather than presenting particular facts in their individuality accounts have been reduced to statements of ‘typicality’. Marcus and Cushman (1982) argue that the overall style adopted in realist ethnography furthers the gap between experience of the fieldworker and the report, so much so, that working back from a final report to the experience is impossible – it is methodologically weak. This claim can be refuted when contrasted with the rigorous criteria for realist ethnography suggested by Stewart (1998).

### **3.12 Writing a Realist Ethnography**

There appears to be a large degree of criticism directed towards realist ethnography and the lack of transparency of the fieldwork associated with it. Perhaps such a discussion has only emerged as an artificial graft to pacify those in disciplines that require such constant methodological mining. The fomalisation of the ethnographic method is ‘radically limited, by the flexibility of

the investigative process and by the uniqueness of each research situation' (Stewart 1998). "How-to" steps are likely to negate the essential spontaneity and serendipity that guide good ethnographic research; the very notion of an emergent design approach implies continual refinement (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

It is understood that the more organized the ethnographer, the easier the task of making sense of the vast amount of data collected in the field (Fetterman 1989); while the ethnographer may be organised, clamouring conversations regarding serendipity and spontaneity may stir (ill claimed) associations with sloppy and unscientific research. By following the guidelines set out by Stewart (1998) and Van Maanen (1988), contemporary ethnographers, in almost a paradox like manner settle aspects of both arguments – these guidelines show ethnography for what it is – a truly dynamic research method. Contemporary realist ethnographers must be willing to adapt; stylising and reporting is in constant flux. Van Maanen (1988, p. 52) advises:

*"Authors must discuss their pre-understandings of the studied scene as well as their own interest in that scene, their modes of entry, sustained participation or presence, and exit procedures; the response of others on the scene to their presence (and visa versa), the nature of their relationship with various categories of informants; and their modes of data collection, storage, retrieval and analysis."*

Thus a more reflexive, confessional, account being produced alongside the realist tale is now more or less the norm in a fieldwork dissertation, usually as a separate appendix. Such approach will be utilised in this study, complying with Stewart's (1998) description of the trail of the ethnographer's path to involve a confessional aspect to facilitate assessment of this study's veracity.

This research therefore complies with the conventions of contemporary realist ethnography, while also adapting a more reflexive style of ethnographic accounting. This research utilises participant observation, netnography, multi-

sited research sites, ethnographic interviews, photography and videography, the study of cultural artefacts, and also triangulation of data across researchers, and other necessary elements of ethnographic research as outlined previously (see Table 6). The iterative approach of Spiggle (1994) was utilised in the analysis of data and development of the ethnographic interpretation. A detailed reflexive discussion concerning methodology as deployed over the course of this study is presented in Appendix A.

### **3.13 The Ethnographic Comic: A Supplementary Analytical Structure**

Researchers often experience difficulties abstracting and inferring from such a comprehensive data set (Spiggle 1994). However, this author supplemented analysis as directed by Spiggle (1994) by developing 'the ethnographic comic' (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013). The ethnographic comic provided a visual structure for the above mentioned research processes. Ethnographic research can be chaotic (Lofland and Lofland 1995), thus any structure that can aid the development of ethnographic analysis and representation should be employed. The development of ethnographic comics positions a structure for data, without sacrificing the desired 'creative spark' (Suddaby 2006) of interpretive research. Researchers are encouraged to 'play' with their data, to use alternative structures and media than those traditionally associated with ethnographic analysis and reporting (Belk and Kozinets 2005, Pink 2006).

Ethnographic comics were created using 'Comic Life', a user-friendly application inclusive on Apple Mac products. Upon opening the application the researcher chooses a comic style (i.e. the shape and number of panes for each individual page), after doing so, the researcher 'drags and drops' previously categorized photographs from the data set into the panes, thus developing the theme's 'strength' visually (photos can be 'cartoonized' for genuine effect). The next step is to triangulate photographs with textual data. Interview and/or observational quotes that confirm/build the theme can be

placed onto photographs via the speech bubble or text box functions. Thus, a visually layered understanding of the theme is being constructed using the comic functions available.

However, inference requires the 'to-ing and fro-ing' between data and theory (Spiggle 1994). Thus, theory must be incorporated: this is done so using the text box function. The inclusion of theory ensures the data is not reported chronologically; that the comic's theme is constructed based on the relationship between theory and data sources. The final product is a comic portraying the strength of an emergent theme/construct and a highly accessible 'lived' representation of the culture (or aspect of the culture) (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013). Please see appendix B for two examples of completed ethnographic comics, which supplemented traditional ethnographic analysis and reporting during this study. The main findings arising from this ethnographic study will now be discussed.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

*The findings in this chapter represent what the author feels to be the key findings from the field. Firstly, the concept of the brand-orientated play-community will be introduced. This community form, unlike marketplace cultures discussed in the literature, displays a desire to play as the foundational motivation to engage with the marketplace, and subsequently, play desires influence the features and subsequent tensions emerging in relation to this community form. Various forms of play manifest in the form of the 'branded carnival', the 'hyper-masculine playpen', and a 'toxic sport'. Section 4.3 discusses the components of the World Series of Beer Pong (WSOBP) 'branded carnival', highlighting the particularly carnivalesque and toxic play behaviours enacted within the marketplace. Inherent to the WSOBP branded carnival is a 'world upside down' ethos and abnormal alcohol consumption. BPONG members affirm and invert the meaning of marketplace resources in order to support the range of play essential to their vision of 'carnivalistic life'. Section 4.4 predominantly discusses masculinity, specifically the competitive and toxic masculine roles enacted within the community play-ground. However, carnival play is unisex, and thus, section 4.4 also discusses female identity within the hyper-masculine play-ground. Section 4.5 introduces the concept of toxic sport, which builds upon on Caillois' (1962) extended theory of play, professional beer pong is discussed as a novel form of sport, which combines the contrasting play foundations of agon and corrupt ilinx.*

## 4.2. Introducing the Brand-Orientated Play-Community

The BPONG community displays most closely the characteristics of the ‘brand community’ category of marketplace culture (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Arnould and Thompson 2005, Canniford 2011). However, examining the BPONG community using the features of Canniford’s (2011) typology of consumption community, it is observed that the BPONG community displays features that range across the three forms of consumption community. Canniford (2011) discusses: subculture of consumption, brand community, and consumer tribe. The BPONG community is understood as a novel consumption community form, as it fails to fit neatly into previously constructed typologies. The BPONG community is conceptualised as a ‘brand-orientated play-community’, such its desire for a broad range of play practices. The manifestation of the community’s play desires will be discussed in detail through this chapter: concepts include the ‘branded carnival’ (section 4.3), the ‘hyper-masculine playpen’ (section 4.4), and a ‘toxic sport’ (section 4.5). However, before launching into a presentation of the range of play forms foundational to this community, its features will now be discussed, with a focus on the features discussed by Canniford (2011). The following table draws the reader’s attention the novel community features observed within the BPONG community, which will be outlined in this section.

Table 7. Canniiford's (2011) Consumption Community Typology Adapted to Show BPONG Community Features

<b>Feature/Form</b>	<b>Subculture of consumption</b>	<b>Brand community</b>	<b>Consumer tribe</b>
<b>Locus</b>	Activity	Brand	Linking Value
<b>Power structure</b>	Hierarchy of core members	Hierarchy of core members & brand managers	Diffuse, democratic, hybrid network
<b>Purpose</b>	Sociality,	Brand use,	Sociality, passion *play

	response to alienation *play	sociality *play	
<b>Time span</b>	Long-term	Long-term	Transient
<b>Structure</b>	Slow to change	Slow to change	Fluid, fast-moving
<b>Social position</b>	Marginalised	Mainstreamed	Mobile

The BPONG community features will now be discussed, followed by an introduction to the brand-orientated play-community (BOPC) and finally, a definition offered to the reader.

#### 4.2.1 The BPONG Community Locus

Marketplace cultures are conceptualised and demarcated according to their community locus (Canniford 2011). Subcultures of consumption are understood as being distinctly activity based (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998, Leigh *et al.* 2006), brand communities are understood to display a passion for branded resources (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Pace 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), and consumer tribes, which are conceptualised as less brand and activity focused, have at their core social relationships (Cova and Cova 2002, Cova *et al.* 2007). The BPONG community does not conform to such a distinct demarcation of features: it displays each of the three locus characteristics, activity, brand, and linking value, in a simultaneous yet interrelated and dependent manner.

The BPONG brand organised the first World Series of Beer Pong (WSOBP) in January 2006. Prior to BPONG's introduction of the 'World Series', and with it 'professional pong', beer pong was constructed as a drinking game, primarily associated with university party activities (Borsari 2004). However, the introduction of a 'professional' tournament, with a \$10,000 grand prize, transformed the meaning of beer pong for a number of consumers:

*“It is not about the drinking, you can do that anywhere, it is about the competition, making cups, and having a good time” – ‘Iceman’, Last Cup: Road to the World Series of Beer Pong, Documentary*

*“This was the first big beer pong event that brought a lot of people together” – ‘JD’, Male (Age Unknown), Last Cup: Road to the World Series of Beer Pong, Documentary*

Beer pong, for this emerging community, was constructed as much more meaningful than a college drinking game: ‘Iceman’ and ‘JD’ highlight the competition (agon) and social relationships that have become associated with professional beer pong, the WSOBP, and through positive contamination the BPONG brand (Belk *et al.* 1989). BPONG’s initial provision of a professional beer pong tournament has resulted in the reification of a community, of which the brand is an important feature, as too the activity of professional beer pong, and also the consumer-to-consumer relationships forged with like-minded community members. The activity, the brand, and linking value, central to the BPONG community will now be discussed.

#### **4.2.1.1 The Activity of Professional Beer Pong**



Photograph 5. Professional Beer Pong, WSOBP VI (2011)

While the activity of beer pong will be discussed in greater detail in section 4.5, as a 'toxic sport', it will be discussed here firstly to display community member's activity focused behaviour. The community's prime ritual is the WSOBP, however, the desire to continuously play professional beer pong, besides that of an annual grand-tournament, has resulted in community members organising small scale, less spectacular, weekly beer pong tournaments in a variety of locations throughout the United States, and more recently internationally, such the desire of community members to play the activity of professional beer pong.



Photograph 6. Weekly Tournament, Corona, California

As can be seen in photograph 6, when compared to the WSOBP tournament in photograph 5, the smaller scale weekly tournament has far less fanfare attached and is conducted in a far less spectacular environment. This suggests that community locus not only lies in the grand spectacle and performance (Turner 1982, Caillois 1862), which is associated with the WSOBP tournament, but in fact lies with the activity of professional beer pong itself. The enduring commitment to professional beer pong is communicated in the following Facebook post:

*“I played all 3 of the Major sports (American Football, Baseball, and Basketball) my entire life at a high level. Not one of them aggravates the fuck out of me more than Beer Pong does. That's what keeps me coming back for more. Do NOT tell me this shit isn't a sport...” – ‘Blaine’, Facebook Status, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

‘Blaine’ compares beer pong to three iconic American sports, he mentions how that he is so mentally focused to improve his beer pong skills that he ‘keeps coming back for more’ and following this he suggests that beer pong is indeed a ‘sport’, such is his commitment to the activity. This level of passion (Belk *et al.* 2003) displayed for the activity of beer pong suggests the activity of beer pong itself is an important feature of the BPONG community locus. Similarly, ‘Farley1’ discusses how the introduction of professional beer pong has significantly influenced his life:

*“We would all still be in various basements across the country playing for nothing but the chance to get your own beer for the next game. Hell more than half of us would have stopped playing years ago...” – Farley1, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

The commitment to the activity of professional beer pong is clearly communicated in ‘Farley1’s’ forum post. He discusses non-professional beer pong as something trivial in which he would be playing ‘for nothing but the chance to get his own beer for the next game’. He suggests that without the introduction of professional beer pong, there would not be an established community: players would be still playing the drinking game version of beer pong in isolated basements causally, if even that. He goes so far as to suggest that without the introduction of professional beer pong he may not be still playing beer pong at all. Thus, ‘Farley1’ too highlights the activity of professional beer pong to be an integral dimension of the BPONG community locus. However, it is not solely an activity-based locus, there is a direct relationship between the BPONG brand and the emergence of professional beer pong: the BPONG brand introduced professional beer pong and continue

to organise the annual WSOBP. Thus, there is also considerable brand-focused behaviour observed within the community.

#### **4.2.1.2 Members Brand-Orientated Focus**

Traditional brand communities discussed in the literature display considerable passion towards the brand and brand management (Fournier *et al.* 2001, Belk and Tumbat 2005). A brand-orientated foundation to consumption rituals is a dominant feature of the brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Pace 2006). The brand distils considerable meaning throughout the community, and thus, is portrayed as the community locus (Canniford 2011, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Aspects of this are observed within the BPONG community. The BPONG brand logo is incorporated into its member's daily non-beer pong lives, which suggests the brand is significantly meaningful to community members (Kozinets *et al.* 2008). The following photographs illustrate clearly the extent to which the brand is a key focus of the community:



Photograph 7. BPONG Tattoo





Photograph 8. BPONG Hair Tattoo



Photograph 9. Birthday cake with BPONG brand logo

Brand-orientated consumption activities as those illustrated above, such as tattoos, and special occasions, suggests that community members have incorporated the BPONG brand into their sense of extended self (Belk 1988). In doing so, the community displays a strong brand locus (Canniford 2011). BPONG not only organise the WSOBP, but also merchandise branded beer pong tables, cups, balls, and clothing, which are purchased heavily throughout the community despite opportunities to purchase less expensive substitutes:



*“On Day 3, after the tourney was over, the three of us that travelled over bought BPONG t-shirts, cups, balls, hats and 3 tables to bring home to Ireland. We had not planned on making such extreme purchases. We also discussed setting up a similar beer pong venture called BPONG Ireland. We had been significantly affected by the experience of the WSOBP” – Fieldnotes, WSOBP V, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010*



Photograph 10. BPONG brand loyalty Dutch Series of Beer Pong, Venlo, Holland, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011

As discussed above, the author and his companions, display significant favourable purchase towards the BPONG brand. Similarly, community members frequently chose to purchase BPONG branded tables over a variety of less expensive alternatives. There are a number of companies dedicated to selling beer pong tables: EZ PONG, BING-A-BONG and GET BOMBED to name a few, however, communal loyalty remains with the BPONG brand. BPONG does not enjoy a monopoly in the professional beer pong market: it has one major competitor – World Pong Tour (WPT). However, despite WPT also facilitating the desire for professional beer pong tournaments, community members display extreme levels of loyalty to the BPONG brand. The brand focused nature of the community, has resulted in the BPONG brand and its

owners being perceived to possess considerable degrees of marketer authenticity (Leigh *et al.* 2006):

*“They (community members) said thank you for giving birth to you (Billy), that you have created this beer pong empire” – Billy Gaines’ (BPONG Owner) Mother, Last Cup: Road to the World Series of Beer Pong, Documentary*

*“To your second point, Bpong.com are the 'Beer Pong Gods’”. – GameMan, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

A common feature of brand community is that of brand owners, when displaying a close-to-consumer philosophy (Fournier *et al.* 2001), being constructed, by the community, as mythical and sacred figures (Belk and Tumbat 2005). As observed in the above quote, taken from the ‘Last Cup: Road to World Series of Beer Pong’ documentary (a widely celebrated cultural artefact), one community member thanks ‘Billy’s’ mother for giving birth to him, which implies members construct ‘Billy’ as a sacred person (Belk *et al.* 1989). Similarly, ‘GameMan’, openly constructs the BPONG owners as ‘Gods’, such marks of respect are associated with brand-focused consumption (Fournier *et al.* 2001, Belk and Tumbat 2005). Religious tones such as ‘the call to adventure’, ‘helpers’, and ‘the wondrous journey’ (Belk and Tumbat 2005) are embedded in the BPONG community-brand relationship (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). Such a sacred construction of brand and brand owners suggests the BPONG brand to be a dominant feature of this community’s locus.

Another important feature of the brand community phenomenon, which clearly distinguishes brand community from other marketplace cultures, is the opposition of competing brands (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005, Canniford 2011, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). While subcultures of consumption and consumer tribes may incorporate a variety of brands into their cultural system, brand community consumption is focused on a sole

brand. The BPONG community frequently proclaim their opposition to the WPT brand:

*"I started playing BPONG rules in may 2009. The best tourneys are run by BPONG. I don't care about WPT!!! I got BPONG and that's all I need. Not trying to diss the WPT but... BPONG > (better than) WPT any day of the week." – BigMark, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

*"R.I.P. WPT 2005-2012" – Hendo34, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

*"I know it sucks being second fiddle (WPT) to a class organization like BPONG, but just accept it..." – Scofro77, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

The above forum posts display the community's unwillingness to incorporate other beer pong brands into their professional beer pong experience, and in doing so display their strong marks of loyalty to BPONG. 'Big Mark' discusses how he has BPONG and 'that's all he needs', 'Hendo34' announces the death of WPT, thus eliminating it from his professional beer pong brand choices, and 'Scofro77' highlights BPONG as a 'class' brand implying BPONG is a far superior brand than that of WPT. Such extreme displays of brand loyalty are discussed regularly in the brand community literature (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova *et al.* 2007, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). However, the respect and loyalty displayed to the BPONG brand lies not only in BPONG's facilitation of professional beer pong but the consumer-to-consumer relationships inspired also (O'Sullivan and Richardson 2012a). Community members frequently discuss the link with other consumers as a prime motivation to participate in the BPONG community.

#### 4.2.1.3 Linking Value

*“It (the BPONG community) was built on the friendships made and the sense of community. I know it sounds lame, but it's the truth.” – Barnes, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

Participation in consumption communities is understood to be a positive addition to consumers' social milieu (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Kozinets 2001). Communal consumption has the ability to foster deep personal friendships among participants (Martin *et al.* 2006, Cova, Pace, and Park 2007). However, participation is more readily associated with feelings of *communitas* (Turner 1982), or sense of communal transcendence. 'Barnes', in the above forum post, highlights 'the friendships' and the sense of *communitas* as being essential contributors to the reification of the BPONG community. Members frequently highlight BPONG's facilitation of 'linking value' (Cova 1997), via the liberatory social atmosphere created (Elias and Dunning 1986) as an important factor of the overall community experience:

*“I like to drink beer. I love people. I like competition. I like games where there is no loser. I like to have a good time. I LIKE BEER PONG!” – ‘Jay’, Male (Age Unknown), Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010*

*“It's great to get together with friends and compete. Growing up playing sports made me competitive and this is just another way to compete and have fun. Oh yeah and drink!” – ‘Bob’, Male (Age Unknown), Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010*

*“WSOBP was amazing! Met so many incredible people! Thank you WSOBP for everything! Next year baby! It's on :)” – ‘Bee’, Female (23), Facebook Status, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

The above members associate communal participation with 'having a good time', 'fun', and alcohol consumption. They also strongly confirm the importance of the consumer-to-consumer relationships foundational to this

community. ‘Jay’ states that ‘he loves people’, ‘Bob’ suggests that it is ‘great to get together with friends’ and ‘Bee’ contributes her ‘amazing’ time to the ‘incredible people’ and she already looks forward to the following years event. These strong personal confessions of the experience of the ‘World Series’ highlight linking value (Cova 1997) as an essential feature of this community. Linking value experienced, via the consumer-to-consumer brand-orientated relationships, is essential to the reification and maintenance of the community (Cova and Cova 2002, O’Sullivan and Richardson 2012a). The locus features of the BPONG community, outlined above, suggest that Canniford’s (2011) clearly delineated typology needs revision – the BPONG community fails to neatly fall into a consumption community category.

As displayed in the community voice, the activity, the brand, and linking value, are each highlighted as key attractions of ongoing communal participation: each feature appears to have a contribution to members’ communal consumption experiences. The unique combination of these three locus-features observed in the BPONG community can be subsumed under ‘playful’ consumption. The locus of the community appears to be directly related to the liberatory atmosphere and the opportunity to express joyful emotion through a variety of play forms. The specific play forms enacted by the community will be discussed in detail in the succeeding sections of this chapter. However, some play references are expressed below:

*“The attendance was up, the competition was at an all time high and most importantly the fun level was through the roof. Just about every person I talked to seemed to be having a blast. From the casual ponger to the die-hard competitor. I know there are quite a few players that come on here to post or just read the topics. If you never made the trip it’s worth every penny and I highly recommend it. Thanks again (BPONG) for another great job and an amazing few days.” – ‘Sauce1’, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

*“It was an awesome experience because we met new friends, we got to play against pongers from different countries, we could yell as much/loud as we*

*wanted... it was definitely an experience!” – ‘Crazy Ted’, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*“It was just an amazing experience... never had anything like that, the amount of fun, the drinking, all the players from all over, everyone is so fun and everyone is just crazy... just an amazing experience” – ‘Ed’, Male (22), Informal Conversation, Field Notes, WSOBP VI, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

The above members highlight their ‘amazing’ and ‘awesome’ communal experience and that the ‘fun level was through the roof’ – it was a ‘blast’. Members highlight various forms of atavistic masculine play (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) essential to their experience; the intense competition, excessive ‘drinking’, revelry, and ‘crazy’ behaviours, which are associated directly with carnival play (Bakhtin 1984). Thus, the ability to engage with a variety of play forms, such as agon, mimicry, ilinx and vertigo (Caillois 1962), not typically experienced to such extreme degrees in the normal daily grind (Elias and Dunning 1986), appear to be the locus of this liminoid community form (Turner 1982).

Expanding further on Canniford’s (2011) typology, the power structure of this community also fails to conform to the features discussed. While Canniford (2011) discusses power structures such as ‘hierarchy of core members’, ‘hierarchy of core members and brand management’ and a ‘diffuse, democratic, hybrid network’, the BPONG community displays a power structure marked by tensions. Play requires order, while BPONG co-create the play-ground to a degree, the brand also attempts to direct play, moving from more carnival orientated paidia play to more sophisticated ludus play.

#### **4.2.2 The Play-Community: Power Structure Tensions**

BPONG do not appear to have adopted a conscious tribal marketing approach (Cova and Cova 2002), however, some aspects of their initial approach incorporated elements of a tribal marketing strategy, specifically the

practice of ethnomarketing and the willingness to co-create experiences with consumers (Schau *et al.* 2009, Cova and Dallı 2009):

*“... we want you to have fun here and if there is anything we can do for you guys let us know, I can’t guarantee it’ll be perfect but we’ll do whatever we can, (we’ll) bend over backwards to make sure you guys have the time of your lives...” – Billy Gaines (BPONG Owner), Last Cup: Road To The World Series of Beer Pong, Documentary*

*“If you have a suggestion or idea for The WSOBP, please post it here... The idea here is to get a list going of what people want and/or don’t want in the event. Think of it as your opportunity to vote. I realize there is a lot of this talk going on already in other threads but I would like to consolidate those points into a list and get an idea of who wants what, so if you have a real idea for the event, please post it here and we will definitely consider it.” – Duncan Carroll (BPONG Owner), posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

The above quotes from BPONG brand management highlight their willingness to partially co-create playful experiences with the community. They display a desire to ‘makes sure’ community members ‘have the time of their lives’, but yet cannot agree entirely to requests. ‘Duncan’ calls to the community for feedback; he positions feedback as opportunity to ‘vote’. However, he also highlights any requests made by community members to be mere ‘contenders’, as the final decision rests with *brand management*. Despite this, BPONG community members engage in substantial feedback in an effort to improve the WSOBP play-ground and the BPONG experience. The community has influenced a number of factors that contribute to the carnivalesque experience of the WSOBP (see section 4.3), such as the music, venue, price packages, tournament structure, stats, rules, and game times:

*“1. More rap and hip hop music. 2. Less male nudity and more female nudity.3. A set of rules for all the games.4. Closer venue to Vegas.5. Team 1 starts with two balls. 6. Games end with a missed rebuttal shot. 7. Later start*

*times. 8. More package options. 9. Team names or player names on the back of the WSOBP t-shirts... ” – MTAG, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Requests similar to that enthusiastically relayed by ‘MTAG’ have been filtered into community practices and BPONG’s product offering (WSOBP). As the community and the WSOBP evolved, BPONG felt it was necessary to introduce a number of new rule changes that fostered emerging consumer interest. However, rather than insisting on rules changes and developments in the play-ground, BPONG believed it to be necessary to seek community consultation prior to the introduction of change, thus displaying a top down co-creation structure:

*“I think Skinny and/or I proposed removing the bounce (rule) last year, and everybody was pretty much against the proposed change. If people now feel differently, we’ll certainly more than willing to consider it (along with anything else that is reasonably proposed and debated).” – Billy Gaines (BPONG Owner), posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

However, while traditionally the brand operated transparent co-creation, as displayed in the above post by ‘Billy’, BPONG is introducing more formal and private forms of co-creation due to a number of members bickering (with each other and BPONG owners) on the BPONG.COM forum over possible new developments to their play forms:

*“We are currently talking to people to determine whether a change in future years is warranted. At this point, I do not want a public discussion on the issue. If you have thoughts, please contact me directly (skinny@BPONG.COM).” – Skinny (BPONG Owner), posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

The above post by ‘Skinny’ displays a move from open and transparent co-creation, thus forcing communal decision making to a ‘behind the scenes’ approach, in which the community cannot rally in favour of other community



members' evolutionary desires. Thus, the community have lost a degree of agency to brand management (Cova and Pace 2006). Community members appear to have appreciated the initial open style of developments, which led to the establishment of an initial brand-community relationship characterised by symbiosis (Cova *et al.* 2007(a), Cova and Dali 2009, Schau *et al.* 2009), and the early WSOBP events characterised by carnivalesque play.

The original opportunities BPONG provided to co-create experiences contributed to the establishment of a loyal communal following. While BPONG did not employ a complete democratic power structure, neither did they employ a strategy in which the consumer had to follow the marketers play-ground rules (Kozintes *et al.* 2004). Due to BPONG initially operating in a transparent manner and providing some (limited) opportunities to co-create playful experience, the community appeared satisfied. However, the form of co-creation experienced is a top down structure, in which BPONG has the vast majority of power, and brand management are slowly attempting to refine the play enacted within the play-ground. The BPONG community power structure is understood as a novel power structure, as it cannot be neatly compared to that of traditional marketplace cultures (Canniford (2011). The community locus of play has influenced the features and characteristics of the community. The desire of the community to play, and the brands attempts to direct this play has resulted in play-ground tensions.

#### **4.2.3 Play-ground Tensions: Moving from Padia to Ludus**

There has been a phase of rapid change observed within the BPONG community since January 2012. BPONG are attempting to diffuse the brand into the mainstream and in their attempt to do so, are implementing changes to the forms of 'play' deemed acceptable within the WSOBP play-ground.

The WSOBP is a carnivalesque (section 4.3) and hyper-masculine (section 4.4) affair. Participants perceive practices of extreme alcohol consumption and aggressive intimidation to be integral components of the WSOBP

experience. While these behaviours were previously unrestricted, and communicated as integral to communal play, BPONG no longer appear tolerant of these forms of boisterous and unpredictable play, due to the negative connotations these play behaviours may bring to the BPONG brand. Brand owner 'Skinny' posted the following during a discussion about the ubiquitous 'out of control' behaviours enacted by members during WSOBP VII (2012). The community remains to enthuse aggressive and carnivalesque play, but BPONG no longer wish to facilitate such extreme and deviant play within the branded play-ground:

*"Our (BPONG) vision of beer pong revolves around sportsmanlike conduct. If this is not the type of game you want to play, we don't want you at our event."  
– Skinny (BPONG Owner), Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

As Skinny's comment suggests, BPONG no longer appear willing to co-create the WSOBP play-ground, but instead display a desire to prescribe *their* vision of acceptable play at the WSOBP experience (Kozinets *et al.* 2004). BPONG owners had not anticipated the increased paidia play spirit enacted by participants at WSOBP VII (2012). BPONG appear frustrated with the community for engaging in erratic play behaviours, which included playful arguing, pushing and shoving, and damaging equipment and Flamingo hotel property. Brand management highlight these more deviant paidia play behaviours as being a major barrier to the evolution of professional beer pong, and ultimately the BPONG brand. Brand management desire more controlled and sophisticated (ludus) play to be enacted:

*" 'I can do whatever the fuck I want' is a perfect example of what's wrong in the world of beer pong." – Skinny (BPONG Owner), posting in Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

'Skinny's' discussion post highlights the liberatory and out of control, primitive (paidia), play behaviours members understand to be essential to the BPONG

experience. However, brand management appear frustrated by trying to manage such a deviant play space. BPONG management have also begun censoring aspects of the play-ground. An important dimension of the WSOBP carnival is the ability for participants to play with one's team name (discussed in section 4.3.4): community members tend to make these as humorous/inappropriate as possible. At WSOBP VII, BPONG engaged in the censoring of team names which *they* found to be too offensive for inclusion in video content and on the BPONG.COM website:

*"Duncan announced the teams and I thought 'that's strange, I didn't think that was their team name', it wasn't he had removed ANY foul language from the Top 16 team names..." – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

Team names such as 'Stupid Fuckin' Easy' and 'Who the fuck is Bobby Williams?' were changed to 'Stupid Easy' and 'Who is Bobby Williams?' respectively. BPONG felt that offensive and inappropriate team names could potentially damage the BPONG brand image. Thus, BPONG are attempting to prescribe *their* vision of the WSOBP to community members, which coaxes more ludus based play behaviours. However, BPONG were unable to manage members' erratic paidia play behaviours during WSOBP VII and this resulted in many inconsistencies in attempted rule enforcement. Such inconsistent rule enforcements and conflicts in the play-ground resulted in community members being disappointed with the overall spectacle of WSOBP VII (some even vowed to never return). However, more severe for the BPONG brand, due to their inability to ensure equality in play-ground rules (Huizinga 1955), brand owners are no longer viewed to possess marketer authenticity (Leigh *et al.* 2006):

*"Bottom line here is the series this year (WSOBP VII) was a shit show. People feel as though they were cheated and rules were implemented unfairly to favour some teams and not others. None of this would have happened if everything would have been organized correctly and ran in a proper way... I'm with everyone else on here thinking that I got cheated*

*because the team I was playing was one of BPONG's golden boys..." – 'Para', posting in Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

*"... we are the people who made these guys (BPONG) popular by our continued support. We supported them when they were nothing, and now that they have become big they try to screw over the very same people that stuck by them and helped them get to where they are today. I'm not saying that they "owe" us anything besides common courtesy, honesty, and consistency... It's getting out of hand... everyone has the same bad taste in their mouth about the same thing..." – 'Farley', posting in, WSOBP VII Updates, Facebook Group Discussion January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

Play-grounds require clearly communicated rules and equality in rule enforcement (Caillois 1962), however, due to the erratic behaviours and inconsistent rule enforcement, community members such as 'Para' feel 'cheated' and question the organisation of the event and the authenticity of the brand. 'Farley' highlights the attempted diffusion of the 'big' brand to have resulted in BPONG's unfair rule enforcements, and lack of 'honest' support of community play. BPONG suggest that it is the community's conduct that is containing the brand, thus BPONG desire more 'sportsmanlike conduct' at official events. However, community members maintain the desire for carnivalesque, toxic, and aggressive play, and do not wish to have a more sedated ludus orientated beer pong experience prescribed to them. While attempting to contain community behaviour and diffuse the brand into the mainstream is one aspect of the changing community structure, BPONG have also enforced a number of brand-orientated changes without consulting the community, hence the resentment at attempted imposition of a change to the play-ground rules.

#### 4.2.4 Brand Dictated Play-Ground Changes

What previously resembled an ethnomarketing strategy (Cova and Cova 2002), of which the community was included in play developments, has not been maintained. BPONG have begun to alienate members of the community:

*“They (BPONG) care far more about stupid trinkets than their actual players”.*  
– Foster, Male (29), quoted in MDBEERPONG.COM, Blog March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

The tone of the above comment from ‘Foster’ stands in stark contrasts to the tones of gratitude expressed by community members in the emerging stages of the BPONG brand and community. While BPONG display a willingness to ‘control’ the community’s behaviour during the WSOBP, they also appear to be deficient in assessing the current desires of its community. The community appears to consider the brand to be evolving in a relatively unwarranted direction. Prior to WSOBP VII, BPONG relayed that they would be making a ‘big announcement’ regarding the evolution of the brand during the opening ceremony of WSOBP VII on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. However, during the ‘big announcement’ the ballroom was noticeably lacking in community members:

*“While making the ‘big announcement’ the ballroom was particularly empty when compared to that of the opening ceremony of WSOBP V and VI, I missed the majority of the announcement myself because I was playing cash games in the practice room, it was there where the vast majority of the community was – playing beer pong and drinking...”* – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

Players chose to engage in a variety of play practices such as consuming alcohol and practicing for the WSOBP over hearing BPONG’s new brand developments. The announcement was the release of a free smart phone ‘app’ on which users can track percentages, rankings, locate tournaments, and connect with other BPONG community members via their smart phones. The announcement was made via video screen in the main ballroom

(tournament area); it went into considerable detail on directions of use. Players present found this to be particularly downbeat and did not pay much attention to it, players at this point had already consumed large volumes of alcohol and were focused on agon based play at the WSOBP: at this juncture the commercial evolution of the BPONG brand was of little interest to players in the play-ground:

*“Who gives a shit? Get on with it, I want to play some fucking games (shouting)” – Weezy, Male (24), Field Notes, WSOBP VII January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

*“They should have sent this out to players during the build up last week or something. It’s too down beat for the ‘World Series’. Players are too pumped up...” – ‘Keany’, Male (28), Informal Conversation, WSOBP VII, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

The priorities of community members are relayed in the above from ‘Weezy’ and ‘Keany’, they discuss wanting to ‘play some games’ and highlight the energetic desire to play beer pong. Brand owners also announced the new-look website which featured advanced technology such as ability to upload videos, create a user profile, and to view an official BPONG national ranking system. Community members appear to be resisting the new-look and technology focused website:

*“Since the introduction of the ‘new’ website there has been a considerable drop off in forum posts and threads. However, there has been a large number of Facebook forum groups set up dedicated to discussing professional beer pong... as the community evolves more and more players are becoming friends on Facebook and are cutting BPONG.COM out of the communication process.” – Netnographic Observation, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

The above netnographic observation highlights that community members’ are beginning to divert the brand. This suggests that while the brand remains important to members due to its facilitation of the WSOBP, the community is

beginning to cut the brand out of some of their e-play experiences (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The evolving structure of the community, which entails BPONG eliminating opportunities for the community to co-create experiences has resulted in a number of unnecessary changes.

A further significant evolution of the BPONG brand that occurred at WSOBP VII was the official rebranding of BPONG. The brand is now called The National Beer Pong League, or NBPL. While the original logo remains relatively unchanged, branding displaying the 'NBPL' is slowly being introduced:



Image 1. Screen shot from beerpong.com website

The new branding and acronym appear to be a further attempt to legitimize beer pong and portray it as mainstream sport. However, since the rebranding has taken place, there has been little overt resistance from the BPONG community to the new brand name. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest that the brand is a particularly sacred entity to a brand community and that it should not be interfered with, as the community may challenge such changes (Muniz and Schau 2005). However, the BPONG community appear unperturbed by the rebranding. This may be due to the fact that both sets of branding (BPONG/NBPL) currently remain in use. Another more credible reason for the lack of revolt may be that as an activity based brand, the 'linking value' can be produced via the brands facilitation of *play* rather than play being directly associated with the brand.

Community members display a desire, firstly, for the activity of beer pong, and secondly, to the brand that best facilitates their play needs, and in this

community it is the BPONG brand. The community does not display the fanatical brand-orientated characteristics, which are understood as a feature of 'classic' brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The forceful changes, the lack of transparency, and the rebranding, suggest that BPONG is moving towards a more traditional relationship marketing style (O'Malley and Prothero 2004). While the marketing literature extols a move towards transparent and open community relationships (Patterson and O'Malley 2006, Holt 2004, Cova and Cova 2002), BPONG's continuing marketization of professional beer pong has resulted in the community being secluded from the evolution process. BPONG appear to be moving from a co-created structure to a more traditional marketer dominant role. The structure of the community is in a state of flux, as a result of the evolutionary (diffusion) path of the brand. The desire for the community to play, and the marketer to attempt to control the forms of play has resulted in a number of tensions in the community-marketer relationship (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). This highlights further the seriousness of play in relation to this novel community form, and how play desires have influenced the range of community features.

#### **4.2.5 The BPONG Brand-Orientated Play-Community**

As highlighted in the above sections the BPONG community does not conform neatly to a consumption community typology, its features span across the three forms of consumption community discussed in Canniford's (2011) typology, and are distinctly affected by the play forms enacted/desired within the community (see Table 7). The most notable characteristic of the BPONG community is its span across the classification of 'locus'. The features of the BPONG locus include the activity of professional beer pong, the BPONG brand, and linking value (consumer-to-consumer relationships). These three features as explained above are linked through the community's diverse range of play practices (which will be expanded upon in the succeeding sections of this chapter). Thus, play is conceptualised to be both the locus and purpose of the community:



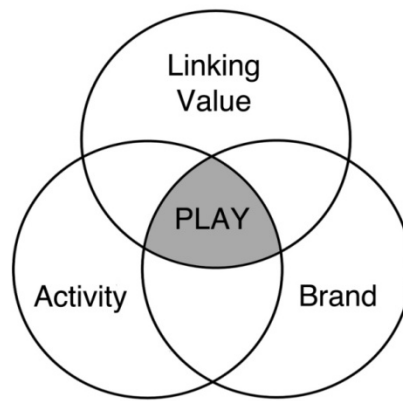


Figure 6. Model of Brand-Orientated Play-Community Locus

Without consumer-to-consumer relationships and the activity of professional beer pong a BPONG branded beer pong table would remain a mere table, which is not its intended use. Community members playing the activity of beer pong on a BPONG table serves to transform (McCracken 1986) the BPONG table into a ‘play-ground’ (Huizinga 1955), its intended use. However, as depicted in section 4.2.1 community members’ loyalty to the BPONG brand suggests the brand is significantly meaningful to the community’s construction of play: it is regarded as the sacred curator of the community’s play rituals, but not as the sole play foundation of the community. As displayed above in figure 4.6.2 the community displays a passion for play, which is supported by a combination of the activity, the brand, and linking value.

However, while brand-orientated, the brand locus of this community is not as strong as that observed in traditional brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Mandelli 2004, Muniz and Schau 2005, Leigh *et al.* 2006, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Brand communities tend to display passionate degrees of ownership in relation to their brand totem (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Cova *et al.* 2007a), however, there has been little resistance to a change of brand name in the BPONG play-community. Despite the rebranding (BPONG to NBPL), the emically constructed symbolic properties of the BPONG brand endured: the playful and toxic behaviours of community members remain unchanged (despite efforts by the brand to eradicate such behaviour). Hence,

the symbolic meaning of the resources used for community rituals and traditions, and the production of consciousness of kind have remained relatively unaltered. Essentially, the consumer-consumer-brand relational dynamics remain constant, apart from the brand attempting to contain the range of deviant behaviours, by coaxing play behaviours away from paidia towards more marketable ludus. Thus, the BPONG community should not be classified as a traditional brand community: it is a hybrid consumption community influenced by play forms, and previously unobserved in the marketplace culture literature:

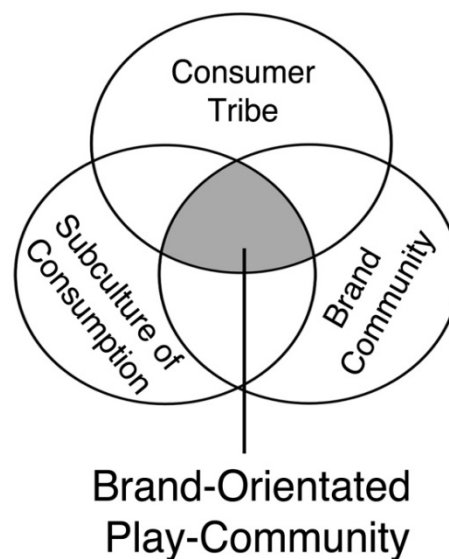


Figure 7. Brand-Orientated Play-Community: Hybrid Community Form

The community displays most notably a desire for play (see sections 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5). However, their play possesses a significant brand-orientation. The BPONG community is thus conceptualised as a 'brand-orientated play-community'. The author offers the following definition: a brand-orientated play-community is a community of consumers bound by lived and/or mediated relationships based upon a shared veneration of play, facilitated by the symbolic properties of a single brand.

The community's range of play practices, each novel conceptualisations in their own right, will now be discussed in order to expand on and display to the reader the strength of the author's conceptualisation of the 'brand-orientated

play-community'. The following play forms will now be discussed; 'the branded carnival', the 'hyper-masculine playpen', and a 'toxic sport'.

### 4.3 The Branded Carnival: Toxic Play in the Marketplace

This study found that the prime ritual of the BPONG community, the World Series of Beer Pong (WSOBP), displays many aspects of the archetypal carnival, albeit contemporised and commodified. The WSOBP carnival participants incorporate marketplace resources to support their vision of carnivalistic life. In this section the following components of the WSOBP branded carnival will be discussed:

Table 8. Dimensions of the WSOBP Branded Carnival

<b><i>Component</i></b>	<b><i>Dimensions</i></b>
Pilgrimage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Extensive pre-trip planning</li> <li>▪ Long-distance flights</li> <li>▪ Group travel</li> <li>▪ Camaraderie</li> </ul>
Creating the Carnival Atmosphere: Ludic autotely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Costumes</li> <li>▪ Entertaining team names</li> <li>▪ Themed jerseys</li> <li>▪ Story telling</li> <li>▪ Music</li> <li>▪ Dancing</li> </ul>
Toxic play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excessive alcohol consumption</li> <li>▪ Feelings of sickness e.g. 'Pong Flu'</li> <li>▪ Appropriation of marketplace resources to enhance toxic play e.g. 'Emergen-C' Vitamin C Sachets mixed with Smirnoff</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supported by marketplace resources with carnival appeal e.g. “Jack Daniels &amp; Coke”</li> <li>▪ Support from black market resources e.g. Marijuana, Cocaine, Ecstasy</li> <li>▪ Hegemonic Masculinity</li> <li>▪ Streaking</li> <li>▪ Poking fun at illnesses</li> <li>▪ Grotesque language</li> <li>▪ Authority being mocked</li> <li>▪ The fool is king!</li> </ul>
Period of Lent (post carnival participation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The fool is fool!</li> <li>▪ Normal Consumption</li> <li>▪ Non-carnival brands used appropriately to create distance from the carnival (e.g. Gatorade)</li> <li>▪ Exclamations of abstinence from toxic play</li> </ul>

The main BPONG ‘brand fest’ (McAlexander *et al.* 2002) of the year, the WSOBP, is held in the adult play capital of the World – Las Vegas, which is renowned for encouraging wild and liberatory behaviours. ‘Vegas’ has a ‘super natural ethos of high energy’ and an atmosphere of constant play (Belk 1997). Beer pong too has been traditionally linked with outrageous, boisterous, and anti-social behaviour (Borsari 2004, Borsari *et al.* 2007), due to its associations as a party drinking game. As a recreational activity, beer pong is banned from many North American college campuses, and even in some cities such as Huntington Beach, California (Ebright 2010).

Toxic and excessive forms of play characterise the experience of the WSOBP play-ground; it is something apart from ordinary life; the behaviour and forms of ritual engaged in at the WSOBP portray the event in a manner that can be considered a ‘branded carnival’. While brand fests are associated with unique and transcendent customer experiences (Schouten *et al.* 2007b), the spectrum of behaviours enacted at the marketer-facilitated WSOBP exceed in deviance those behaviours typically associated with ‘brand fest’ events (Cova and Pace 2006). Firstly, the official marketer-facilitated event only contributes to a portion of the overall sense of play, and secondly, the playful behaviour of the BPONG community members is so excessive that it simulates the grotesque, toxic, and mad forms of consumer play associated with the carnival (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011, Thompson 2007, Presdee 2000, Wills 1989). These behaviours, conceptualised as ‘toxic play’ encapsulate the apogee of carnivalistic life: toxic play is enacted as a means to support and maintain a collective emotional bond, in which consumers engage in a variety of consumption practices that are either physically, emotionally, or psychologically harmful to oneself or others. Participation in the liminoid zone of the branded carnival and the enactment of toxic play requires a separation from structured behaviour (Belk 1997, Tumbat and Belk 2011), thus the separation from structure will be discussed as the ‘antecedents of toxic play’. The author will then expand on the variety of toxic play forms enacted during the height of the ilinx-mimicry frenzy at the WSOBP branded carnival.

Table 9. Toxic Play at the WSOBP Branded Carnival

<b><i>Component</i></b>	<b><i>Dimension</i></b>
Antecedents of toxic play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pilgrimage</li> <li>▪ Anti-structure ethos</li> <li>▪ Ensouling the carnival</li> <li>▪ Ludic Autotely</li> </ul>
Toxic play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Abnormal alcohol consumption</li> <li>▪ Appropriating marketplace resources</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Black marketplace resources</li> <li>▪ Upsetting the Public</li> </ul>
Post toxic play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Exiting the carnival</li> <li>▪ Normal consumption</li> <li>▪ Structure behaviours</li> </ul>

### 4.3.1 The Antecedents of Toxic Play

#### 4.3.1.1 Pilgrimage to the Carnival

BPONG members anticipate the carnival: the WSOBP branded carnival is hailed as an extraordinary experience (Tumbat and Belk 2011), referred to regularly as the ‘*most coveted event*’ of the year. For participants, it evokes associations with the magical, passionate, and the sacred (Belk *et al.* 1989). The below interview comment highlights how the WSOBP is like no other beer pong event:

*“This is the best place ever, Vegas (WSOBP) gives you a chance to get away and experience everybody, you get to see your friends from the West Coast, the Mid-West, I’ve got my friends here from Ireland, Germany, Canada... all over the World. We just won the East Coast Beer Pong Championships in Atlantic City (New Jersey) and that’s fun but it’s not the same aspect as Vegas, there is not as big a turnout” – ‘Reap’, Male (27), The World Series of Beer Pong VII Presents: ‘Bangerang’ (vimeo.com/36249246), February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

*“It’s rather magical isn’t it?” – ‘IMH’, Male (25), Commenting on a WSOBP Photograph, Facebook, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

In the above ‘Reap’ discusses that ‘Vegas’ (WSOBP) is the ‘best place ever’ and that no other tournament has the ‘same aspect’. ‘IMH’ refers to this aspect as ‘magical’, highlighting the novel feelings it evokes for participants. Thus, the sacred associations with the WSOBP emerge and remain persistent a significant time before the carnival. Participants travelling from all corners of

the USA, and the World, engage in significant sacralisation anticipation prior to the WSOBP. It has been noted that attending the WSOBP is a serious sacrifice. USA workers typically only are allowed 15 days vacation per year, and the WSOBP requires 5-7 of those vacation days. For those travelling from Europe/Asia the cost of attending the WSOBP is quite expensive: travelling from Ireland involves a cost of approximately €900 for airline tickets alone.

*“Has anyone booked their flights from NY or nearby to Vegas yet for the WSOBP? The prices I'm seeing are retarded... I paid just over \$600 last year for 2 people round trip. That price is now upwards around \$900. Crazy.” – MilkMan, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

As ‘MilkMan’ highlights, BPONG community members make significant financial and time sacrifices to attend the WSOBP, thus highlighting the event to be sacred for participants. The extensive pre-trip planning process, with regard to flights and expense, begin months prior to the WSOBP:

*“I'm looking to see if anyone from GA (Georgia) is driving to Vegas this year? Me and my partner are looking to either fly...OR carpool out to Vegas with someone who has extra room!” – Pudz1703, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*“Since there's only 240 days to go to for the WSOBP V, I think we should share some tips for everyone coming back out to the Flamingo this year. For example, there is a Chipotle and a McDonald's right down the street... discovered I didn't have any need to stand in line for 30 minutes for a pizza at the Flamingo.” – Barnes, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Participants anticipate the carnival, ‘Barnes’ begins 240 days in advance, and ‘Pudz1703’ attempts to organise a convoy of travellers to the sacred location of ‘Vegas’. BPONG community members go through the process of disengagement from the real world (non-carnival) via such anticipation based rituals (Turner and Turner 1978, Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009): these are associated with the separation from the profane, mundane, world (Belk 1997,

Belk *et al.* 1989). The processes of booking flights, packing luggage, and boarding flights serve to greatly increase sacralisation anticipation for BPONG members. The process of discussing the build-up and organisation for the WSOBP on the BPONG.COM forum acts as a communal separation ritual that prepares the carnival community for the extraordinary:

*“We'll be there 12/30 to 1/6... I'm going to do some research soon, but if anybody already knows of the hottest clubs to hit throw them out there for everybody to know.” – Dwissburn, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*“Just curious, where is everyone else staying at if you're going to be there for New Year's Eve?” – Welch, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

‘Dwissburn’ engages in research to ensure his time at the WSOBP will match his extreme play expectations. ‘Welch’ also looks for information from other participants to ensure his WSOBP experience will invoke feelings of fun and revelry. Besides behaviour predominately associated with planning, attending the WSOBP requires a pilgrimage (Belk *et al.* 1989, Turner and Turner 1978, Goulding *et al.* 2002). The pilgrimage symbolises a release from mundane structures. Similar to religious pilgrimages, it involves an organised journey to a sacred time and location (Belk 1997, Tumbat and Belk 2011). Pilgrimages have the power to bond, unite, and to prompt camaraderie among travellers:

*“When boarding from Toronto to Vegas, we had a difficult time getting through US customs, not a nice experience, lots of tension and unease on all sides. But when we got through customs, we were able to relax... we headed to a bar for some food and a drink. When sitting there in our Irish beer pong jackets, we heard what we all agreed moments afterwards was the best question we were asked in a long time ‘Are you guys going to the World Series? It was and always will remain in my mind as the spark that set it all off! We all then shook hands and began telling our stories, where we were from... We traded stories about what we will do for New Years Eve and we said if we don't see them on the strip we would meet them on Day 1 of the*



*tournament. We had made friends before we even arrived.” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009*

As discussed in the above field note, friendships made while travelling to the ‘World Series’ are highlighted as essential to the experience, and remembered as ‘the spark that set it all off’. Pilgrimages signify an alteration of the structures of everyday life (Tumbat and Belk 2011) – they invoke feelings of mystery and playfulness (Belk *et al.* 1989, Caillois 2001). Pilgrimages serve as a means of sacralisation anticipation: consumers anticipate the sanctity of the carnivalesque during the pilgrimage (Langer 2007, Goulding *et al.* 2002). BPONG members prepare for the communal and friendly play behaviours required to participate in the WSOBP during the pilgrimage, thus it signifies the transition from ‘normality’ to the carnivalesque setting of Las Vegas, and the liminoid play-ground of the WSOBP.

#### **4.3.1.2 Las Vegas: An Anti-structure Ethos**

The WSOBP officially takes place in ‘Vegas’ annually, from January 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>. Las Vegas is an ideal setting for the linking of consumer emancipation with a branded event – it is considered the Mecca of impulsive and ludic behaviour (Belk 1997, 2001). Participants at the WSOBP not only anxiously await the beer pong tournament, but the novel setting of Las Vegas also. ‘Vegas’ is set apart from the mundane non-play time of ordinary life (Huizinga 1955, Belk 1997) and has the power to invoke a playful spirit in consumers (Belk 2001, Kozinets *et al.* 2004). BPONG community members enthusiastically encourage fellow members to embrace the opportunities for hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, Holbrook *et al.* 1984) that attending the WSOBP has to offer:

*“... go out and party your ass off... it's fucking wild! We'll have 4 days to play more (beer) pong than you ever have. I'll be out on the strip partying like it's 2008... or something like that.” – Dwissburn, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

BPONG members, such as 'Dwissburn' consider it a squandered opportunity to participate in the WSOBP without taking advantage of the extra-ordinary setting of Vegas pre and post official BPONG organised agon (tournament) play. Players engage in playful consumption in ancillary play-grounds (Huizinga 1955) prior to the WSOBP, in which they are encouraged to 'party their ass off' (agon, alea, and ilinx based). Ancillary play-grounds include The Flamingo casino and hotel rooms, O'Shea's Casino, and Blondies Sports Bar. The community regard these locations as sacred due to their association with liberatory play behaviours in the form of alea, agon and ilinx. O'Shea's is respected as an integral part of professional beer pong history due to its official supportive role to the carnival of the WSOBP. The below is a photograph taken on December 30<sup>th</sup>, it emphasises the emerging communal spirit of the BPONG community in O'Shea's. Members from various locations throughout the World gather in O'Shea's to enflame the communal spirit via friendly games of beer pong prior to the WSOBP.



Photograph 11. O'Shea's Ancillary Play-ground

As seen in photograph 11, the BPONG logo appears on many items in O'Shea's casino: the cups, pitchers, and tables. It is a BPONG sponsored permanent beer pong area with official equipment. There is also a display of the BPONG brand heritage on the walls, featuring many BPONG players,

hence its popularity as the community rendezvous point. Besides O'Shea's, attending room parties with community members is also an important addition to the overall engagement with the carnival:

*"There were about 8/9 different room parties with BPONG members occurring after they arrived in off the strip. It's great to hang with people like CC that you have chatted with on FB and finally get to meet in person... People are sharing alcohol, listening to music. It is a very friendly and relaxed vibe." – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010*



Photograph 12. BPONG room party, WSOBP VI December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010

As the above field note discusses and photograph 12 illustrates, prior to the official WSOBP tournament a communal and friendly spirit centred on fun and revelry has already begun to emerge. The majority of BPONG community members travelling to the WSOBP arrive in Las Vegas on the 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> of December, which means that they are in Las Vegas for New Years Eve celebrations (emically abbreviated to NYE). For NYE the Las Vegas Strip is transformed into a pedestrian street party, which typically involves temporary bars, music, performers, fireworks, and close to 320,000 participants (Finnegan 2010). This adds greatly to the longevity of the WSOBP carnival,

as communal consumption on the 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> serves as a supplementary play ritual, and hence for many, travelling to Vegas for NYE, has become an integral part of the WSOBP experience:



Photograph 13. BPONG members on 'The 'Strip' NYE, WSOBP VI, December 31<sup>st</sup> 2010

As illustrated in photograph 13, BPONG members partake in a variety of activities on NYE, but activities typically involve other members of the BPONG community:

*"...as lame as it sounds I have the most fun just hanging out with the guys I never normally see..." – Barnes, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

As 'Barnes' highlights, the communal ethos of the carnival is enacted from the moment participants begin to gather in Las Vegas. Despite the various forms of 'partying' available in Las Vegas, which serve as the preconsumption experience (Caru and Cova 2007) to the official BPONG experience, these are 'the most fun' when experienced with other BPONG members.



#### 4.3.1.3 Ensouling the Carnival Play-Ground



Photograph 14. 'The Ballroom': The calm before the carnival

Registration for the WSOBP opens on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. Participants are required to wear the WSOBP wristband for the duration of the tournament; it serves to highlight them as WSOBP participants, mainly to security and staff, but also to fellow participants. Donning the WSOBP wristband marks the commencement of the official branded carnival, acting as a contemporary tribal mask, it assembles attendees into an identifiable carnival community (Turner 1982). The main event begins at 10am on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January with an opening ceremony. The ceremony is concerned primarily with speeches and pageantry: it symbolises the sacred beginning of the official marketer-organised carnival (Sherry *et al.* 2007, Goulding *et al.* 2002).

*"The opening speech was similar to last year emphasising respecting everyone involved... this year the WSOBP opened with the USA national anthem. Duncan finished up with "Ladies and gentlemen – IT'S TIME!" The buzzer sounded, cheers and roars filled the ballroom... it officially had begun." – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011*

Carnivals do not (cannot) spontaneously erupt (Presdee 2000), the space designated for the carnival needs to be transformed via a purification ritual (Turner 1982). The opening ceremony of the WSOBP, the national anthem

and the buzzer, combine to serve as the purification ritual (Turner 1979). These rituals transform the ballroom into a sacred play-ground and allows for the carnivalesque atmosphere to emerge (Huizinga 1955, Sherry *et al.* 2007, Kozinets *et al.* 2004).

*“... there was this carnival atmosphere with a real major sporting event kind of a feel to it... that feeling of a big organised event in an arena, you know you’ve... over 1000 people competing...” – ‘Keany’, Male (28), Interview, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011*



Photograph 15. The Ballroom during the Carnival

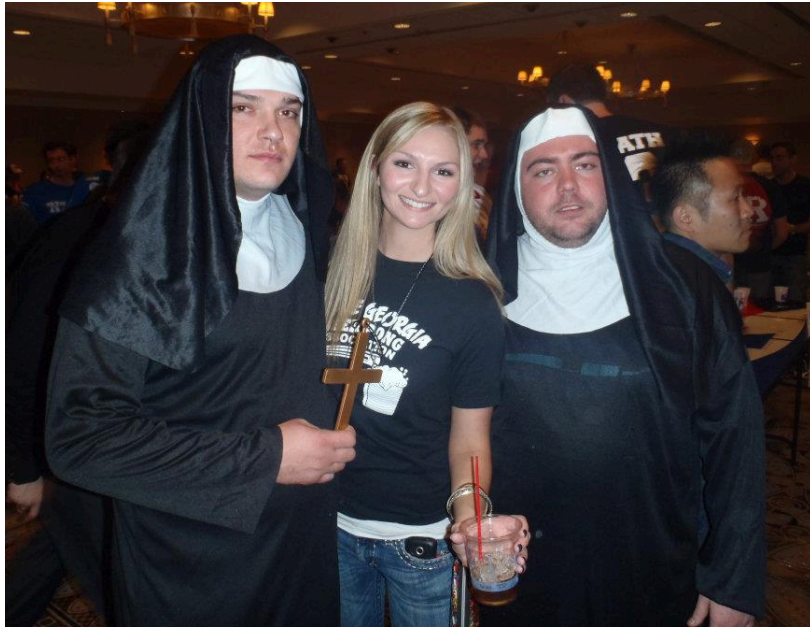
As ‘Keany’ discusses, following the official opening of the WSOBP, a carnival atmosphere emerges. ‘Keany’ associates the carnival atmosphere with the large number of attendees in the arena and the sense of *communitas* it provokes. Photograph 15 offers the reader a chance to experience the extent of the bustling play-ground. Communities of consumers, provided with the necessary platform, will develop bespoke approaches to consumption: they will infer their own meanings, develop bespoke rituals and traditions, and adapt previously communicated rituals and traditions in order to enhance consumption experiences offered by the marketer (Cova *et al.* 2007, Fournier *et al.* 2001, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The consumption of spectacles typically involves elements of consumer co-creation (Holt 1995), a significant portion of

the enjoyment experienced by consumers is a result of the capricious interactions consumers have with other consumers (Holt 1995, Sherry *et al.* 2007).

#### **4.3.1.4 Ludic Autotely: Maintaining the Carnival Atmosphere**

Creation and maintenance of the WSOBP carnival rely on specific dimensions. These dimensions include: playful dress; entertaining team names; themed jerseys; story telling; music, and revelry. Playful dress and costumes are traditionally associated with the carnival (Bakhtin 1984, Thompson 2007, Langer 2007, Goulding *et al.* 2009). Costumes mark a separation of the mundane (Caillouis 1962) and highlight the sense of world upside down. BPONG community members engage in processes of ludic autotely: whereby the event's participants are largely responsible for enhancing the playful experience for each other, it is largely outside BPONG's organisation (Sherry *et al.* 2007). The boundless creativity of BPONG community members maintains the atmosphere of the previously ensouled play-ground (Huizinga 1955). Participants wear colourful and entertaining costumes when participating at the WSOBP as a form of ludic autotely:

*“Looking around it was great to see people make the effort, many teams had flags, t-shirts, banners, hats, logos, crests, and some players were in fancy dress, it was very much a festival of fun and enjoyment...” – Field Notes WSOBP V, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010*



Photograph 16. Nuns on the Run WSOBP VI Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2011



Photograph 17. Fancy Dress at WSOBP VII





Photograph 18. 'Red and White are Dynamite'

The above photographs illustrate the playful nature of the WSOBP carnival experience. The inversion of typical day-to-day attire ensures that all participants are aware that they are playing within a carnival play-ground (Caillois 1962). Members' team names are also expected to be entertaining. Team Names are encouraged/expected to reflect the diverse elements of beer pong, be it the drinking aspect, the partying aspect, the rules, the boastful attitude, or the intimidation of opposing teams (team names are also discussed as a form of toxic play in section 4.3.2, hegemonic masculinity in section 4.4.2 and female empowerment in section 4.4.3).

Teams names at the WSOBP have included: THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH YOUR FACE!, ASK ABOUT US!, Gossip Girl, Wet Ballz, We Own Your Face, Smashing Time, and Handful of Ass, to name a few. There has been an evolving trend at the WSOBP to also have custom designed team jerseys that bear playful reference to popular culture: it ensures further maintenance of the

carnival (Sherry *et al.* 2007). The following are examples of team shirts on display at the WSOBP VII:



Image 2. WU-TANG CLAN based team shirt



Image 3. Superman themed team shirt

As the above demonstrate, community members have developed their own rituals and devised their own props to facilitate the carnivalesque spectacle of the WSOBP. Members build upon the marketer provided entertainment via the friendly conversations, story swapping, consuming shots of alcohol, trading t-shirts, and other playful rituals that enhance carnivalistic life at the WSOBP:

*“MT walked down to us drunk and tired. MT went on to tell the story of how he got married to a girl last night and she was still in the room and that he was too afraid to go back up... He was laughing and joking, but nervously.” – Field Notes WSOBP V, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010*

The above field note highlights the contrasting behaviours governing play at the carnival. Typically, ‘Vegas wedding’ stories are associated with TV and movies, however the WSOBP, in true carnival spirit invokes spontaneous behaviours (Elias and Dunning 1986) and these erratic and playful experiences are celebrated within the community as form of ‘ludic autotely’. Besides the vast array of costumes on show and story telling, carnivals require dancing, music, and joviality (Thompson 2007). The ballroom of the WSOBP encapsulates the laughter, reversal, and revelry associated with the carnival (Presdee 2000). Echoing throughout the ballroom there is bellowing R’n’B/Rap music played by a professional well-established DJ (Joe Green). Also within the confines of the play-ground are two fully stocked bars, the music and alcohol serve to enhance and conduct the carnivalesque atmosphere:

*“The music really got people in the mood to party. The atmosphere was amazing. It was like a nightclub, but better. People were dancing, drinking, jumping, laughing, joking, and making friends.” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*



Photograph 15. Music fills the Ballroom at WSOBP VII

The above field note highlights the fluid nature of the music, alcohol, participants and the build up of the mimicry-ilinx frenzy. The ballroom is compared to that of a nightclub such is the high-energy atmosphere and friendly nature of participants. Brand fests and other forms of consumer play, such as engaging in sports and games (Holt 1995, Holbrook *et al.* 1984) are typically associated with forms of hedonic and experiential consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, Santoro and Troilo 2007, Langer 2007). The WSOBP embraces these hedonic experiences as a foundation, and builds upon them in a more deviant and toxic manner. Participants exaggerate the moderate forms of hedonism, typically associated with brand-facilitated events, to degrees of abnormal (Reith 2005) and toxic consumption, which are traditionally associated with carnivalistic life (Hanlon 2006, Thompson 2007).

#### **4.3.2 Toxic Play: The Apogee of Carnivalistic Life**

While hedonic consumption is understood as pleasure seeking through consumption practices (Hopkinson and Pujari 1999, Santoro and Troilo 2007), BPONG community members display an additional excessively destructive element to their hedonistic play. Participants enact additional self-harming and deviant behaviour traditionally associated with the madness of the carnival (Caillois 1962, Bakhtin 1984, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). The playful, yet toxic practices engaged in are associated with the foolish, irrational, and deviant. However, the significance of this form of toxic play at the WSOBP, lies in its liminoid nature, it is to be played out with common emotional bond: this serves to enhance participant's experience of the play-ground (Goulding *et al.* 2009, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011).

Consumers are caught at a juncture, between the legacy of self-control and the increasing emphasis on hedonism and personal gratification (Reith 2005). Such dualism lies at the heart of consumption: consumers are encouraged to let go and experience hedonistic excess – but not too much. They are expected to balance self-indulgence and the social conventions required in ordinary time (Reith 2005). However, carnivalesque play is a form of

consumer emancipation (Langer 2007), a temporary freedom from the dualism of excess and control, it fosters excess in the form of drinking, eating, copulating, vomiting, and destruction (Thompson 2007, Reith 2005). It may have harmful side effects but it allows consumers to act out desired practices of hedonism in a temporal, yet communally significant manner. Toxic play is the apogee of 'carnivalistic life': it is at this juncture the carnival reaches its full ilinx-mimicry frenzy.

Toxic consumption practices such as excessive drinking, binge eating, legal and illegal drug consumption, and upsetting the public are widespread at the WSOBP. Such toxic practices are also associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The masculine roles enacted by BPONG members have a dual foundation of competitive (agon) and toxic (ilinx) play. The enactment (mimicry) of masculine roles is essential to the BPONG playground, hence, it will be discussed separately in section 4.4.

#### **4.3.2.1 Abnormal Alcohol Consumption**

At the WSOBP there is a particular salient abuse of alcohol involved in the form of voluntary intoxication and continuous extreme alcohol consumption. The WSOBP involves alcohol consumption during tournament play, post tournament games (shots of alcohol with competitors), and also during night 'partying'. The effects of this toxic play via the abuse of alcohol has lead to the development of an emic lexicon: terms such as 'feeling like Day 2', "PONGDEMIC", and 'Pong Flu' attempt to normalise and distance the consequences of engaging in such a destructive corrupt ilinx play form (Caillois 1962). However harmful alcohol consumption may be, within the liminoid community it is encouraged as it invokes the atmosphere of fun and revelry, which serves to conduct carnivalistic life as desired by participants:



Photograph 16. Drinking in the fun at WSOBPV January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010

*“Everyone present got stocked up with alcohol and went back to the room parties... chatting to fellow beer pong players in the hallways... the general theme is that everyone wants to party... everyone has alcohol stocked in their rooms... we went into rooms to watch games, chat, and drink beer...” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*

As the above field note highlights, alcohol consumption does not stop, it commences first thing in the morning, and continues through to the official tournament and later at room parties: it is essential to the maintenance of the WSOBP carnivalistic life. However, the practice of continuously engaging in abnormal alcohol consumption often leads to community members feeling quite ill: it is extremely damaging. Extreme consumption practices puts participants’ bodies under serious strain. Below is a personal account of the second day in ‘Vegas’ at WSOBP VI after engaging in canivalesque consumption, as expected, and encouraged, by BPONG community members:

*“OH my head! My first thoughts when I woke – this was not going to be a good day, how am I going to survive? I had the worst beer migraine – vomiting for about an hour straight with a pounding headache. I had my*



*sunglasses on, I was not talking, I was sweating and empty retching every four steps – it was torture.” – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010*



Photograph 17. Room party with excessive consumption – 60 beers, WSOBP V, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The above personal account highlights the torturous consequences and ease at which participants may become drawn into carnival consumption. However, the positive feelings experienced during WSOBP play are understood by members to outweigh the temporary negative toxic effects. Within the BPONG community, emic terms have emerged that highlight the consequences of binge alcohol consumption. These phrases are derived from the abnormal abuse that members' bodies experience while participating at the WSOBP. One particular phrase makes reference to 'Day 2'; at this point in the WSOBP players have been engaging in abnormal alcohol consumption for a number of days:

*"My body feels like Vegas Day 2" – CC91, Male (27), Facebook Status, March 18<sup>th</sup> (The day following Montreal's St. Patrick's Day celebrations), 2011*

*“At WSOBP V during ‘Day 2’ I was puking blood at one stage I think... (laughs)” SS, Male (28), Informal conversation, WSOBP VII, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

‘CC91’ associates his ill feelings following St. Patrick’s Day celebrations to be similar to the experience of Vegas Day 2, thus highlighting the toxic nature of his consumption at the WSOBP. ‘SS’ discusses how such salient abuse of alcohol during WSOBP V resulted in an extremely dangerous physical state in which he was ‘puking blood’. The toxic alcohol consumption involved at the WSOBP leaves participants feeling the affects of their excessive consumption post the experience of the WSOBP also. BPONG members have coined the general sickness and feelings of ill health experienced post the WSOBP as ‘Pong Flu’. BPONG member PPA discusses how being ill is part of the overall WSOBP experience, and that pushing one’s body and mind beyond the normal realms of consumption is expected, in fact it is a conscious decision made by community members:

*“PONGDEMIC!!!! You guys should all be happy you’re sick... it’s part of the WSOBP experience!” – PPA, posting in BPONG.com Forum*

*“Yeah, I ended up in the ICU for 4 days after the Series this last year... no jokes.” – ‘BC’, Facebook Comment, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

‘BC’ highlights the extreme dangers of engaging fully with the community’s vision of carnivalistic life, consumption can be so extreme that it has resulted in members being hospitalised for a number of days. In the below passage, BPONG brand owner Billy Gaines highlights the toxic consumption coupled with disregard for structured behaviour as to why members develop ‘Pong Flu’ post the WSOBP:

*“...nearly everybody pushes their bodies beyond normal limits by drinking, not sleeping, etc. When you do that, you’re going to break down your body and*



*be more susceptible to all of the stuff brought by people from all over the world.” – Billy Gaines (BPONG Owner), posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

‘Billy Gaines’ highlights further the extreme hedonic element central to the WSOBP; he states that participants push their bodies ‘beyond normal limits’, thus developing illnesses. To engage fully in the spectrum of play, specifically the carnivalesque, available at the WSOBP involves sacrificing one’s health. Thus, underlying play at the WSOBP is a toxic and destructive element. However, BPONG members are happy to indulge in the forms of hedonistic play available, understanding that the consequences will be quite damaging to their body and minds (Lyng 1990).

Players vocalize the ‘pain’ of excess and the toxic element of their play in an attempt to normalize these behaviours within the community (Goulding *et al.* 2009, Algesheimer *et al.* 2005). Play-grounds require rules (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962), and while the competitive rules for playing beer pong are clearly established by BPONG, the rules of play engaged in outside of competitive beer pong are created and maintained by community members (masculine roles enacted influence the tacit rules of the play-ground and will be expanded upon in section 4.4). The WSOBP in essence is a co-created consumer carnival (Langer 2007) and the general rule that guides behaviour in the WSOBP play-ground is that ‘the play never stops’ and that participation at the WSOBP requires full commitment to all forms of play, regardless of how excessive and damaging the play may be. BPONG members highlight the continuous toxic play behaviours to be the foundation to the WSOBP carnival:

*“LOL (Laugh out loud) - I think this is (constant alcohol consumption) one of the funny aspects of the WSOBP. Having to get ready early for pong is hilarious... especially if you're partaking in the evening events... which for many include playing pong and drinking past 3-4am the nights before. My first world series was rough... just wasn't prepared to be doing that, especially since that year and every year after we go out on December 30th... so we*

*already had 2 Vegas days/nights in before the WSOBP registration even starts... LOL” – Dwisburn, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

‘Dwisburn’ highlights his experience of having to get ready to play beer pong early to be comically, such is the abuse of alcohol throughout his night that he cannot maintain normal composure. He describes his first experience of this to have been ‘rough’ and that he wasn’t ‘prepared for it’, this suggest that toxic play within the community is a learnt skill (Goulding *et al.* 2012) and that it needs to be matched with mental preparation, such are its potentially damaging effects as outlined previously. It is in fact so damaging that community members often find it difficult to eat due to the extent of their toxic alcohol consumption:

*“I never eat at the WS, it is too difficult. I am after drinking so much... I barely get an hour sleep and then I start drinking again... it’s too hard to eat, so I just keep drinking (laughs).” – Speas, Male (55), Informal conversation, WPT Atlantic City Championship, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

The above from ‘Speas’ highlights the observable trade off between participation at the WSOBP, as per community norms, and one’s health. However, during the WSOBP carnival members rarely view this as a trade off.

*“BB described his routine at the WSOBP like a timetable surrounding alcohol – the times he drinks beer and drinks spirits. He mentioned waking early to be able to drink by tournament time...” – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Toxic play is engaged in instinctively. As per carnival tradition, there is a liminoid ethos of abnormality practiced as normality; alcohol consumption is a constant foundation of this contemporary carnival.

#### 4.3.2.2 Appropriating Marketplace Resources for Toxic Play

The WSOBP proclaims the maximisation of fun regardless of the consequences. Hence, some marketplace resources, associated with health and balance are appropriated to facilitate toxic play and to maintain the carnival tradition of inverting meanings (Hanlon 2006). Thus, brands other than BPONG, become incorporated into this commercially orientated carnival:

*“Players are often so sick from alcohol they cannot eat. They begin mixing Emergen-C vitamin sachets into Smirnoff (vodka) or Jack Daniels and mix alcohol and Gatorade in order to ‘keep going’.” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010*

The Emergen-C and Gatorade brands are appropriated with carnivalesque meaning: their intended use is mocked due to their combination with inherently carnivalesque alcohol brands. During the WSOBP, these non-carnivalesque brands are appropriated in order produce carnival linking value and in doing so BPONG members maintain enough ‘good’ health to participate in their desired form of corrupt ilinx based play. BPONG members also appropriate the meaning of food brands as another creative play outlet and express their communal desire for carnivalesque inversion and excess.

Food is something inherently sacred (Belk *et al.* 1989), however, the WSOBP embraces the ‘world turn upside down’ ethos and normal social conventions are not respected. Nothing is off limits: everything is considered a possible resource for toxic play.

*“MV and I will be organizing a Chipotle race for anyone interested. \$10/head buy-in plus cost of food. Winner takes all. Quickest to eat two meat burritos wins. Rules: 1. Must be a meat burrito 2. Must contain rice 3. Beans are required, but can be substituted for extra rice or fajita vegetables 4. At least two toppings (i.e. lettuce and cheese) The Chipotle is located within walking distance of the casino” – Barnes, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Eating competitions are pre-organised, and hence eating too becomes a resource for facilitating toxic play. Marketplace resources, such as the Chipotle brand (gourmet burritos), are appropriated and infused with carnivalesque linking value. The communal appropriation of brands serves to heighten the emotional bond central to the carnival.



Photograph 18. Homemade Bacon Vodka Bloody Marys!

The following conversation, took place underneath the above photograph (18) on Facebook, it highlights how carnivalesque linking value is produced via the appropriation/mocking of marketplace resources (namely; bacon, Tabasco sauce, Vodka, and the Bloody Mary, in this example):

*JS: look how dark that vodka turned out!? You know that was full of flavor :P  
lol (laugh out loud) It tasted like I put bacon in a blender and poured it into the  
Bloody Marys haha*

*MS: lol (laugh out loud) Hoooooray for bacon vodka! Was I the only one to  
drink it straight?*

During the carnival, that which in moderation can be considered healthy is transformed and mocked – primarily used to access carnival meaning (through inversion) and as a result produces carnivalesque linking value. While excessive and abnormal eating is traditionally associated with the

carnival (Bakhtin 1984), alcohol remains the prime carnivaleque consumption activity engaged in at the WSOBP – it is inescapable.

Maintaining energy levels is something each participant must control and ultimately self-manage. While some (a vast minority) will get adequate sleep and eat healthily, the majority rely on either legal or illegal substances. Those that do not use illegal substances rely on energy drinks, which have been termed ‘liquid cocaine’. Legal energy rushes, relied upon heavily, include branded energy drinks such as 5-hour Energy, Red Bull, Monster and alcoholic versions such as Four Loko (an alcoholic drink high in caffeine, given the slang name ‘black out in a can’ due to its effect on novice drinkers). It is common to see BPONG members consume energy drinks/alcoholic energy drinks the morning of tournament play to ensure they have enough energy to participate in the more serious forms of agon play:

*“I bumped into 3 other Canadian guys I didn’t know in the shop, all buying a couple of 5-hour energy drinks. As I was walking out of the shop, I saw H and B also drinking them, K then shouted at me to throw him one of mine... quick energy fixes are popular among participants.” – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

*“E\_\_ and S\_\_ arrived into my room for practice games at roughly 8.00am, they already had begun drinking Four Lokos to keep ‘the buzz going’ they explained” – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011*

While some marketplace resources are incorporated into the carnival as intended such as ‘Jack and Coke’ and ‘Red Bull’, other brands are appropriated for inclusion. Examples discussed include Emergen-C and Gatorade. However, the WSOBP carnival is not supported by marketplace resources alone, it is also supported by black market resources in the form of illegal drugs, which highlight further the toxic, and darker, elements of the WSOBP branded carnival.

#### 4.3.2.3 Black Market Resources: Illegal Toxic Play

Other potentially more harmful supplements to the carnivalesque atmosphere at the WSOBP include the consumption of illegal drugs. Typical drugs consumed by members of the community include marijuana, cocaine, and ecstasy. While excessive alcohol consumption is promoted widespread within the community, the use of drugs to supplement toxic play is on a far more secretive scale. The consumption of illegal drugs is regarded as a deviant practice of the carnival (Reith 2005). While community members can earn degrees of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) for extreme alcohol consumption (discussed in section 4.4.2), this is not the case with regard to the consumption of black market resources. The illegal drug most commonly consumed by the BPONG community is Marijuana:

*“The smell of marijuana on our floor corridor was ridiculous... all the beer pong players are kept together... to be honest anywhere there were beer pong players there was a smell of ‘weed’. It something that seemed to go hand in hand with it...” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010*

*“I would be useless if I smoked during... I smoke weed after tournament play to relax and to eat. It is so intense you need something to calm you down, to just chill... the tournament is such high pressure... Playing pong and having a smoke afterwards is relaxing.” – ‘Columbine’, Male (25), Informal Conversation WSOBP VII, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

Marijuana is consumed by some BPONG members post official tournament play, due to its associated effects of relaxation and increasing appetite. The majority of ‘weed’ smokers in the community do not believe it would supplement beer pong ability positively, due to its effects of lethargy, and possible confusion. Agon play from beer pong is the most desired form of play, however, post official WSOBP tournament play the more deviant forms of play emerge, which includes many room parties centred on smoking ‘weed’, drinking, and playing casual beer pong:

*“One of my favourite parts of the trip... those bangin’ Cali trees (marijuana)” – ‘Guido’, Male (29), posting in Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

Marijuana offers a more relaxing aspect to the high-energy carnival, while still concerned with the liminoid it allows players to ‘recharge’, after an intense day’s agon play. For some members, such as ‘Guido’, being able to relax post tournament is one of his favourite parts up the experience. While still inherently carnivalesque, the consumption of marijuana offers a contrasting form of play to that experienced during intense agon at the beer pong table. Besides marijuana use, to maximise the overall carnivalesque experience at the WSOBP, other potentially more harmful drugs used on a lesser scale, include cocaine and ecstasy.

Similarly to marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy are typically used outside of the sanctity of official tournament time; they are used post tournament time to maintain the excess, deviance, and inversion of mundane (Thompson 2007, Presdee 2000, Reith 2005). Cocaine is more likely to be consumed at a room party given the highly illegal status and stigmatization of the drug (Reith 2005, Duterte *et al.* 2009). Below is a personal experience of a room party during WSOBP VII, at which some players were consuming ‘coke’:

*“I was in shock how many people at the party were doing it. I suspected two guys because they mentioned it a few times, but I was very surprised at the rest. After they did ‘a few lines’ there was an immediate rush to go wandering around the hotel, to gamble and to ‘hit on girls’...” – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Participants at the WSOBP often make reference to running on ‘empty’. They engage in extreme behaviours such as playing beer pong all day, consuming alcohol continuously, and partying all night with little to no sleep or food. Hence, extra sources of energy are needed in order to be able to continue

participation in the carnival. As the above field note illustrates, the consumption of 'coke' allows for more energetic forms of carnival play to remerge, following consumption, community members desire play in the form of gambling (alea) and to flirt with girls (mimicry), a foundation of the archaic carnival (Caillouis 2001). BPONG members try to interact with as much fun as possible during the carnival:

*"I go hard! It is very difficult to keep energy the whole way through, drinking that much means its hard to eat, then not sleeping much, I need a bit of a kick if I want to keep going, 'coke' (cocaine) helps with that..." – JM, Male (24), Informal conversation, WSOBP VI, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

The consumption of drugs to maintain play can be considered a deviant form of edgework (Lyng 1990, 2005, Reith 2005) (Edgework is discussed in terms of abnormal sport in section 4.4.3). Cocaine, as mentioned above by a number of participants, is a suitable supplement to ensure they can engage fully in the behaviour required at the WSOBP and 'keep going'.

Ecstasy is another drug consumed in a highly ritualistic manner at the WSOBP. Similar to cocaine, the consumption of ecstasy is not as widespread as alcohol or marijuana consumption. For those that consume ecstasy at the WSOBP, it is a marker of the end of the WSOBP carnival. A minority of members organise to consume ecstasy on the last night of the WSOBP. While the effects of ecstasy encourage feelings of *communitas* (Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009), the negative affects such as feeling drained with high levels of anxiety (Duterte *et al.* 2009, Goulding *et al.* 2009) would not suit the high intensity of competitive games at the WSOBP. Hence, it is consumed post the official tournament, to symbolise and reinforce the communal bond established before the ending of the carnival:

*"After B.B mentioned he was going 'rolling' after the tourney I asked him when and with whom... he told me a story about how previously himself and a lot of the players, took some and just hung out with each other around the*



*casino having fun, he mentioned that 'it's the last night – you won't see these guys again for months, if not a year, so it's good you all have a good night together... as often we are pretty fuckin' sick about not winning'. He reflected upon this story in an extremely positive manner."* – B.B, Male (27), *Informal Conversation, WSOBP VII, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

'B.B' highlights how even though participants may not be happy with their performance at the WSOBP, they instead establish a means to create feelings of fun through drug consumption. This highlights further the ethos of maximizing fun from play (corrupt ilinx), regardless of potential consequences. There is an observable relationship between the WSOBP and poly-drug use: the practice of 'picking and mixing' a selection of drugs associated with youth culture (Reith 2005, Duterte *et al.* 2009) appears to be integral to the maintenance of the constant play and amusement central to this carnival carnival. This further supports the 'world upside down' ethos: at the WSOBP the risks of drug consumption are not considered or realised. Essentially, risks do not exist in the minds of participants during the liminoid carnival: it is juxtaposed with ordinary life in each consumption sphere (Turner 1982, Sherry *et al.* 2007).

#### **4.3.2.4 Upsetting the Public: The Delight in Being Deviant at the WSOBP**

The carnival is about displaying opposition to the socially constructed norm, and normal time, it is to be considered outside of and set apart from ordinary life (Caillois 1962, Bakhtin 1984, Thompson 2007). Contrasting rules govern play during the temporary phenomenon of the carnival (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011, Bakhtin 1984, Thompson 2007, Wills 1989, Presdee 2000). These rules hold a hidden aesthetic of disruption in that there is a certain appreciation of the 'delight in being deviant' (Katz 1988, in Presdee 2000). The carnival is a performance of disorder, one in which public concern and order must be disrupted, not merely opposed (Presdee 2000, Thompson 2007). The BPONG community embrace the inappropriate ways in which those not participating in the branded carnival of the WSOBP become upset. While the practices

engaged in at the WSOBP can be considered forms of consumer play, they display darker, more deviant characteristics. One particular method of upsetting and inverting cultural norms is that of publicising the private, or displaying the 'openness of the grotesque body' (Bakhtin 1984, Wills 1989, Thompson 2007) through streaking:

*"We said to him: 'Man you were wasted last night, do you not remember running naked through the hotel?' He then replied: 'What man? I wasn't naked, I was wearing a shoe.'" – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010*

The BPONG community are not satisfied with containing the carnival within their communal boundary. Publicising the private has the inherent ability to cause upset and shock. Inappropriate acts such as the streaking, outlined in the above field note, draw nonparticipants into the carnival without their consent. They are drawn into the grotesque: their boundaries are not respected. The carnival frenzy must be communicated to those not in full participation, they are in essence forced into the experience as carnival spectators (Caillois 1962). This form of deviant play heightens the sense of liberatory behaviour associated with the WSOBP at the expense of those outside the community.

While the openness of the body may upset public norms, it has become de-stigmatized. That which may have been once considered abnormal becomes unusual and eventually normal (Presdee 2006, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). Streaking has occurred in various other aspects of consumer society, from sporting events to protests, and hence it is no longer the 'world upside down'. Contemporary carnivalesque play must thus display new imperatives to maintain its foundation of disorder:

*"Brand owners mentioned how previously one of the actual flamingos from the Flamingo casino's gardens was abducted and brought into a BPONG players room. There are constant stories about players being kicked out of*

*their rooms, breaking items in hallways, and being inappropriate” – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*“CC91 started continuously chanting AIDS in tune to the song ‘Shots’ by LMFAO. He also began asking random girls in the casino and O’Shea’s would it be okay if he kissed them that he only has AIDS and it would be gone in a week...” – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011*

The inappropriate shocks, things that are not regarded as amusing or entertaining in day-to-day life provide the foundation of carnival joy. Illnesses such as AIDS are allowed to be poked fun at during the carnival: the carnival represents the world upside down, but more importantly it is structured through laughter, for in tandem with social upheaval and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour is carnivalesque joy (Predess and Carver 2000). However offensive play behaviour may appear, for those engaging in it, it is a suspended reality – not a reflection of real life (Huizinga 1955). Thus, the carnival must also possess the ability to laugh at itself. BPONG members frequently taunt and tease each other, as well as poke fun at themselves, about how drunk they were during the WSOBP:

*“SunnyB posted a video (on Facebook) of one his friends being very drunk at WSOBP VII, the guy was beyond drunk... everyone poked fun at him while admitting that they too were in similar states of inebriation but just were not videotaped...” Netnographic Note, Facebook, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

Acts of carnival contain no shame, and without shame the carnival runs seamlessly (Presdee and Carver 2000). Below is a photograph uploaded to Facebook in which all in the photograph poked fun about drunk they were, free from shame:



Photograph 19. 'Drunkards' at WSOBP VII

The inappropriate and offensive is expected at the carnival. In its language and imagery the carnival is not afraid of the 'arse hole', the 'prick', or the 'cunt' (Thompson 2007). A particularly important aspect to the WSOBP is the choosing of a team name, it is another prop for playing. While these team names typically include references to aspects of beer pong (see section 4.3.1); team names often ignore any reference to beer pong and take on particularly foul and grotesque meanings. The following are examples of the many team names that take on grotesque language: 10 inches soft, Buttpussy, Dirty Vaginas, Projectile Vomit, Flick the bean, and C.U.N.T.

Authority is to be taunted, teased, and mocked during the carnival. This is no different at the WSOBP. While there are many security guards present in the tournament ballroom and in the ancillary play-grounds (Huizinga 1955) of O'Shea's and Blondies, security's warnings are generally laughed at and ignored. Authority is inverted to the point that security guards accept the inappropriate behaviour as an easier means of dealing with the carnival and hence, too become forced into the fun:



Photograph 20. Authority Mocked

*‘The Police officer was tricked into holding a ‘JD and Coke’ by ‘E’ for a photograph after refusing to consume the drink which was offered to him’ – Field Notes WSOBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*

*“On the last night of the WSOBP O’Shea’s security said they are not going to throw anyone out unless it’s a fight or something. He explained to me he had enough of the childishness and doesn’t care anymore... He then mentioned that we (WSOBP attendees) are too difficult to manage...” – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

The above field notes highlight how participants at the WSOBP branded carnival ensure the world upside ethos of the inversion of authority is enacted. Security guards are not respected and they become forced into the fun to the point where they cannot do their jobs effectively. However, the high energy and the deviant practices of the carnival cannot last: eventually it will result in ‘chaos’ (Presdee 2000) and ‘chaos in the midst of chaos is no longer play’ (Caillois 2001). Order must eventually be restored.

### 4.3.3 Exit through the Carnival: A Return to Structured Consumption

The extreme and excess behaviours associated with the WSOBP cannot last: the carnival must end and 'Lent' must come (Caillois 2001). The WSOBP comes to an end on January 5<sup>th</sup>. The night of January the 4<sup>th</sup> is respected as the final BPONG community celebration, for many it will be the last time they will be in each other's social company until the following carnival season (WSOBP). It is on this night that the festivity of the carnival exhausts itself. On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> the vast majority of BPONG members must return to the 'ordinary' non-carnival world to ensure they are present for flights home. Thus, there is an obvious end to carnival on the morning of January the 5<sup>th</sup>:

*"Walking around the Flamingo lobby I didn't know who was a beer pong player anymore... the vast majority have their WSOBP wristbands cut off already, everyone is quiet, they look focused on the task of checking out and making their flights home. They look like 'normal' people now: drinking Vitamin Water or Gatorade in order to speed up the process of being back to normality. Players are saying goodbyes but these are a lot less animated and more formal than on the drunken night previous... players look almost apologetic... the WSOBP is certainly over for another year." – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, as discussed in the above field note, it is no longer clear who is a BPONG community member anymore, they have blended in with the rest of the hotel's visitors, no longer is carnival play enacted, players are focused, less animated and almost apologetic for their carnival commitment to toxic play. Those who do not respect the sanctity of the carnival end are mocked and shamed, and no longer playfully. One such member who failed to revert from carnival time, which resulted in him missing his flight from Las Vegas, became the butt of many jokes within the community:

*“Oh this is embarrassing. Everyone finds it so amusing I missed my flight, and it’s not helping me at all.” – ‘Keany’, Male (28), Informal Conversation, WSOBP VII, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

While during the carnival there is no shame and the fool is king, post the carnival of the WSOBP those who continue to fool are no longer respected as ‘kings’ – the fool is a fool. During the days following the WSOBP, players discuss and proclaim visions of their own forms of Lent. No longer is excess enthused or celebrated, it is in fact the opposite desired – frugality. BPONG community members express joy about no longer playing beer pong and being back to ‘normality’, they also exclaim abstinence from toxic play for a number of weeks:

*“I cannot wait not to play beer pong for a couple of weeks” – ‘Chewie’, Male (25), Facebook Status, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*“Looking forward to going back to normality and some detox for a couple of weeks” – ‘Keany’, Male (28), Informal conversation, WSOBP VI, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*“After the WS I just hide out for a couple of weeks, build my money back up, forget about beer pong and stop drinking... make my way back into society (laughs).” – ‘CC91’, Male (27), Informal Conversation, WPT Atlantic City Championship, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

These behaviours are in stark contrast to those enacted during the WSOBP. It highlights members’ temporary, yet, full commitment to the WSOBP carnival. The branded carnival has been played out successfully and, as is tradition, it must be followed by Lenten times of frugality and normality (Caillois 2001). Participation in the WSOBP branded carnival is so extreme that post-carnival rituals results in a reverse movement in consumption; marketplace resources associated with ‘normality’ and health (such as Gatorade and Vitamin Water) become the foundation of post WSOBP consumption practices. No longer are

they mocked, but embraced – emphatically. The carnival is over and order (normal consumption) restored until the following carnival season. The WSOBP has at its core toxic play behaviours associated with masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012). The masculine roles, enacted as a form of mimicry, which produce the play-ground ethos will now be discussed as the ‘hyper-masculine playpen’.

#### **4.4 The Hyper-Masculine Playpen: Masculine Roles Enacted**

Cultural representations of masculinity have changed dramatically over the past decade (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Holt and Thompson 2004). It is suggested that male consumers, unsure of their masculine day-to-day consumption roles, have either adopted a more feminine approach to consumption as a result of the shifting cultural representations of what it is to be a ‘real man’ (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Holt and Thompson 2004). Some male consumers have resorted to seeking utopian ideals of masculinity via participation in rituals within hyper-masculine consumption communities (Belk and Costa 1998). Such mimicry is understood as a temporary subversion of contemporary cultural representations of masculinity and an escape from their disillusioned understanding of masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004). Typically, within these liminoid zones (Sherry *et al.* 2007), consumption rituals are primarily associated with atavistic ideals of masculinity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Observed within the BPONG community’s liminoid play-ground, play rituals enacted afford participants a spectrum of masculine roles, not solely atavistic, free from the constraints of contemporary representations of masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Participants can engage in a variety of desired masculine mimicry forms, which allows for the construction of a hyper-masculine identity, yet in a socially acceptable



context. The forms of play, the toxic (ilinx) and the competitive (agon), central to this play-ground, provide participants opportunities to mimic and maintain a variety of contrasting strong masculine identities. The WSOBP is a liminoid zone in which participants can engage with a variety of masculine play associated with aggression, dependability, competition, physical skill, gazing upon women, drinking and smoking, and various other forms of frivolous and irresponsible behaviour. In essence, rather than only incorporating ideals of atavistic masculinity into their liminoid play-ground, the community have also incorporated breadwinner roles into their consumption. However, while Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss the middle-ground tactic of adopting elements of both breadwinner and rebel masculine roles, within the BPONG community members enact roles at the extremes of the poles of the breadwinner and rebel masculine roles. Thus, the WSOBP is understood as a novel hyper-masculine liminoid zone, conceptualised as the ‘hyper-masculine playpen’, in which participants enact a multitude of extreme masculine roles to aid their construction of masculinity (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). The range of masculine roles observed within the playpen, will be discussed in reference to Avery’s (2012) discussion on masculine roles:

Table 10. Masculinity in the Hyper-Masculine Playpen

<b>Play Form</b>	<b>Masculine Role</b>	<b>Components of Role</b>
<i>Competitive (agon)</i>	The Sturdy Oak	Winning, Skill, Composure, Self-belief Withstanding pressure Showmanship, Internal hegemony
	Give ‘Em Hell	Defending territory, Winning at all costs, Aggression,

		Intimidating competitors, Engaging in 'smack talk'
	The Big Wheel	Winning, Earning money, Cash-games, Hustling
<i>Toxic/ Carnavalesque (ilinx)</i>	The Glutton	Alcohol, food, and drug abuse, Competitive consumption, Constant play/no sleep, Internal hegemony
	The Playboy	Gazing upon strippers, Photographs with 'pretty girls', Use of term 'stud', Relaying of sexual conquests
	Peter Pan	Ignoring responsibility, Child-like play, Costumes, Playful team names, Trickster mentality

During the intense competition of the WSOBP competitive masculine roles are enacted and post official tournament games the more carnivalesque and toxic masculine roles are enacted. Members are thus afforded varied, but constant, opportunities to mimic their construction of 'real man'. Members of the BPONG community enact several/all of these roles associated with poles of masculinity by employing a tactic of alternating between them based on the specific play context. The play contexts of the WSOBP hyper-masculine

playpen are characterised as either competitive (agon) or carnivalesque (ilinx) based (see Table 10).

In both these play spheres an ethos of 'being the best man one can be' has emerged. It is maintained through the use of internal hegemony, which refers to the social ascendancy of a group of men over all other men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Within the BPONG community the collective vision of 'man', and being the best man one can be, is maintained through a series of playful punishments, a desire to portray dependability and reliability, choosing sexist team names, excessive alcohol consumption, poly-drug use (section 4.3.5.3) and aggressive competition. The hyper-masculine roles of the BPONG community will now be discussed with reference to the two dominant play contexts observed in the play-ground: the competitive (agon) and the carnivalesque (ilinx).

#### **4.4.1 The 'Competitor' Masculine Roles Enacted Within the Playpen**

##### **4.4.1.1 The Sturdy Oak**

This masculine role holds associations with the dependability and reliability of the breadwinner (Holt and Thompson 2004). Within in the BPONG community the masculine role of the 'Sturdy Oak' (Avery 2012) is associated with, what the BPONG community construct as the most sought after play talent, to be able to 'make cups under pressure' – the ability to be consistently accurate in high pressure beer pong game situations. The most unique rule in the sport of beer pong is that of 'redemption', it is this rule that creates the high-pressure atmosphere, in which reliability and dependability are essential. The 'redemption' ruling states that if a team ends the game, the competing team has the opportunity to draw the game and bring it to an over-time, but only if all remaining cups on table are 'hit' without missing. This serves to heighten the sense of pressure and tension central to competitive games (Caillois

1962). It is in these game scenarios where the skills of players get noticed and are subsequently talked about emphatically:

*“The video is titled ‘the best game of beer pong of all time’ it is a renowned Maryland Singles Championship Final, in which the game went to 8 over-times due to the players ability to perform under pressure and make redemption shots. It remains one of the most talked about games ever due to the impressive talents on display. There is substantial subcultural capital earned from being a ‘pressure shooter’.” – Netnographic Note, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011*

*“... MV or PT (is best player)...both are awesome shooters especially under pressure....” – ‘2<sup>nd</sup> Place’, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

The above netnographic data, highlights pressure and performance, powerful displays of masculinity are intertwined with these traits. The rules of the game created by BPONG allow these traits of masculinity, associated with the ‘Sturdy Oak’ to be enacted: it provides the community with the opportunity to play this role, seldom experienced by WSOBP participants within structured society. (It must be noted that the typical beer pong player is a white working class male between the age of 22-27, with little responsibility and a relatively low income or still attending College. While there are players with prestigious careers, which are financially secure, these players are a minority). Despite the heightened pressure of making redemption shots, players frequently increase the pressure on themselves by engaging in degrees of showmanship as a status display (Morris 2002, Huizinga 1955):

*“I couldn’t believe it, this was very impressive, before stepping up to hit the last cup in an over-time, Max shouts out to his opponents and the crowd, the crowd chanted along with him, “DIP, BOUNCE, BANG” he then did exactly that, dipped the ball in water, bounced it, and threw it into the cup. He smiled and opened out his arms in celebration, in a taunting manner. It was very cocky, and that’s what beer pong is about.” – Field Notes WSOBPVII, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

(Youtube.com search: "Get Me A Juice Box vs Stupid Fuckin' Easy - WSOBP  
7 - Top 8")

A 'Sturdy Oak' deals with pressure, he is able to block out the many distractions of the crowd, and opponents, in order to 'make cups', as the above field note discusses, he must be reliable, dependable and self-assure – these are the foundations of professional beer pong. The below poem, written by "WBC", highlights the importance of breezing past pressure and having the self-confidence to take one's time, and most importantly, be a reliable man:

### ***Take Your Time***

*Focus on the reason and what it means to make it  
Why you do what you do, day in- day out  
Look at what you've done since you started playing  
Another shot in a row of cups to straighten  
The last one being the goal to get to over again  
A skill acquired by dumb luck, a motion of memory  
Being the one that does it, like a drill bit, on point  
Why splash your time in a game that repeats  
An addiction that rewards only a few each night*

*As you look, piercing the plastic with laser vision  
Your arm shakes as you breath deeply in and out  
Lining up, feet slide into position, hips aligned  
Motioning a pump-fake as if ball in hand, but not  
Like you've done a million times before this  
Seeing the whole time, a vision of the shot going in  
Swallowing to clear your throat as dipping again  
Bouncing the same number of times every time  
When you set the mechanics in motion, they work*

*To not worry about the way in which it goes in  
Never falling the same, each shot differs a little  
Only small measured amounts to be blind to some  
Clocks wound about in synchronization and style  
They seem to slow into a lull as pressure mounts  
Free from discretion, each player finds theirs  
Just keep telling yourself that making it is proof  
Moreover, you have a will and way is all you need  
Win or lose is the way it goes, just take your time*

– WBC, posting in Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook  
Group Discussion, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012

The terminology used by WBC, such as, ‘making it is proof’ suggests that players thrive for pressure moments – to prove that they are indeed ‘real men’. Players wish to publically enact their ability to be a ‘real man’:

*“The whole game and the attitude is about being able to stand up to pressure and abuse by being a really good shooter... it makes it (winning) even more satisfying when you stand up to that pressure. – ‘Keany’, Male (28), Interview, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011*

*“I love having the last shot at last cup, do or die, it is a great feeling” – Dwissburn, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

‘Keany’ highlights that the foundation of agon play within the community is about ‘being able to stand up to pressure’ and similarly ‘Dwissburn’ states he ‘loves’ the pressure moments, this suggests players desire the opportunity to mimic the reliable masculine role. Failing to enact the powerful masculine trait of dependability is constructed as ‘death’, and thus a loss of play-ground masculinity and status.

The BPONG community have formed around a relatively new and marginalised activity, thus the search for legitimacy influences many of the social norms within the community, particularly regards the emerging rituals and traditions (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005). In a strategy of internal hegemony (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the BPONG community practices playful rituals in which community members that fail to enact the ‘Sturdy Oak’ masculine role are momentarily ‘punished’.

The BPONG community attempts to portray themselves as sporting professionals, and those that cannot play to the high standards necessary to construct a professional identity are punished via rituals of normative pressure (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). This is an attempt to encourage those who display subordinate forms of masculinity (lower levels of beer pong skill) to increase their standards: a jovial punishment called ‘trolling’

is enforced. The troll rule is not an official BPONG beer pong rule but a community enforced ritual. The 'troll' ritual is defined as follows on the BPONG.COM forum:

*"When someone trolls (i.e, doesn't make a single cup in a game), tradition says they have to get under the table and have their picture taken (hence the term, troll)." – Clawless, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*



Photograph 21. Mimicking the TROLL!

This particular ritual serves to communicate internally within the BPONG community that poor performance levels, associated with subordinate forms of masculinity, are not acceptable and thus will be punished. The ritual of trolling is practiced in an attempt to encourage members to enact the 'Sturdy Oak' masculine role. Those who cannot mimic a 'real man' must then, as punishment, mimic a troll. Within the BPONG community winning, and being a skilful beer pong player, earns the greatest amounts of subcultural capital, honour, esteem, and prestige (Huizinga 1955). Accompanying the will to win mentality is the 'Give 'Em Hell' masculine role, in which 'getting the W' (win) comes at any cost. While the 'Sturdy Oak' displays skill, and reliability, the

'Give 'Em Hell' man defends his territory and attempts to disrupt competitors' skills by enacting intimidating and aggressive behaviours.

#### **4.4.1.2 Give 'Em Hell Masculinity**

Beer pong is described as a combination of the intensity of a boxing match and the self-congratulation of a game-winning touchdown (Appelbaum and DiSorbo 2009): status displays (Morris 2002) are central to the game. In every game of beer pong only one team can win, only one team gets to revel in the powerful masculinity that comes with being crowned champion (Huizinga 1955):

*"There are no draws where we come from." – 'Strider', Male 25, Facebook Status, referring to beer pong, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*"Winning is everything." – 'Corsi', Male 29, posting in Beer Pong Will Be A National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

'Strider' highlights the fact that unlike other sports, in beer pong there must be a definite winner, the winning team earns additional masculine status at the expense of the losing team, the trading of masculinity to the winners is undesired by the defeated, as 'Corsi' explains: winning is everything. While players compete on skill, and earn subcultural capital via skilful displays, the rules of beer pong encourage the 'Give 'Em Hell' masculine role to be mimicked also. 'Give 'Em Hell' masculinity is enacted via the use of legal intimidation and aggressive distraction tactics, which are expected and encouraged during beer pong competition. Engaging in such behaviour suggests that players are willing to fight for what is important to them (Morris 2000), an important masculine trait.

*"Let me make a toast to the assholes... Nice guys don't belong in beer pong, simple. Every time a team wishes me good luck I tell them to fuck off and give them the finger instead of shaking their hands... I'm an asshole... after the*



*game I will talk to you and say good game win or lose... but before the game lets fucking be real... you're in the zone and don't want to be talked to...if you will take it personal, then sorry... it isn't a gentleman's game..." – CC91, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

'CC91' engages in 'Give 'Em Hell' masculinity the moment he approaches the playing area, he states that it is not a gentleman's game and that one is permitted to be 'an asshole', to give teams the 'finger' and to voice obscenities at them. However, he also states that this is no way personal, that it is only a role mimicked within the agon play 'zone', and after the game he will shake hands with opponents, win or lose. Such aggressive distraction tactics are used in an attempt to display dominance. Players symbolically play for the territory of the table and frequently during 'smack' and 'trash' talk; players attempt to take ownership of the table or the game. Thus, implying that they are the alpha male and that the match or table is their 'territory' (Morris 2002):

*"KK walked up and said 'Get off my table, get off my fucking table, this is my game you fucking noob (derogatory term meaning novice), you shouldn't be here, this my table', He wanted to bully them off the table, his opponents looked so timid." – Field notes, WSOBP VII, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

*"Y'all watching my show, this is my fucking game." – 'Fras', Male (29), WSOBP VI, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011*

So while players maybe confident in their ability to play beer pong, they also engage in practices of aggressive intimidation, they attempt to make other players miss their shots by displaying such territorial behaviour and 'bullying', as discussed in the above field notes. The increasing enactment of the 'Give 'Em Hell' role within the play-ground has been noted by members:

*"I don't know what happened between WSOBP VI and VII, but the general attitude seemed to change from fun competition to win-at-all-costs competition." – Clawless, posting in MDBEERPONG.COM, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

The 'Give 'Em Hell' masculine role is becoming more frequent due to being intertwined with the high expectations of the 'Sturdy Oak' masculinity. While BPONG members appear to relish the opportunity to engage in such displays of masculinity, it is clearly understood as mimicry play performance, not real life, and thus physical fighting is avoided:

*"I love to hate (intimidate and distract) but have much respect at the end of every game!" – Marx, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Once the game is over the mutual respect and *communitas* (Turner 1982) re-emerges. There is an unwritten rule within the community to ensure the correct role-play of 'Give 'Em Hell' masculinity is maintained:

*"What happens at the table stays at the table." – Duncan Carroll (BPONG Owner), Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*

*"The great thing about is you sit here and talk shit to everybody and people talk shit to you in the end of the day you are friends..." – Chichester, Male (31), The World Series of Beer Pong: Distractions ([vimeo.com/36175203](https://vimeo.com/36175203)), February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

The above quotes highlight that players maintain a sense of mutual respect to fellow 'friends', and that although it is highly aggressive, it is just another form of play enacted within the play-ground, it is a subversion of real life (Huizinga 1955). Within the community beer pong is constructed as professional sport, hence, financial earnings from playing beer pong has become another sphere of masculine mimicry in the WSOBP play-ground. Participants seek opportunities to play the breadwinner role of the 'Big Wheel'.

#### 4.4.1.3 Big Wheel Masculinity

*“Beer Pong is about winning, winners get rewarded, losers go home and cry... this is beer pong, win and get paid!” – SamS, posting in Beer Pong Will Be a National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

BPONG members associate winning with financial reward, while winning allows for the ‘Sturdy Okay’ role to be mimicked, it also subsequently allows for the ‘Big Wheel’ role to be enacted. Players are particularly boastful about how much they earn from playing professional beer pong. A particular emphasis is placed on ‘beer pong earnings’, as this symbolizes breadwinner masculinity, which community members typically do not have the opportunity to enact outside the liminoid play-ground. The below is a comment from one of the ‘elite’ beer pong players, posted in a Facebook group discussion. He communicates his all-time professional beer pong earnings, while portraying himself as a ‘Big Wheel’:

*“I am the NUMBER #1 in money making in all of professional beer pong, from major tournaments to tourneys in Long Island and way before majors. I met ‘Pops’ 5 years before I played with him and I was making average 800-1500 dollars cash per week, after meeting him and playing with him we were making 1000-2000 cash per week. I have place WSOBP 32nd (gross), 9th, 5th, 5th, 1<sup>st</sup> and 1st with total prize money from WSOBP at like 52k. I have come in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 8th or 9<sup>th</sup>, at World Pong Tour (BPONG Competitor) with a combined prize total in money earned at like 20k for myself. I am almost positive since I been playing this game for 6 years before going to WSOBP that I am the number 1 money winning person of all time in professional beer pong.” – ‘RonnyH’, posting in Beer Pong Will Be A National Sport, Facebook Group Discussion, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

According to ‘RonnyH’ he has earned close to \$100,000 from playing beer pong, a substantial amount of money earned from a marginalised game. While there is a minority of such high-earners, the majority of the community

enact the 'Big Wheel' masculinity based on winning relatively low sums of money. Those who do not win substantial money from tournament play will often communicate that they are 'up' on beer pong cash games. Cash games are beer pong matches outside of official tournament games in which players compete for a predetermined sum of money, a practice similar to American pool (billiards) hall traditions (Polsky 1964). During the WSOBP cash games usually occur in The Flamingo hotel rooms or O'Shea's. It is deemed the norm to partake in gambling (alea) when in 'Vegas' (Belk 1997), however, cash games (alea-agon) are the favoured form of gambling among BPONG members, as it ensures one player/team will be afforded the opportunity to mimic the 'Big Wheel'. Players are playing for cash, but also for pride: the winner is a 'real man', the loser – a subordinate man. The internal hegemony is the trading of money from loser to winner: trading the opportunity to mimic a 'real man'. Cash games typically range between \$10 and \$100, although some have been contested for \$500:

*"I'll be looking for cash games the entire time I'm in Vegas. Anything from \$5 - \$100 a head" – Tdors, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*"I'm down for some high stakes games too Mike. Let me know what you find out. Maybe a couple hundo (hundred) a head? Five even...what's everyone else's thoughts?" – Longhorns707, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*



Photograph 22. Cash Game for \$50 at 4.00am, O'Shea's, WSOBP VI, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2011

Considering the amount of cash games observed there has been scant evidence of intra-community hustling; mainly due to the male pride attached to winning cash games. BPONG members are seldom disgruntled after losing a practice game, however, losing a cash game is more damaging to player's masculine status. Losing cash games results in a considerable loss of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) and honour (Huizinga 1955) due to the player failing to enact the roles associated with the competitor masculinity on the beer pong table:

*"I mentioned to 'Pop' that we had beaten 'Ron' (Pops partner) a few times the night before in practice games. Pop laughed and said 'He wouldn't have lost if there was a sum of money on the table, he doesn't like losing cash games, he doesn't really lose them...' – 'Pop', Male (27), Informal Conversation, WSOBP V, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

As Pop highlights, players are not so much concerned with practice games, however, once the trading of money, and thus trading of masculine status, becomes a possibility, players ensure they are playing at their best. The vast majority of BPONG community players know each other's skill levels so

hustling would be quite difficult to practice. However, it often happens that BPONG community members, knowing their skills are far superior to non-community members, lure non-BPONG members into games for money or beer:

*“P\_\_\_\_\_ was walking around O’Shea’s all night with casino chips from the Flamingo trying to tempt non-community player into cash games to earn a few bucks. He was very aggressive trying to get games, he is a good shooter and would certainly beat any non-community player.” – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

*‘We were after winning 20 plus cash/beer games that night, many drunk college kids wanted to play us, not knowing how good we were, it was a little mischievous but It was very enjoyable knowing you are going getting paid by drunk college kids.’ – Field Notes, WSOBP VI, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

Hence, as outlined above the ‘Big Wheel’ masculinity role is mimicked on a number of levels. Players that do not possess enough skill to win ‘big money’ from the WSOBP, have the opportunity to ‘win big’ on cash games, and those displaying even lesser skill can prey on those outside the community, in order to enact, to some degree of the ‘Big Wheel’ role. While the BPONG community employ a number of roles associated with hegemonic masculinity to support the notion of the ‘breadwinner’ (Holt and Thompson 2004), or ‘reliable competitor’, a secondary opportunity to construct a masculine identity also presents itself via the toxic play roles associated with carnivalesque consumption activities (see section 4.3). If members cannot mimic the masculine roles associated with competition in the play-ground, they can enact the carnival roles as a means to ensure a strong masculine identity is constructed. However, typically BPONG members mimic both agon and ilinx based masculine roles.

#### **4.4.2 The ‘Carnavalesque’ Masculine Roles Enacted**

The foundation of carnival is the combination of mimicry and ilinx (Caillois 1962). While the toxic play practices (ilinx) of abnormal consumption, and the playful carnivalesque behaviours have been discussed in the context of the WSOBP branded carnival (section 4.3), these play practices hold extreme importance in the maintenance of masculinity within the BPONG community. These toxic and carnival play behaviours are foundational to the ‘Glutton’, and the ‘Peter Pan’ masculine roles. These practices, less fixated on agon, and the cultural ideals of structured masculinity, emerge from the spontaneous/toxic play behaviours central to carnivalistic life (Thompson 2007).

The masculine roles associated with spontaneous play ensure a ‘common emotional bond’ (Goulding *et al.* 2002) is maintained. Toxic play practices allow those who do not/cannot forge a masculine identity through ‘competitor’ play roles to forge strong masculinity by enacting the ‘carnival’ roles. Thus, BPONG members have the opportunity to enact a constant powerful masculine identity by alternating between the extremes of the ‘competitor’ and ‘carnival’ roles. The masculine roles of the ‘Glutton’, the ‘Playboy’ and the ‘Peter Pan’ mimicked within the play-ground will now be discussed.

##### **4.4.2.1 The Fun Glutton**

Participation in the BPONG community requires an abundance of energy. Once agon game play is finished for the day abnormal consumption (ilinx) (Reith 2005) reigns supreme – and does not cease until deep into the morning, if at all. To engage in the carnivalesque consumption behaviours such as the excessive drinking, eating and dancing, requires stamina and a sacrifice of health (discussed in section 4.3.5.3). Alcohol consumption is considered a prime masculine consumption activity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and within the BPONG community this is practiced to excess and abnormality (Reith 2005). Players engage in alcohol consumption as a form of edgework, a predominantly male activity (Lyng 1990, 2005)

(discussed in detail in section 4.5.3), but also continue to consume alcohol as a form of communal bonding within the play-ground:

*“Post competitive games, it is happens a lot... teams go and do shots of alcohol together either at a room or at the bar.” – Field Notes, WOSBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*

However, friendly consumption, as highlighted in the above field note, regularly becomes a competitive activity (Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Sherry *et al.* 2007, Wenner 1998). BPONG members frequently claim to have been the drunkest at a particular moment at the WSOBP as a means to enact a gluttonous masculine identity:

*“SOOO WHO WINS DRUNKEST AT BLONDIES LAST NIGHT?? ME OR ‘PS’? IF ‘PS’.... REMATCH NEXT YEAR!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” – MattyS, Male (29), Facebook Satus, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*“You’re lucky I wasn’t at Blondies then... ‘cause that title (drunkest man) is mine ha ha” – PPA, BPONG.COM, Forum*

While gluttonous, abnormal consumption is used to construct a masculine identity, via being the best at being the ‘drunkest’, it is further supplemented via the inclusion of competitions surrounding gluttonous consumption. These often include, who can drink the most, and who can drink the quickest (Borsari 2004). Two personal accounts of such gluttonous competitions practiced within the BPONG community are discussed below:

*“We (myself, KT and R-Lo) bumped into another ponger ‘Clutch Pong’. He wanted to play a drinking game... Who ever didn’t drink the shot the other guy bought had to pay for all the shots drank to that point... The bill ended at \$100, Clutch Pong paid because he didn’t finish his shot.” WSOBP V, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010*



*"I got challenged to about 10 different chugging competitions that night (mainly because I am Irish), I only remember winning one... everyone at the bar was doing it..." – Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012*



*Photograph 23. 'Keg Stand' Gluttons beer consumption*

By engaging in the carnival consumption activities, such as supplementary drinking games, members mimic the 'Glutton' role, and thus construct a toxic masculine identity. However, within the BPONG community there exists an ethos of the 'play does not stop', members are encouraged to continue carnival play and mimic carnival roles for as long as can be physically endured, regardless of consequences to health, body, or mind (also discussed in section 4.3.2):

*"... If you're not prepared to man-up and suck-up the pain then you either need to not enter, or go to bed at midnight every night - which is nooooo fun."*  
*– D.Wissburn, BPONG.COM, Forum*

*"I was walking through the casino, and I heard shouting 'You better not be going to bed Ireland', I looked back and it was some of the 'Cali' guys playing roulette. I was going to bed. I was shattered. I was up 40 hours, I just said I*

*was going to O'Shea's to play cash games so I would not to be taunted."* –  
*Field Notes, WSOBP VII, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Choosing to go to sleep at a relatively 'normal' time is considered a subordinate form of masculinity due to its non-carnival association of being 'no fun', being boring and sensible; a direct contradiction to the competitor masculine roles enacted. In a similar manner to the 'Sturdy Oak' masculinity, processes of internal hegemony occur regarding the 'Glutton' role, in order to maintain behaviour associated with 'keeping up' and 'seeking fun'. Jovial punishments for 'resting' and not being able to keep up with abnormal alcohol consumption are enforced. Typically this punishment includes drawing on a member's face or upsetting their facial/physical aesthetics and taking photographs as 'proof' of the 'embarrassment' of not being able to enact continuously carnival play. The following are examples of internal hegemony enforced by BPONG community members:



Photograph 24. Post SNAFU Satellite Tournament, USA Beer Pong Tour, Detroit, MI, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010



Photograph 25. Emasculation of the subordinate, WSOBP VI, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011

Photograph 25 displays the construction of the sleeping victim solely as feminine due to his behaviour being the opposite to that needed to play the 'Glutton' masculine role. The ethos of internal hegemony results in the more 'masculine' members taunting and punishing the subordinate form of masculinity (sleeping) by drawing female breasts and insinuating that his sexual preference is male.

Within the BPONG community constant competition surrounding abnormal consumption exists (Reith 2005). These displays of masculinity are enacted without influence from the BPONG brand; in fact brand management often display negative sentiments towards such paidia based play behaviours (see section 4.2.3). Historically, the BPONG brand allowed for the masculine construction of the 'rebel' masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004), which includes a maverick, no-rule, and free from inhibition approach to masculinity to be maintained via the inclusion of novelty/stripper teams at the WSOBP. It provided a foundation for the 'Playboy' masculine role to be enacted by participants.

#### 4.4.2.2 The Playboy

The BPONG community can be considered a utopian masculine community (Kozinets 2001). The community maintains associations with the traditional masculine associations of beer, women as sexual objects, competition, and revelry (Holt and Thompson 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Historically, women were 'included' in beer pong for their entertainment value, namely their ability to 'distract' male competitors using their sexuality and seduction tactics (Applebaum and Disorbo 2009). Female participation in professional beer pong was in a highly objectified manner: typically included for their sexual aesthetics and an opportunity for male competitors to gaze upon (Patterson and Elliott 2002):



Photograph 26. Enacting the Male Gaze

This ethos of women as entertainment evolved from the early stages of the WSOBP when BPONG partnered with well-known strip clubs for additional sponsorship revenue. For instance, the official after party of WSOBP V was held in Sapphire Strip Club, Las Vegas. Typically, strip clubs and dating websites contributed to WSOBP sponsorship and entered a 'stripper team' or 'novelty team', which served as a promotional tool, while simultaneously creating an atmosphere dominated by ideals of hegemonic masculinity



(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Below is a photograph from the BPONG.COM website from WSOBP IV, it depicts an atmosphere dominated by ideals of masculinity, supported by Fringles.com (dating website):



Photograph 27. Fringles.com (dating website) Team WSOBP IV

The inclusion of such ‘novelty’ teams, while serving to maintain the carnivalesque, and allowing male players to enact masculine roles in a socially acceptable context, supports men’s objectification of and sexual dominance over women, as one female community member points:

*“I am aware that beer-pong is a male dominated sport. It's all good and fun to have trashy (team) names and jokes about your balls...What upsets me is the blatant chauvinist attitude that will prevent beer pong from ever graduating beyond testosterone battles and juvenile frat-boy antics. You want beer pong to be taken seriously? Here's a tip: DITCH THE FUCKING STRIPPERS. There is no shortage of exposed nipples in Vegas, I just don't see why they have to be such a crucial part of this event. If the event were less penis-centric, maybe you wouldn't have to stock the sport with questionable females. Perhaps, JUST MAYBE, more she-pongers would show their faces. This was my second year making the trek to WSOBP, and this is the second*

*year it became a cock-fest. Strippers paid to play last year? After parties at Penthouse? Gee, that's how you get serious TV coverage. That's family friendly fun there! You say beer pong is a sport of skill? Get over yourselves. Get your damn hands out of your pants and go practice your shots." JStud, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

'JStud' highlights how the WSOBP is far from 'friendly family fun' and suggests that if it was not so centred on satisfying male play desires that more female players would attend. She highlights that the WSOBP is a male centric play-space full of 'testosterone battles and juvenile antics', which fails to accommodate for female players in an acceptable manner – it is not a feminine play-ground. However, male participants desire these play forms, and relish the opportunity to enact the male gaze (Patterson and Elliott 2002). The following from 'Dub' highlights the value of these hyper-masculine play opportunities, he suggests that conduct at the WSOBP, and during beer pong, cannot be likened to other sports, and that the WSOBP is an inherently different play-space, in which ideals of masculinity are to be enacted without stigma attached:

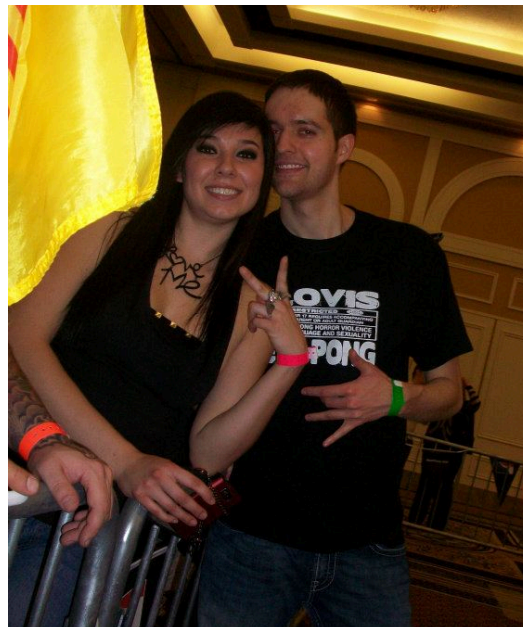
*"Let's not forget what this is, people. It's fucking BEER PONG. Not fucking chess, cricket or water polo. Not only do I condone the strippers and penthouse after parties, I also propose that next year we add midgets to that mix." – Dub, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*

'Dub' not only condones strippers, he also suggest, in a jovial manner, that more forms of liminoid play be added – play forms that cannot be experienced in structured society. 'Dub' highlights the unique experience of the liminoid zone of the WSOBP by contrasting it to more gentlemanly sports in which limited degrees of masculine roles can be enacted. However, as the BPONG brand community evolves (to have more female participants), brand management are attempting to move away from sexist connotations and WSOBP VI and VII was 'stripper team' free. However, some male participants

were disappointed not to be able to enact the male gaze or play out the 'Playboy' role:

*"... the only thing I was disappointed in is the fact that I didn't see any stripper teams or really any girls that were there (WSOBP VI) just to distract... (note to self and B/D/S in the future we need to pay some strippers and escorts to come play...)" – Strider, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

'Strider' states explicitly he would like employed 'strippers and escorts' present in the play-ground solely for his visual stimulation desires. Besides the desire for stripper teams, BPONG community members frequently pose for photographs with attractive females, in order to enact the 'Playboy' role. The pursuit of women, and posing for photographs with attractive women are rituals practiced by male BPONG community members. The below are two examples of many photographs taken and uploaded to Facebook that display the members enacting the 'Playboy' role:



Photograph 28. IMH with 'Hot Chick'



Photograph 29. “Studs”

Groups of BPONG members also frequently bar hop on the Las Vegas strip to ‘hit on girls’ and typically, any stories regarding sexual conquests are relayed through the community quickly. Within the BPONG community emic terminology used by members reflects the desire to construct the Playboy masculinity. The term ‘stud’, which has connotations with the Playboy image, is used to describe someone who is an ‘elite’ beer pong player, and hence, in doing so constructs a strong masculine identity.

Athletes portray a strong masculine identity due to associations with physical fitness, which symbolises sexual prowess to potential female mates (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). With regards to beer pong as a sporting activity, it is nonathletic, and has a negative stereotype due to the connotations of beer guzzling (Borsari 2004). However, BPONG members attempt to construct an alternative narrative:



*JT: How Have you been with the ladies because of this development (being an 'athlete' and finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> place at WSOBP VI)... Do they give a damn?*

*CG: Hmm... They act like they don't, that they are not impressed that you drink a lot... but they do (pause) (cheeky smile)... exactly JT that's what I am saying... (nodding and smiling)*

*– Netnographic Notes, Interview with CG, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 (<http://vimeo.com/36315113>)*

In order to preserve the masculine identity of the sport, BPONG community members, such as 'CG', construct a narrative that women find beer pong players desirable, and hence, it further reinforces opportunities for the 'Playboy' masculinity to be mimicked. Another facet of the rebel associated masculine role is the trickster, the jester, or the 'lad'. These roles, also essential to the carnival, are enacted with gusto within the WSOBP play-ground.

#### **4.4.2.3 The Peter Pan masculinity**

The "Peter Pan" masculinity is associated with the child who never grows up (Avery 2012). Within the BPONG community, there are many aspects of childish behaviour present. As discussed previously (section 4.3.1) as forms of ludic autotely (Sherry *et al.* 2007), the playful dress and playful team names used by community members add to the sense of the carnivalesque but also provide an opportunity to mimic the 'Peter Pan' masculine role. The 'Peter Pan' masculinity helps to ease the tensions of the more serious forms of agon masculinity in the play-ground. Below are photographic examples of the 'Peter Pan' masculinity being enacted within the BPONG community: (photographic evidence has been chosen in order to illustrate fully the colourful extent to which the 'Peter Pan' masculinity is enacted).



Photograph 30. Improvisation face painting at WSOBP VII



Photograph 31. Stripping for fun at WSOBP VII



Photograph 32. The Bud Light Knight WSOBP II



Photograph 33. 'Foxy Boxing' at WSOBP V

The displays of the 'Peter Pan' masculinity role are particularly varied within the BPONG community, ranging from fancy dress, face painting, stripping, joke photos, and wrestling. They all signify the lack of structured responsibility

essential to the WSOBP play-ground. Childish consumption practices are particularly popular within the community, at WSOBP VII there was a significant trend in players chanting in a childish manner instead of talking:

*“Weeks after WSOBP VII members are still discussing how they are still chanting (I’MMMM ST-ILLLL CHAAAANT-ING) phrases are being chanted between members using caps and dashes, so as the tone is communicated.”*  
– Netnographic Observation, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012

The above netnographic note highlights the jovial interactions that persist within the community. The lack of seriousness and sober responsibility appear to be a huge attraction to the BPONG play-space and serve to ensoul the carnival (see section 4.3.1). There are also unofficial prizes awarded by community members on the BPONG.COM forum regarding such childish practices, one of which was best trip or fall onto a beer pong table. Stumbling or falling are particularly clumsy and childish activities celebrated as humorous within the BPONG community. The following is a description of one video that has been relayed throughout the community named ‘best fall onto a table’ (Youtube search: “Face Down Ass Up that’s how Mike Vit likes his cups”):

*“The video begins with rap music blaring in the bar and two players beginning to play a singles game. It looks deep into the tournament, as only two tables are in play – the others are idle. In the background you see two other community members dancing around the bar while chasing each other (playing tag), they approach the table where the serious game is about to start, one of the ‘serious’ players has his shirt pulled over his head for no apparent reason besides childish fun. The two playing chasing (tag) begin dancing around the competitors, the competitors then also start dancing, one of which spins back to the opposite side of his table where he then stops dancing, losses his balance and slips onto the table in a comic fashion knocking most of his cups. This is met with rounds of laughter and pointing.”* – Netnographic Observation, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010

The above depicts the constant play element embedded within the community: members are playing tag and enacting other spontaneous expressions not deemed acceptable for adults in day-to-day life (Elias and Dunning 1986). The 'Peter Pan' masculine role is enacted at all BPONG related events, if an opportunity for a joke or gag presents itself, it is grasped. While it can be constructed as frivolous, or as mere childish fun (Sutton-Smith 2001), it has an important function: it ensures a broad spectrum of masculinity can be mimicked (Avery 2012, Thompson and Holt 2004). The below photograph is of the tournament winners, at one of South West Beer Pong's weekly events. Organisers, instead of uploading a 'normal' photograph, decided to cover the winners' faces with 'troll' faces (a popular method of causing irritation on the Internet). By doing so, BPONG members relay that immaturity, and the 'Peter Pan' masculine role, is indicative to the collective BPONG masculinity:



Photograph 34. Troll Heads Southwest Beer Pong

This form of 'Peter Pan' masculinity enacted relates directly to the 'jester' role, traditionally practiced during the carnival (Bakhtin 1984). While there is a period of Lent from toxic consumption following the carnival (see section 4.3.3), the carnival "jester", or trickster', is maintained outside of the WSOBP



carnival, via enactment of the 'Peter Pan' role. Having discussed the variety of masculine roles mimicked within the hyper-masculine play-ground, and how these roles establish the play-ground ethos (rules), attention will now be focused to how female members appropriate their behaviour in an attempt be accepted as legitimate play-ground members and not merely as sexual objects.

#### **4.4.3 Women in the Play-Ground: “Not Just for Distractions Anymore”**

Within consumption communities that are predominately male orientated, ideals of masculinity ensure that practices, rituals and traditions, and general ethos, remain as anti-feminine as possible (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Fournier *et al.* 2001, Avery 2012). While there remains a hyper-masculine ethos within the BPONG community, certain behaviours suggest a desire for the inclusion of legitimate female community members. More recently within the BPONG community males have been more accepting of female members as competitors, and not solely as entertainment. However, sexist and chauvinistic undertones remain embedded.

WSOBP VI saw the introduction of the first women's singles tournament, and also a co-ed tournament, in which teams were composed of a male and a female competitor. BPONG aimed to place the majority of the team responsibility in the co-ed tournament on the female player. According to the official rules, the female member had to take, if awarded, all third ball shots (normally in beer pong either teammate can take this shot). Rather than it being truly co-ed, and having un-gendered rules, the rules emphasised BPONG's attempt at fostering female participants as competitors, which the majority of the male BPONG community members supported:

*“Definitely let the girls take every 3rd shot the point of the co-ed is to get them more involved and for them to have fun... so let them get more involved...” – Strider, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*"I support the "girl takes every third shot" ruling. Let's give our wives/girlfriends more reason to want to come out to the Series (WSOBP)... It's about the ladies. Let them shine." – Clawless, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Despite the BPONG community collectively desiring more women to participate as competitors, or as 'Strider' states 'to get them more involved' and as 'Clawless' proposes it will give them 'more reason to want to come out', as they would now be valuable players within the community, and no longer resources for play, it appears that the ruling made by BPONG was particularly necessary. Many male community members appeared reluctant to revert from enacting the 'Sturdy Oak' role, many male members wanted women to be included but on their hyper-masculine terms. Some male members wished to continue engaging in hyper-masculine roles, as the following forum post from 'Sauce1' emphasises:

*"I talked to a few people and most plan on playing with their girls with the idea that it will be fun and they will be able to carry their girl partner..." – Sauce1, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

'Sauce' wishes to continue playing a breadwinner, dependable role, and is primarily concerned with his own play desires: that it would be fun for him 'to carry his female partner', by enacting the 'hero' and bringing the team to victory. Despite efforts to be more inclusive, the above comments concerning the BPONG co-ed tournament, suggest it is a mere token inclusion for female participants. The WSOBP remains a hyper-masculine play-ground. One female participant discusses how angry the male-female divide in the sport makes her, especially the chauvinistic and pandering manner in which male competitors attempt to be supportive:

*"Our opponents came up to me afterwards and said wow, you're really good", which although meant as a compliment made me cringe. Making 3 cups a*

*game is not a good game for me, but because I am a girl in beer pong, that was considered “good”. I understand that in general, this is a male dominated sport, but it drives me crazy to be separated in it... I feel like there are still plenty of people who are still reluctant to play with me over a boy who isn’t as good as me, but so it goes, because the stigma is there.” – Beth, Pongstars.net Blog, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

‘Beth’ discusses how such male/female separation in the play-ground ‘drives her crazy’, as she aims to be a competitor, a player, and that in the play-ground gender should not be a concern. The BPONG community is dominated by hyper-masculinity, marketplace cultures with such strong male oriented play rituals require female participants members to enact masculine roles and appropriate their identities in order to meet the community’s identity constructions (Martin *et al.* 2006, Schouten *et al.* 2007(a), Avery 2012). Tactics of appropriation often include altering between enacting male and female gender roles (Martin *et al.* 2006, Schouten *et al.* 2007(a), Avery 2012). Women may adopt aspects of masculinity in constructing competitive identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), which is particularly relevant during the hyper-competitive WSOBP experience. Women within the BPONG community use tactics of adoption and co-option of hyper-masculinity, similar to those observed in the Harley-Davidson community (Martin *et al.* 2006). These will now be expanded upon.

#### **4.4.3.1 Women Adopting Hyper-masculine Competitive Roles: “It’s Always a Little Sweeter Victory When You Beat the Boys”**

Traditionally within male dominated consumption communities, overt displays of masculinity begin to grate on the female minority (Martin *et al.* 2006); female members begin to strive for sisterhood or at least an acceptance of gender equality via the appropriation of masculine consumption symbols and behaviour (Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012). Within the BPONG community, female members are attempting to renegotiate the ‘traditional’ objects of sexual desire role of women in beer pong by engaging in a variety masculine



consumption practices and mimicking the masculine roles enacted within the play-ground.

Within the BPONG community, the optimum means to construct a masculine identity is playing the competitor role: female participants enact hyper-competitive roles as a means to achieve a redefinition of women in beer pong – to achieve a form of play-ground equality (Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012)



Photograph 35. “Real Pong Wives” – whereby real implies competing. *“Getting ready for the weekend with a change in profile picture” – ‘KR’, Female (32), Facebook Status, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

‘KR’ suggests a ‘real pong wife’ no longer sits and watches, or entertains – she plays and competes. The tactic of adopting a hyper-masculine role of being hyper-competitive serves to liberate female members from the ‘eye-candy’ role, it justifies their place in the play-ground as players:

*“For the weeks, days, and hours leading up to the satty (satellite tournament), I was so excited because of how deeply I wanted this win; all of Arizona will tell you. The win was more gratifying because I participated and competed more than I had anticipated. Knowing that I won that tournament*

*because I played my heart out is a phenomenal feeling. Now that I am deeper into the scene, I see how few females there are. Although it may be true that guys are better, I believe it is because girls don't take it as serious. There is no better feeling than being underestimated and winning against guys who think I'm nothing but talk."* – 'Huff', Female (Age Unknown), *Pongstars.net, Blog, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

The above passage displays how 'Huff' enacts masculine roles via her style of play, stating she 'played her heart out' and is extremely competitive – that she is more than just 'talk'. She relishes in the fact that she proves male competitors wrong by beating them, she feels she belongs in the play-ground as a member, and not as a toy *per se*. While ladies tournaments have become more popular, female members prefer playing in the regular male dominated tournaments, as being victorious in the male dominated game allows for greater opportunities for player equality to emerge:

*"Playing in a girls tournament is always a lot of fun and it's always great to win, but it's always a little sweeter victory when you beat the boys. Hopefully at WS VII we will see a lot more girls playing at a higher competitive level."* – 'Braley', Female (Age Unknown), *Pongstars.net Blog, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*"Nothing is more entertaining to me than to walk up to a table, see my male opponents start smiling and getting all excited about 'playing a girl and an easy win.' Nothing is more satisfying than proving them completely wrong and watching them walk away stunned and disappointed."* – 'Shelly', Female (26), *Pongstars.net, blog, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

Beating the 'boys' affords female competitors an opportunity to construct a more powerful feminine identity via the construction of their beaten competitors as subservient men, in fact they are constructed as mere 'boys' due to their inability to beat female players. Female competitors receive satisfaction from proving male competitors 'wrong'; female competitors are viewed as weaker, not serious competition and often referred to as 'easy wins' by male members. However, by beating male competitors, and refusing to be

‘easy wins’, female members justify their place within the masculine playground as competitors. Female community members crave legitimacy as ‘real’ players; they believe that winning games is the prime source of female empowerment within BPONG community:

*“Regardless of her (Nugget) size, she is feisty and holds her own on and off the beer pong table... Our most eventful game was against “Dallas 49ers”. They hit last cup, giving us one shot to go into overtime. I pulled Nugget aside and told her she is the best clutch female I’ve ever seen and this was her cup to bury. She proved me right and took the game into its first overtime. Second overtime they closed us out at 2. I shot first burying the angled 2 because it is my favourite rack in the game. Again I told Nugget that this was her cup. Before she stepped up to the table Evan began putting his jacket on to leave. But she buried the cup, ran over and ripped his jacket off with both of us yelling “you’re not done yet”...” – ‘Huff’, Female (Age Unknown), Pongstarts.net, Blog, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

‘Huff’ discusses a highly competitive game against a male team at the WSOBP VII as the highlight of her tournament; mainly due to her female partner’s aggression and will to win, and their combined attempt to intimidate male competitors, regardless of inferior physicality. Their aggressive behaviour, hence, justifies their inclusion in the play-ground – they are true BPONG members. Female members enact the hyper-masculine role of ‘Give Em Hell’ during the WSOBP as a means to achieve a degree of legitimization and empowerment (Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012). However, female community members also display elements of hyper-competition against each other, in order to achieve the ultimate play-ground acceptance of being the first all female team to qualify past preliminary rounds of the WSOBP. This would earn considerable individual/team legitimization:

*“We want to be the first female team to make it to Day 3” – ‘Ma’l, Female (28), Informal conversation, WSOBP VI January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011*

However, this is an extremely difficult feat, and hence, female members construct the co-ed and the women's singles events as important platforms to display their hyper-competitive masculine identities and their skills:

*"Keep events like the co-ed to give the ladies an opportunity to be a champion... Without opportunities like that, a lot of the top girls would just have to keep paying year after year and we need to be rewarded for our skill too."* – 'Olson', Female (Age Unknown), Pongstars.net, Blog, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011

'Olson' highlights the need for female players to feel like a 'champion', as a reward for their developing skills, she constructs the honour and prestige associated with playing as to why more female players are willing to enter into the play-ground: playing fosters self-worth (Huizinga 1955). The collective construction of masculinity within the play-ground influences how females interact during competition also. Female players adopt hyper-masculine vernacular when competing in order to emphasis their gender equality, independence, and their right to be in the play-ground (Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012):

*"... But you better believe I'm coming after you two next year, so don't get too comfortable."* – 'Huff', Female (Age Unknown), Pongstars.net Blog, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

*"AA eventually won that endurance test of a tournament, against SoCal's TM. The verbal abuse between the two girls during the game was epic, as was the shooting."* – 'Clawless', Pongstars.net, Blog, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011

*"Mal explained that after I left the co-ed tourney two of the T sisters got in a fracas with each other. She said they were getting involved in 'serious smack talk, and then ran at each other and began scrapping while their two male team mates just watch and let them at it'."* – 'Mal', Female (28), Informal Conversation, WSOBP VI, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011



Photograph 36. Adoption of male aggression and symbolism

Language, phraseology, and symbolism being used by female BPONG members carry masculine and aggressive tones. 'Huff' states she is 'coming after players', 'Clawless' reports 'epic verbal abuse' during the ladies competition, and 'Mal' discusses a physical fight occurring between two female competitors. The hyper-masculine aggression involved in tournament play requires female members to enact masculine roles in order to achieve a degree of acceptance as play-ground participants and a degree of emancipation from previous eye-candy roles (Henry and Caldwell 2006). However, Martin *et al.* (2006) suggest that the carnival is unisex, and hence, it allows for natural strategic co-option of situational masculinity and selective feminine roles. Thus, female players can also enact some feminine roles associated with the carnival in tandem with masculine roles.

#### **4.4.3.2 Co-option of Roles: 'Skilled in Every Position'**

While female members enact hyper-masculine roles during game-play, in an attempt to renegotiate female roles in the play-ground, female members also enact carnival roles. Female BPONG members use humour to negotiate the gender paradox experienced in the play-ground (Martin *et al.* 2006). Female members bear humorous sexist team names and engage in the grotesque terminology used during the carnival (see section 4.3.2). Female team names

that poke fun at their previously sexually objectified status within the community include: We Love Butt Sex, 99 Problems but a Bitch Ain't One, We Swim Naked, Slut Nation, and The Boob Job Fund.



Image 4. Slut Nation team logo

In the above image (4) the 'Slut Nation' team logo appears to be co-opting hyper-masculinity and femininity. The 'Sorry For Partying' (often shortened to 'S4P') term is used within the community, in a sarcastic manner, as a feign apology for engaging in behaviours associated with toxic alcohol consumption. Hence, its use has associations with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the logo the slogan 'Slut Nation' is placed next to a heart – a female symbol, suggesting co-option of male vernacular with female symbolism. Female members poking fun at the previously established feminine role within the BPONG community continues in other spheres of consumption also, as both a form of ludic autotely (Sherry *et al.* 2007) and a tactic to manage their identity paradox (Martin *et al.* 2006):



Photograph 37. 'The Boob Job Fund'



Photograph 38. Skilled in every position sexual innuendo

While clothing, make-up, and appearance are all universally linked with



female identity (Martin *et al.* 2006, Avery 2012), female BPONG community members co-opt the notion of male gendered beer pong t-shirts and combine them with traditional feminine practices such as choosing an outfit:

*“I love going for a t-shirt and the first 4 I pull are BPONG shirts” – ‘Asian Balls’, Female (32), Facebook Status, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010*

It is common for female members to conform to play-ground norms (Martin *et al.* 2006), especially with regards to clothing. Typically female members wear more masculine clothing during BPONG tournament play, and afterwards revert to more feminine clothing. However, female members tend to adopt a tactic, as discussed by Martin *et al.* (2006), of underscoring their femininity subtly when wearing clothing appropriate to the masculine norms within the community. Photographs 37 and 38 are examples of female BPONG members conforming via the use of humour, while underscoring femininity via colour. The following photographs display a differing tactic of subtly underscoring their femininity via the use of jewellery, grooming, and feminine accessories:



Photograph 39. Subtly underscoring of femininity via jewellery (left hand), ‘trendy’ female glasses, and a groomed ponytail





Photograph 40. Beer Pong T-shirts, denim shorts, pink nails, pink hair ribbons, and digital camera



Photograph 41. *'Ultimate co-option, female handbag hanging from beer pong table while competitive game is in play' – Field Notes, WPT Atlantic City Championship, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

The vast majority of female participants resort to co-option tactics to achieve degrees of legitimacy, emancipation, and empowerment, within the male dominated play-ground. As a quintessential male-gendered consumption

activity, the reinforcement of typical male gender stereotypes is expected (Kozinets *et al.* 2004) via full participation in toxic and carnivaleque play (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, the relative desire of female BPONG members to enact various masculine roles, both competitive and toxic, has resulted in the acceptance of females as *competitors* by male play-ground members. This can be considered an evolutionary step towards player equality (Martin *et al.* 2006) within the play-ground and within the BPONG community. Female attendance at beer pong events is increasing rapidly and the BPONG community is embracing the female involvement as the following photograph suggest:



Photograph 42. The 1<sup>st</sup> BPONG Satellite Tournament of 2012. This tournament had a significantly larger portion of female competitors than previously observed.

The relative ease of transition from the ‘women as entertainment’ to ‘authentic’ members can be credited females enacting masculine roles within in the play-ground. The masculine roles enacted within the play-ground serve to establish the play-ground rules and ethos, *all* players must play by the rules, regardless of gender (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962). Playing by the rules is the only means by which the carnival play-ground identity can be maintained

(O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010). Carnivals are unisex (Martin *et al.* 2006), and hence, *require* female participation to support the varieties of play rituals enacted (Bakhtin 1984, Thompson 2007). Having discussed the carnival nature of the WSOBP experience (section 4.3), and the subsequent enactment of gender roles central to the WSOBP play-ground (section 4.4), it is now deemed appropriate to discuss the community construction of the buttress of these two intertwined concepts – the game of beer pong.

#### **4.5 Professional Beer Pong: The Emergence of Toxic Sport**

Examining beer pong using Caillois' (1962) classification of play would result in beer pong being categorised as both an agon (competition) and corrupt ilinx (abnormal alcohol consumption) based game (see sections 4.4.1 and 4.3.2 respectively). However, Caillois (1962) discusses the incompatibility of agon-ilinx based games. These play classifications are direct contradictions – agon requires skill, control and equilibrium, whereas ilinx is the pleasure of vertigo – concerned with the momentary loss of control and perception, and when attained via the use of alcohol and drugs it is classified as corrupt, as the players no longer possesses the independent freedom to eject from play.

While the game of beer pong does not fit neatly into a classification of play, or cultural understandings of sport (Coakley and Pike 2009), BPONG community members construct beer pong as a professional sport. However, those outside the community construct beer pong as a drinking game (Borsari 2004), which is not significantly meaningful, and far removed from typical social constructions of sports, due to its associations with excessive alcohol consumption (Borsari 2004). Professional beer pong, as played by BPONG standards satisfies academic definitions of sport (Dyke 2000, Guttman 2000, Coakley and Pike 2009). Coakley and Pike (2009) highlight that foundational to sports are the elements of performance and spectacle: both are inherent to professional beer pong and particularly at the WSOBP. Beer pong will now be discussed as novel form of sport, a form of play with agon-corrupt ilinx play

foundations. The contrasting constructions of beer pong, beer pong as a edgework activity, and finally as a novel form of sport – a toxic sport, will now be discussed.

#### 4.5.1 Contested Constructions of Beer Pong

There exists a tiered commitment to the game of beer pong – a typology consists of those who primarily enjoy beer pong as entertainment at a party as a form of ‘pre-gaming’ (pre-gaming is a term used widely in North America, which entails consumption of alcohol prior to another social event (Borsari *et al.* 2007)), whom are generally termed ‘party players’ by the BPONG community, and those who consume beer pong as a sport by ‘playing to compete, not drink’ (emic definition). However, it is beer pong as ‘drinking game’ that dominates popular culture (Borsari 2004). Beer consumption is *mandatory* during the ‘drinking game’ version of beer pong. It is quite common to experience beer pong as a ‘drinking game’ at many bars, and parties, throughout North America:



Photograph 43. Casual Beer Pong at the ‘Gin Mill’ Bar, Uptown New York City, USA Beer Pong Tour, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

The BPONG community demarcates between two types of beer pong with zeal; they highlight that professional beer pong is primarily focused on the competitive aspect, and not the consumption of alcohol, despite the carnival commitment to alcohol consumption as discussed in section 4.3.2. Professional beer pong players attempt to dismantle the negative connotations associated with beer pong, such as mandatory drinking and intoxication (Borsari 2004), when constructing professional beer pong as a sport. BPONG members frequently assert that alcohol consumption is *not* mandatory during professional beer pong. The community continues to attempt to evolve beer pong beyond a 'drinking game' and into a legitimate sporting activity.

There exists a tension between the BPONG community and the broader 'party players' subculture. This has manifested due to BPONG community members asserting that traditional 'party' beer pong is inferior, due to the focus placed on mandatory beer consumption. BPONG members believe that the alcohol driven motivations of 'party' beer pong sabotages the image of professional beer pong (and by association the WSOBP). Contrastingly, 'party players' view organised professional beer pong (such as the WSOBP) as subordinate due to the lack of mandatory beer consumption:

*"These guys are terrible lol (laugh out loud). I may enter this year. ps. the guy in black is drinking a water...wtf (what the fuck)? pussy!" – CapnCriss, commenting on Youtube.com: 'WSOBP VI Finals Game I (official)', January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

*"There are a substantial amount of 'hate' comments under the WSOBP VI video on Youtube.com. The general 'party player' seems to despise the WSOBP, BPONG, and the 'professional' players', mainly because of the lack of alcohol consumption and different rules." – Netnographic Note, Youtube.com: 'WSOBP VI Finals Game I (official)', January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012*



The above post from ‘CapnCriss’ highlights the open tension between the two classifications of beer pong player, ‘CapnCriss’ views professional beer pong and its players as inferior due to his perception that professional beer pong does not entail mandatory alcohol consumption. Another rule difference that causes tension between the BPONG community and the broader party beer pong subculture is that of the ‘elbow rule’. Traditionally in party beer pong one is not allowed to leave one’s elbow cross the plane of the table when throwing, which means leaning over the table is forbidden. However, professional beer pong permits leaning during game play, as it lessens disputes between players (professional beer pong is played on an 8ft table, party beer pong is generally played on a 6ft table). Professional beer pong players use the ‘elbow rule’ to demarcate between the ‘sport’ and ‘drinking game’. However, party players use the lack of ‘elbow rule’ to marginalise organised beer pong. The contrast is observed below:

*“Elbow rule pong is a game. Leaning pong is a sport” – ‘Pops’, Male (27)  
BPONG.COM, Blog*

*“I wished the way we played lets you lean across the fucking table so you could practically slam dunk the ball...” – corryS, Youtube.com comment on: WSOBP VI Finals Game I (official), January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

The BPONG community’s attempt to legitimize professional beer pong successfully is further inconvenienced by an abundance of media reports that spotlight the bizarre and novelty aspects of professional beer pong. The cultural representations, the U.S. media in particular, portray the notion of ‘professional’ beer pong as mere neoteric intoxicated hijinks:

*“What do you associate with beer pong, besides getting belligerent in a mouldy college basement?” – Klockstein (2009)*

*“The Fox news interview with AD highlights the novelty aspects of the sport, lots of giggling from the news casters, highlighting associations with college*

*drinking, and bemusement at someone being proud of being a beer pong champion.” – Netnographic Note, Youtube.com: ‘Fox News Beer Pong’, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

As highlight in Klockstein (2009), beer pong conjures up associations of being excessively drunk in a basic, non-spectacular location, thus downplaying its meaning within the BPONG community. Similarly, during the Fox News beer pong report, newscasters focused primarily on the novelty aspects of the sport, the drinking and its associations with rowdy college parties. The report was conducted in a frivolous manner, and to a degree, poked fun at ‘AD’ the professional beer pong player present.

BPONG and the WSOBP is largely stigmatized and marginalized, however such stigmatization has resulted in a goal-orientated ethos within the community, which serves to enhance community bond (Kozinets 2001, Schouten *et al.* 2007b). Professional beer pong players or ‘pongers’, as emically termed, rally together in an attempt to legitimize the sport of beer pong, despite the maintained practices of extreme binge drinking (as previously discussed as an element of the branded carnival 4.3.2 and the masculine roles enacted within he play-ground 4.4.2).

#### **4.5.2 The Community’s Construction of Beer Pong as Sport**

*“I played all 3 of the Major sports (American Football, Baseball, and Basketball) my entire life at a high level. Not one of them aggravates the fuck out of me more than Beer Pong does. That's what keeps me coming back for more. Do NOT tell me this shit isn't a sport...” – ‘Blaine’, Facebook Status, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

‘Blaine’ compares beer pong to traditional hegemonic American sports, he suggests the mental energy and dedication involved in professional beer pong qualify it as a sport. ‘Pongers’ when attempting to construct beer pong as a

sport, typically highlight what they believe to be the sporting aspects of the game, aspects such as mental toughness; aiming; muscle memory; practice and training; injuries, such as ‘pong-knee’; stamina; control; shooting percentages; cash prizes; jerseys; sport leagues; statistics; rules; and equipment – *anything* associated with culturally dominant sports (Coakley and Pike 2009, Jarvie 2006).

*“... the sports clothing people dressed in and the competitive language they spoke in... there definitely is an over justification attempt at saying beer pong is an actual sport.” – Field Notes, WSOBP V, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010*

*“Beer pong may not require strength or endurance, but it does require very fine eye-hand coordination and finesse, the ability to focus under pressure and execute physically coordinated movements in tough circumstances is what makes something a sport to me...” – Sfooster, posting in BPONG.COM, Forum*



Photograph 44. ‘The TF’ (The Training Facility), Huntington Beach, California, as uploaded to Facebook

The above are examples of the tactics used by the community to construct beer pong as a sport: the overly ‘competitive language’, the sports clothing



worn, 'Sfoster' while accepting beer pong dose not require strength or endurance, highlights aspects such as 'hand-eye coordination', finesse and pressure to justify the construction of beer pong as sport. Foundational to the construction of beer pong as a sport, are BPONG's provision of statistics, rules, enforcement, rankings, informational videos, and the WSOBP cash prize of \$50,000. BPONG and the community co-create (Cova and Dalli 2009) the construction of beer pong as sport. Traditionally, American sports are statistic orientated (Coakley and Pike 2009), thus, in order for the BPONG community to be able to construct beer pong as a sport, 'stats' are central to the WSOBP play-ground.

At the WSOBP teams play 12 preliminary games, six on 'Day 1' and six on 'Day 2'. Team records are then calculated and the top 128 ranked teams qualify for 'Day 3'. Rankings are calculated based on a teams number of wins, loses, and cup differential over the 12 'prelim' games. (Cup differential is calculated by adding the amount of cups a team won by in their winning games, and subtracting the amount of cups a team lost by in their losing games). During the WSOBP, statistics aid the construction of beer pong as sport, and 'stats' are a constant link among play-ground participants:

*"After four rounds of play at the WSOBP everyone begins asking each other how are you doing? Or what's your 'record'? It heightens the sense competition. This basically means how many wins have you, how many losses, and what is your cup difference?" – Field Notes WSOBP VII, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

Players establish an emotional bond through the competitive 'stat' based interaction, as discussed above; this perpetuates the construction of beer pong as sport within the play-ground. It is common for members to upload their record to Facebook while preliminary games are being played:

*"AWKWARD 3-3" – 'Keany', Male (28), Facebook Status, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

*“For those that are concerned, just finished the second day of games. Our stats are 10 win 2 loses, + 47 cups I think. It is rank 27 of 440 team, best Canadian team (obviously)!” (Translated from French) – Gab, Male (22), Facebook Status, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

The inclusion of ‘stats’ provides an essential staging prop (Caru and Cova 2007) for the construction of beer pong as sport. Prior to WSOBP VII, BPONG, as a means to further accentuate the centrality of stats to the play-ground, developed a national ranking system in which professional beer pong players are ranked according to their performances at BPONG tournaments. Below is an image of how the individual rankings appear on the BPONG.COM website:



Rank	Player	Rating	Wins	Losses	CD	Location
1	ronsmashingtime	6858.90	113	18	315	Rocky Point, US
2	syrioose8	6839.37	89	15	235	St. Peters , US
3	Range8	6795.56	64	9	161	-
4	jordanmcallister	6717.60	83	30	217	Manchester, US
5	austin	6707.48	95	27	226	Baltimore, US
6	Incognegro	6702.06	88	21	240	-
7	mikepop66	6697.56	196	35	535	-
8	sfoster	6693.74	100	31	263	Gambrills, US
9	sonomajoe	6691.89	204	66	444	Rohnert Park, US
10	longhorns707	6689.36	156	51	392	Sacramento, US
11	sauce1	6630.07	90	25	231	Philadelphia, US
12	bnentwig	6595.30	63	12	191	-
13	drellis123	6579.92	110	31	258	Dimondale, US
14	outsiders401k	6568.06	81	19	213	Randolph, US
15	aklwhiteboy	6562.30	34	3	107	Edwardsville, US
15	TheBoss51	6562.30	77	10	206	Edwardsville, US
17	prusch	6545.07	106	31	234	El Segundo, US
18	Andolf	6535.41	67	18	172	Mount Prospect, US
19	gravycakes	6530.95	44	9	129	Dollard-des-ormeaux, CA
20	TheBestAliveOne	6516.76	62	23	147	Virginia Beach, US

Image 5. Screen Shot of BPONG’s National ranking system

Despite the BPONG community including various sporting references to construct beer pong as sport, alcohol, in an ironic twist, remains most central to beer pong’s construction as sport. ‘Pongers’ frequently downplay alcohol consumption involved during professional beer pong. Beer pong is often

called 'pong' by BPONG members: the word 'beer' is frequently removed in order to portray a more sport-orientated image. As mentioned previously, 'party' beer pong requires the mandatory 'chugging' of beer (chugging involves drinking, without pause, an entire serving of beer until completion). However, the rules of professional beer pong do not require players to drink *any* alcohol, and subsequently the vast majority of professional beer pong tournaments (besides the WSOBP) are played with water in the cups, not beer. Players exaggerate this 'alcohol free' perception in an attempt to impose a full sporting complexion on professional beer pong:

*"In states like PA, you can't play with beer in the cups... So if someone ever raises the question that it's just a binge drinking game rather than a sport, point to states that have to use water and hold tournaments and then I want to see what that person says. Because then it's no different than darts or pool or bowling" – juzam139, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*"Personally I practice and play all the time without beer in the cups, all of our tournaments we don't use beer in the cups... I just love the game, the community, and the competitive aspect!" – Strider, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

'Juzam139', in order to downplay alcohol consumption, uses a comparison with other 'bar sports' such as pool or bowling, in which alcohol may be consumed on premises but not mandatory. 'Strider' highlights that the majority of time he plays with water in the cups and that his love of the game and the competition are more important to him than the alcohol consumed. While alcohol consumption during competitive play is portrayed as being minimal/nonexistent to those outside the community, there remains a strong contradiction, as discussed previously as being central to branded carnival (section 4.3.2). The vast majority of players consume substantial and dangerous amounts of alcohol during and post competitive tournament play. The BPONG community demarcate from the 'party player' by stating that professional beer pong players do not *have* to drink any alcohol, however,

within the community alcohol consumption is constructed as an integral component/skill of the sport. Alcohol consumption within the community, while it belongs to the corrupt-ilinx category of play, it is so extreme and dangerous that it can be considered an edgework activity (Lyng 1990) (see section 4.3.2.1).

#### **4.5.3 Professional Beer Pong as an edgework activity**

Edgework activities have one central feature; they have a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental wellbeing or one's sense of ordered existence (Lyng 1990, 2005). Edgework is the process of negotiating the boundary between safe consumption and destructive consumption: one must not go over the 'edge'. Professional beer pong can be considered a form of edgework activity as it involves negotiating the line between consciousness and unconsciousness via excessive alcohol consumption (Reith 2005). Beer pong as an edgework activity involves the skilful use of alcohol to discover optimum performance limits:

*"I'm not sure if anyone decides not to drink in order to play better, or improve their shooting percentage. I personally have found that I play much better when I'm in the nice-and-buzzed to just-about-tripping-over-my-own-feet-drunk range." – Rusch, posting BPONG.COM Forum ('Rusch' is considered one of the all time great professional beer pong players)*

'Rusch' highlights that he feels alcohol is integral to his performance. However, this level of alcohol consumption, to the edge of being in control of one's motor balance, is quite dangerous, so too are the effects of 'puking blood' and being hospitalised due to alcohol consumption, as discussed in section 4.3.2. For beer pong players winning games is their prime play goal (as discussed in section 4.4.1), however, in order to reach performance levels believed necessary to achieve a 'W' (win), alcohol is consumed to the 'edge' of optimum performance and intoxication, as discussed by 'Rusch'. Beer pong involves the negotiation of the crucial line in alcohol consumption – between alcohol consumption that enriches performance and that, which destroys it.

The risk of going over the edge means that one will be too intoxicated to compete, and hence, it will significantly hinder performance and subsequently one's chances of winning. Beer pong players attempt to negotiate the line of mild intoxication and complete intoxication, which requires elements of practiced control:

*"There is a very fine line between being hammered and being able to play." – 'Balls Ink', Female (27), Informal conversation, WSOBP VI, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011*

Managing alcohol consumption during beer pong is considered a learnt community practice (Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford 2013). Players openly discuss the levels of alcohol required to enhance and maintain optimum performance:

*"When it comes down to the semi's and the nerves start to kick in then I like to have some alcohol in me... the Socal (Southern California) open the last 4 games I played there I had about 8 jack and cokes and shot my balls off." – SonomaJoe, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

*"4 Beers + 4 practice games = PERFECT GAMES!!!!" – VinceB, posting in BPONG.COM Forum*

Beer pong players openly discuss using alcohol as a means to find the right 'zone'. When sober players get too nervous they are vulnerable to competitors distractions and may also become unsettled by the spectators' directed roars and put-downs. However, too drunk and performance is affected negatively: the ability to aim or focus is forfeited, and the necessary muscle memory needed for accurate 'shooting' is unattainable. Negotiating the temporal zone (Turner 1964) of optimum performance/intoxication is a learnt edgework skill, performance has a particularly quick drop-off when too much alcohol is consumed but without it some could not play to a decent standard at all.

*“We were pretty wasted, I don’t really remember any of the prelim games this year – but we played good that’s for sure.” – T-Man, Male (29), Informal Conversation, WSOBP VI, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

*“It was shocking to see how much B\_\_\_\_\_ was drinking, it was difficult to understand how he was drinking that much and was able to make pressure shots consistently... this was a real eye opener to how good he was at being able to balance his performance.” – WSOBP VII, Field Notes, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

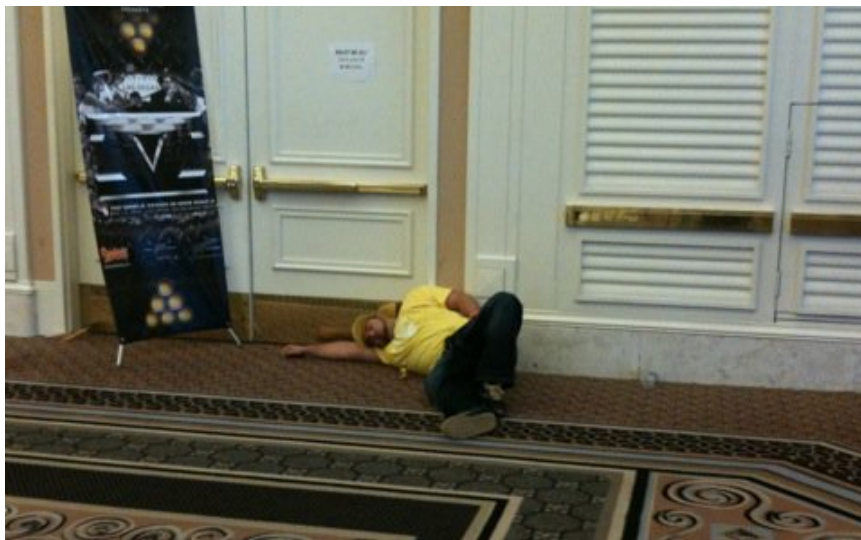


Photograph 45. Collection of alcoholic beverages under the table used to boost/maintain performance

‘T-man’ discusses not remembering playing any of his ‘prelim’ games he was so drunk, yet he rejoices in the fact that he played well, that he found the optimum performance zone. Similarly, as discussed in the above field note, players consume ‘shocking’ amounts of alcohol while being able to maintain high performance levels. However, while BPONG members appear skilled at managing their alcohol consumption, it is quite frequent to see some community members consume too much alcohol and go over the ‘edge’. Alcohol consumption can be so excessive that some members are at the point of near pass-out:



Photograph 46. WSOBP VII “Over the edge”



Photograph 47. WSOBP V “11.30am”

The above photographs (of many) illustrate players that have not learnt the skill of balanced alcohol consumption and have gone over the edge into near pass-out. Despite the levels of alcohol consumed that are quite damaging to players health ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)) (discussed previously as ‘toxic play’ within the carnival), the BPONG community continues to actively construct beer pong as a professional sport.

*"It's a sport, it just happens to have alcohol" – 'Jman', Male (Age Unknown)  
Last Cup: Road to World Series of Beer Pong, Documentary*

Reith (2005) suggests another dimension of edgework is the negotiation of the boundary between an individual's participation in an edgework activity and their normal lives, such as participation in weekend drug orientated rave parties, while also managing typical working weeks (Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009). For the vast majority of the community, commitment to professional beer pong comes second to keeping jobs, supporting families or attending university. However, BPONG members frequently highlight the difficulties involved in playing professional beer pong and working, as beer pong interferes with work and visa versa; it makes negotiating the boundary between leisure time and the 'straight and narrow' difficult:

*"No matter what kind of job you have its fucking hard to be competitive and work full time... all the late nights of practice, weeklies, and taking time off (work) sometimes..." – 'ZackG', Male (25), Pongstars.net Blog, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

However, the vast majority of the BPONG community appear to be quite adroit at negotiating the more serious edge of staying within the boundaries of work/play balance (Lyng 2005). Beer pong is a hyper-masculine game (section 4.4.1) in which toxic consumption is endemic (section 4.3.2). The carnival (ilinx) of the WSOBP combined with the male desire for competition (agon) based play (Wenner 1998, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) has birthed a new form of sport: a sport centred on toxic edgework practices – a toxic sport built upon an agon-corrupt ilinx pay foundation.



#### 4.5.4 Professional Beer Pong: A Toxic Sport

While professional beer pong satisfies the necessary sport definition criteria, it lacks legitimacy due to its emergence from a binge drinking game (Borsari 2004, Borsari *et al.* 2007) and its sustained connections with alcohol consumption. While alcohol is something that is inescapably linked to sport culture (Syndor 2006), the consumption of alcohol while playing sports is not considered appropriate sporting practice. This form of 'sporting' engagement is at best constructed as a pastime or a hobby (Coakley and Pike 2009, Jarvie 2006). Sport consumption and alcohol consumption occur as tandem activities for sport fans (Holt 1995, Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Wenner 1998), however, alcohol consumption is seldom (if ever) associated with professional participation in a culturally accepted sport.

Alcohol consumption and engaging in a (normal) sport are contrasting notions merged seamlessly by the BPONG community. Professional beer pong players are dedicated and regardless of alcohol consumption, behave as competitive athletes do in relation to mental preparation and practice (Coakley and Pike 2009). The below passage from a BPONG community member's blog highlights the dedication central to professional beer pong, it describes the mental processes that beer pong players enact, highlighting that for BPONG community members, beer pong is significantly more meaningful to them than a mere past-time (Guttman 1978, 2000, Sutton-Smith 2001):

*"For everyone but a single team, Day 3 typically has an air of bitterness about it. We think about how it could have been us, about that one missed shot, about that one bad game, about how we let our partners down or they let us down, about how we had it in our grasp and just let it slip by." – 'Clawless', Pongstars.net Blog*



Photograph 48. Dejected after elimination

Professional beer pong produces an ironic twist: it is highly competitive (section 4.4.1), BPONG members treat it as a sport, yet it is revoked as a legitimate sport by mainstream society, due to its sustained associations with intoxication (section 4.3.2) (Borsari 2004). However, postmodernity involves a different modulation of previously defined categories, it involves ‘playing’ with contrasting meanings to create a hybrid meaning – something fundamentally authentic (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). Consumers are fusing elements from a variety of consumption spheres typically understood as incompatible to create new, authentic, and decommodified, meanings and identities (Cova *et al.* 2007a).

Beer pong infuses the contrasting notions of ‘intoxication and control’ (Caillois 1962), and ‘excessive alcohol consumption and professional sport’, to create something inherently unique, a form sport centred on abnormal alcohol consumption – a ‘toxic sport’. Reith (2005) suggests that ‘normal’ consumption is moderate and that ‘abnormal’ consumption is excessive and harmful, hence, toxic (section 4.3.2.1). While, professional beer pong can be understood as a form of edgework practice (Lyng 1990, 2005), or ‘controlled intoxication’, whereby players negotiate the boundary between destruction

and optimum performance via the use of alcohol, constructing beer pong solely as an edgework activity is too restrictive. It ignores the intense agon (section 4.4.1) and abnormal consumption practices considered integral to participation in the carnival of the WSOBP, and ultimately the sport. Toxic and excessive consumption is practiced pre, during and post, official competitive tournament play. When asked to describe his experience of the WSOBP 'Keany' highlighted toxic consumption to be central to his sporting experience:

*"It was outstanding, I really enjoyed it apart from the heavy abuse to my body... I just mean drinking too much. I probably shouldn't but like I do have stomach problems so it's not ideal for me to be drinking but because I enjoy it so much and get such a kick out of it... I know I am going to suffer consequences over the next couple of days with something like beer pong, obviously its so much fun and you've got the competitive aspect to sports... two things coming together. It was perfect, it was ideal for me so drinking too much and suffering the consequences of those vicious hangovers is worth it because of that."* – 'Keany', Male (28), Interview, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011

For 'Keany' 'the abuse' to his body and the 'competitive aspect' come together to provide for an 'outstanding' and novel consumption experience. Beer pong as a sport, as an intense competition, and performance display (Morris 2002), embraces the excess in all forms of consumption, but particularly with regard to alcohol. While beer pong, as a competitive activity, without alcohol consumption, is a pure form of play (Caillois 1962), this study has found that there are much darker and toxic elements to the sporting activity, thus can be considered a 'toxic sport' with agon-corrupt ilinx play foundations. The sport of beer pong fails to confirm to the extended theories of play discussed by Caillois (1962), or fit neatly into social constructions of sport, and thus toxic sport is defined as an organised game with the contradictory play foundations of intense competition (agon) and excessive alcohol consumption (corrupt ilinx) intertwined. The succeeding chapter will discuss the importance of the communicated findings in this chapter for consumer culture theory.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

*This chapter discusses the meaning that can be inferred from the findings presented in the previous chapter. Firstly, the empirical relationship between play, masculinity, and marketplace culture will be discussed. Following this, the author's conceptualization of the brand-orientated play-community and how it contributes to our understanding of the marketplace culture dimension of consumer culture theory will be discussed. The author will then discuss the play manifestations central to the BPONG play-community: the 'branded carnival' will be discussed in relation to marketer-facilitated events and in reference to the archaic carnival; 'toxic play' will be discussed in terms of a desire for harmful play in consumer culture; 'toxic sport' will be discussed in relation to extended play theory and its significance for sport culture; finally, the importance of utopian and cultural ideals of gender in constructing a play-ground ethos and the subversion of contemporary gender representations will be discussed.*

### **5.2 The Empirical Relationship between Play, Masculinity, and Marketplace Cultures**

Previously the author introduced a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between play, masculinity, and marketplace cultures (see below). This model highlighted the 'liminoid' nature of marketplace cultures, in which norms and 'rules' enacted within the liminoid mark an observable departure from the mundane structures that govern behaviour in 'normal' time (Turner 1979, 1982). The consumer culture theory literature suggests that within liminoid zones, consumers engage in liberatory behaviours, as a form of catharsis from the pressures of cultural expectations and representations (Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Holt and Thompson 2004, Sherry *et al.* 2007, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Tumbat and Belk 2011). Within marketplace cultures (liminoid

zones) consumers enact playful rituals, which contrast with typical day-to-day behaviours (Kozinets 2002a, Goulding *et al.* 2002, Cova *et al.* 2007a, Sherry *et al.* 2007, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Thus, within marketplace cultures playful desires are encouraged (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Schouten *et al.* 2007), not suppressed as are in the productivity-orientated world of work (Kavanagh 2012). Liminoid zones also afford participants opportunities to enact gender roles in a socially acceptable performance, free from cultural expectations, representations, and pressures, thus utopian ideals of gender can be enacted (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998, Holt and Thompson 2004). Within these liminoid zones, the desire for emotional expressions of play and utopian ideals of gender combine to ensoul the ethos governing behaviour within these play-orientated marketplace collectives (Martin *et al.* 2006).

According to Huizinga (1955), it is our deep-rooted need to play that enthuses complex rituals to emerge, and it is through the collective commitment and the design of these rituals that participants are afforded opportunities to perform (mimic) a variety roles, which may include gender roles, that are not typically afforded to actors outside the time-space confines of the specific liminoid zone (Belk and Costa 1998, Martin *et al.* 2006). In normal structured time, play desires are suppressed (Elias and Dunning 1986) and consumers are pressured to balance their gender performance in relation to the cultural ideals deemed appropriate (Patterson and Elliott 2002, Holt and Thompson 2004). However, marketplace cultures, which belong to the realm of anti-structure, are understood as a liberatory space in which play and gender roles combine to create a temporary utopian space centered on the communal subversion of the structures governing day-to-day life through consumption (Kozinets 2002).

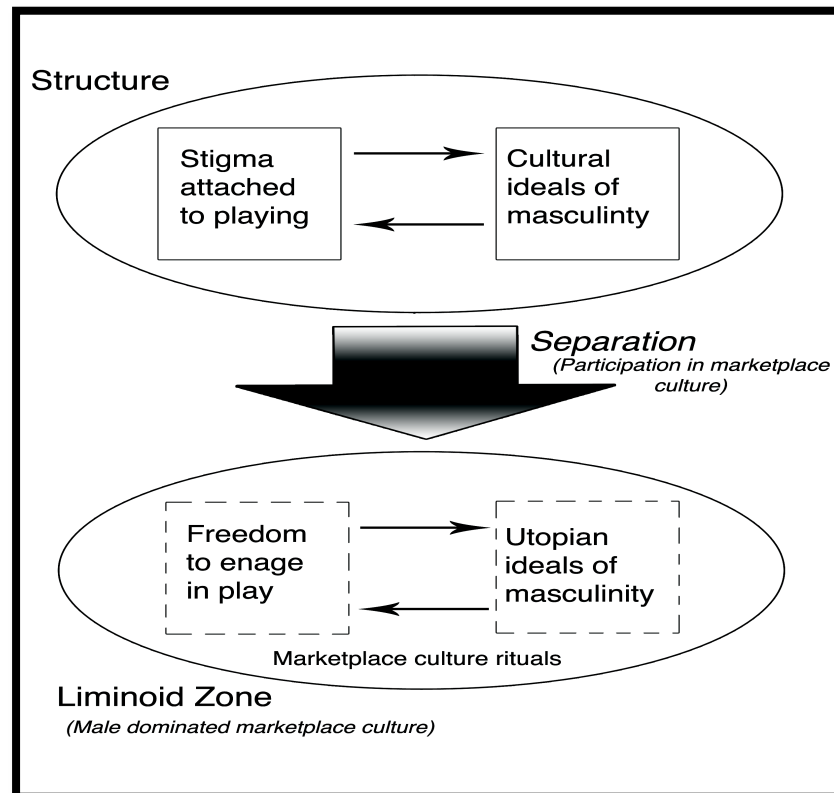


Figure 5. Play, Masculinity, and Marketplace Culture

The findings of this study, discussed in the previous chapter, strongly accord with the theoretical model previously introduced (see above). The marketplace culture under investigation is conceptualised as a brand-orientated play-community, such its inherent desire to engage with a spectrum of play forms: carnivalesque (ilinx-mimicry) and competitive (agon-alea) play are central to the play-ground, these play forms provide opportunities for a variety of masculine roles to be enacted (mimicry), and the combination of these play behaviours has established an ethos of hyper-masculinity. The 'branded carnival' allows for consumers to engage in a variety of toxic play (ilinx) forms: abnormal consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs, the appropriation of marketplace resources to fuel carnivalistic life, hegemonic masculinity, and upsetting the public. However, BPONG community members also desire play in the form of agon. The 'toxic sport' of professional beer pong, provides opportunities for members to engage in more serious, competitive play. However, this novel form of competitive play has at its foundation extreme

alcohol consumption, which the community constructs as an integral skill, and thus central to the agon-corrupt ilinx based sport. The branded carnival and the toxic sport are intertwined with the constant enactment of hyper-masculine play-ground roles. The constant displays of hyper-masculine behaviour serve as the tacit rules of the play-ground – one must be a ‘real man’ within the confines of the BPONG play-ground. A broad range of masculine roles associated with the contradictory poles of the ‘rebel’ myth and ‘the breadwinner’ myth are enacted in tandem within this play-ground. Figure 8 illustrates the empirical understanding of the interrelated play/gender dimensions observed in the BPONG brand-orientated play-community.

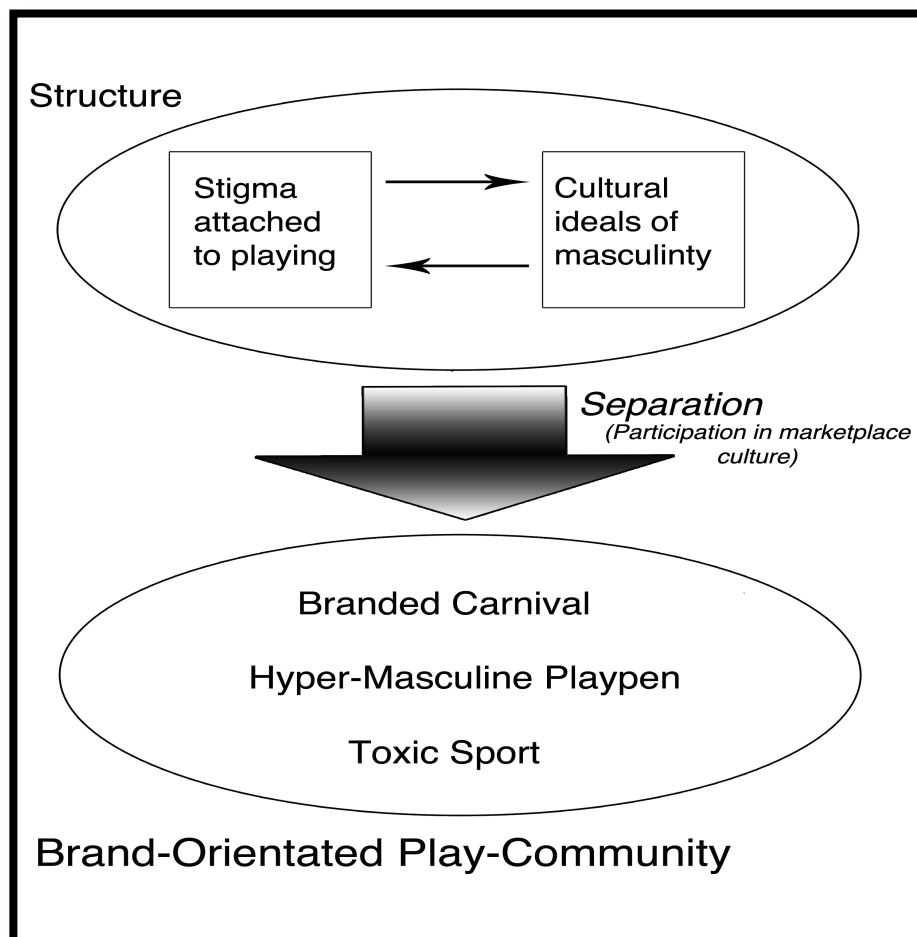


Figure 8. The Empirical Relationship between Play, Masculinity, and Marketplace Culture

The above model positions the rituals and traditions of the BPONG community in contrast to normal structured time, and in doing so displays the novel contribution to the consumer culture theory dimensions of marketplace culture and consumer identity projects – the empirical relationship between play and marketplace cultures. Each of the novel conceptualizations introduced in this model will now be discussed, and expanded upon individually. Firstly, the novel consumption community form of the brand-orientated play-community will be discussed, followed by a discussion of the range of play behaviour observed within the play-community.

### **5.3 The Brand-Orientated Play-Community: Towards a Reconceptualization of Marketplace cultures**

The brand-orientated play-community is introduced as a novel consumption community form: it displays a combination of characteristics associated with subcultures of consumption, brand community, and consumer tribes (Cova *et al.* 2007a), but most dominantly displays the desire for play as its foundational characteristic. Within the consumer culture theory literature these community forms are primarily demarcated according to their community locus (Canniford 2011). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the BPONG community fails to confirm to such a clear demarcation of community locus: this community has at its core an activity (beer pong), a brand (BPONG) and linking value (consumer-to-consumer relationships) (see Table 7). This particular community's locus, as shown in figure 6, is the desire for play, however, an activity, a brand, and linking value are each essential to the make-up and support of the range of play enacted within the BPONG play-community.



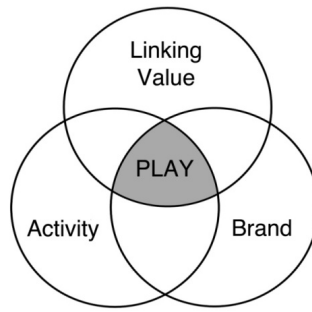


Figure 6. Model of Brand-Orientated Play-Community Locus

A brand-orientated play-community is defined as a community of consumers bound by lived and/or mediated relationships based upon a shared veneration of play, which is facilitated by the symbolic properties of a single brand. While the brand-orientated play-community displays a number of the characteristics of the brand community phenomenon, as discussed by Canniford (2011), this particular community does not enact the same brand directed behaviour as discussed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001).

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p.412) define a brand community as “*a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand*”. The BPONG brand-orientated play-community is a community of consumers bound by a shared veneration of play, which incorporates the brand into play forms, this is significantly different from a community enacting a shared veneration for a brand and incorporating playful rituals within.

Within brand communities the brand inspires consumer-to-consumer relationships and subsequently community formation (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Within the brand-orientated play-community, it is not the brand, but the desire to engage in many play forms that appears to have fostered community formation. However, within this novel community form the facilitating brand remains significant, it is far from trivial, as the community perceives the BPONG brand as the sacred curator of venerated play (Belk *et al.* 1989). The brand is thus understood as a resource for and facilitator of communal play.

The complex and nuanced activity-based rituals are the ‘playing’, so to speak, and the players are linked through their shared veneration of play. The findings of this study, and the author’s conceptualisation of this novel community form, suggest that such a distinct typology, as that introduced by Canniford (2011), is of limited value in relation to understanding the community’s consumption behavioural phenomenon. In a similar manner, Goulding and Saren (2007) discuss the blending and blurring of the feature characteristics within the Goth tribe. Thus, a return and critical re-examination of the original conceptual foundations of marketplace cultures may be of value to consumer culture theory.

The conceptualisation of marketplace cultures is grounded in Mafessoli’s (1996) discussion on ‘neo-tribalism’ and Cova’s (1997) conceptualization of ‘linking value’ (Arnould and Thompson 2005). However, this study suggests there may be value in returning to the conceptualisation of marketplace cultures, and using an alternative foundation, one that is postulated as an *essential* human activity.

*“Play is an essential element of man’s ontological makeup, a basic existential phenomenon... that cannot be explained as deriving from other existential phenomenon.”* (Fink 1968).

Play is an inseparable part of culture and society. Each play classification; agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx, has inspired a social manifestation of the respective play form (Caillois 1962), for example; agon – sports and contests; alea – card games and casinos; mimicry – theatre and cinema; and ilinx – carnival rides and adventure. Thus, play inspires sociality (Caillois 1962, Huizinga 1955). Sociality is discussed as a common feature of the various forms of marketplace culture discussed in the consumer culture theory literature (Cova and Cova 2002, Cova *et al.* 2007a, Canniford 2011). However, humans have a deep-rooted need to play (Huizinga 1955), and play is only fully realised when those with the same ‘toys’ play together (Caillois

1962). So rather than understanding playful consumption as a symptom of sociality, which is how the consumer culture theory literature discusses the relationship between play and marketplace culture (see Table 4), the findings of this study suggests that play can be in fact a common locus for members of these community forms, and the types of consumption enacted within – a means to satisfy our deep-rooted need to play (which fosters sociality as a result). Thus play, offers a solid foundation for the reconceptualisation of the marketplace culture phenomenon.

Advancing this call for reconceptualisation, the author suggests we begin to think in terms of marketplace play-communities, in which the relationship between an activity, brand(s), and linking value is understood as fluid – each of these features combine to aid the community locus – desire for play. Constructing these community forms as play-communities allows for a more extensive treatment of the communal consumption phenomenon. By understanding play as central, and foundational, we can examine communal consumption as a symptom of our deep-rooted desire play: what marketplace resources facilitate play-communities, this includes an investigation of brands and branded products, services, activities, and experiences used to facilitate play; the rituals incorporated; the community's construction of their 'play rules' or the 'rules of the game', i.e. the community norms, and the subsequent gender roles enacted during play. By adopting play as an alternative foundation for understanding communal consumption, rather than making shallow references to play and persist in filtering play-orientated terms throughout discussions of these community forms, it affords consumer culture theory researchers an opportunity to (re)focus attention on the complex behaviour enacted within these liminoid commercial manifestations rather than demarcating the behaviours of these community forms based on labels attached. Without a reexamination of the conceptual foundation of marketplace cultures, consumer culture theorists will persist on perpetuating false complexities and paradoxes (Cova *et al.* 2007a), which to a large degree can be explained using play theory as a foundation, as illustrated in this study.

The below table highlights the value of taking a play-market facilitation approach to investigating/understanding these community forms.

Table 11. Reconceptualising Marketplace Cultures: Play & Market Facilitation

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Play Form</b>	<b>Marketplace Facilitation</b>
Canniford (2011)	Red Bull brand-community	Ilinx and agon (music, DJ competitions, adrenaline sports)	Red Bull sponsorship and facilitation of events within these categories
O'Sullivan <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Beamish Brand Community	Ilinx and mimicry (beer consumption, cigar consumption, enacting ideals of masculinity)	Beamish brand used as symbolic resources for play behaviour. Beamish Tours facilitate desire for play.
Schouten and McAlexander (1995) /Fournier <i>et al.</i> (2001)	New Bikers, subculture of consumption	Ilinx and mimicry (motorbike riding, rebel masculine roles)	Play supported by outlaw symbolism of Harley-Davidson brand and products. Posse Rides serve as marketer facilitation of play desires.
Cova <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Warhammer Brand Community	Mimicry, agon, alea (War figurines, battle, dice)	Facilitated by Warhammer products and events.

Cova and Cova (2002)	Solomon Consumer Tribe	Ilinx (snowboarding)	Solomon bringing products/resources to the 'play-ground'.
Langer (2007)	Manifest Brand Community	Mimicry and ilinx (Fetish carnival)	ManiFest organized brand-fest events

The findings of this study introduce a novel community form and suggest that a reexamination of the consumption community as a contemporary cultural manifestation of play would present further significant value to understanding consumer behaviour: within consumption communities play is foundational but can be enacted in a variety of commercially orientated ways, some facilitated directly by the marketer (Red Bull), others facilitated by the use of marketplace resources (Beamish), and others indeed both (Harley-Davidson). Thus, advancing the introduction of the brand-orientated play-community novel community form, we are offered an opportunity to apply the fresh foundation of play to garnish novel insights concerning communal consumption for the area of consumer culture theory.

## 5.4 Marketer-Facilitated Events: The Branded Carnival

Brand fests are opportunities for marketers to co-create experiences with communities of consumers, marketers attempt to influence the complex web of relationships central to brand community marketing (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). While consumers are willing to engage with marketer-facilitated events, they also desire bespoke approaches to consumption (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). The BPONG community participate in the marketer-facilitated WSOBP, however, their bespoke and toxic approach to consumption practices, escalates this brand/play celebration to that which reflects more accurately a contemporary commercialised carnival (Hanlon 2006, Langer 2007). While,

brand fests are typically associated with communal consumption of a single brand, the branded carnival, in this instance, is primarily concerned with enacting a world-upside-down ethos, which is supported by a number of brands. Despite consumers attempting to invert social and market logics, they do so within boundaries provided by the market system (Firat and Dholakia 1998).

The marketplace has always been associated with playful, destructive, and often deranged behaviours (Kozintes *et al.* 2004, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). The archetypal carnival represented the culmination of interplay between the market and hyper-play behaviours (Thompson 2007). Participation in 'carnivalistic life' represented a suspension of reality, in which a 'utopian realm of community' was established (Turner 1982, Hanlon 2006, Langer 2007). The carnival was in opposition to the overly structured nature of formal (oppressive) relationships, including those of the marketplace. Participants obtained equality through mutual participation in 'deviant' play during the carnival (Kozinets 2002b, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). The suspension of hierarchy ensured that at the heart of the carnival were excess, laughter, reversal and ecstasy. There was to be no shame held in the practices of drinking, eating, dancing or singing during the 'carnivalistic life' (Bakhtin 1984). This study introduces the concept of the 'branded carnival', thus the following questions arise: How does the contemporary 'branded carnival' compare with the archetypal carnival? What has been maintained? And what has evolved to encompass the commercial market?

Historically, the carnival ritualistically mocked authority: parody ensured equality so that those previously separated can enter into familiar contact in the carnival-playground (Hanlon 2006, Langer 2007). While traditionally the sanctimonious authority of the church and court were mocked, during the 'branded carnival' it is marketplace resources that are transformed, appropriated, and in essence, their intended use/meaning is 'mocked'. During the WSOBP branded carnival a number of brands have their meaning

transformed; brands such as Gatorade, Vitamin Water, Emergen-C, and Chipotle, typically associated with good health, are ritualistically 'mocked' and 'forced' into toxic carnival participation. These brands are infused with carnivalesque 'linking value' (Cova 1997) via their use in the carnival; the Gatorade, Vitamin Water, and Emergen-C brands were amalgamated with 'carnival brands' such as Jack Daniels, Smirnoff, and other 'toxic' alcoholic brands, as a means to access the carnival ethos of 'the world upside down' (Presdee 2000). The Chipotle brand too became incorporated into the carnivalesque via abnormal consumption in the form of binge eating contests; hence, the brand's meaning is appropriated to support the community's desire for 'toxic play'.

Other marketplace resources (Red Bull, Four Loko, Jack Daniels), and black marketplace resources (Marijuana, Cocaine, Ecstasy) that support carnival play, or indeed naturally possessed 'carnivalesque linking value' are incorporated accordingly to support the excess, laughter and revelry, essential to carnivalesque life (Torn 2012). These resources seem to be revered and have their meaning affirmed and celebrated, because brands like 'Jack Daniels' emically symbolise wantonness, irresponsibility, excess, and self-indulgence (Holt 2006). It appears that during the WSOBP branded carnival, that not only are certain brands being ritualistically 'mocked' but so too responsible behaviour and 'adult' life. However, while this sense of diversion of 'structure' mimics the ethos of the archetypal carnival, the contemporary, 'branded carnival' requires branded products to facilitate both the affirmation and inversion essential to the frenzy necessary to access carnivalistic life (Caillois 1962).

Lenten times traditionally follow the carnival (Caillois 2001), following the branded carnival participants revert from the toxic and 'abnormal' consumption behaviour enacted and return to 'normal' consumption behaviour. Consumers, following participation in the carnival, extol abstinence from carnivalistic life and from the brands that possess natural carnivalesque

linking value – the brands that facilitated and supported the carnival. Following the WSOBP branded carnival, participants exclaim joy at no longer engaging in toxic consumption practices, alcohol is no longer viewed in terms of its carnivalesque value, but instead abstinence from alcohol is utilised as a marker of distance from the toxic carnival. Members of the community also extol joy at a temporary abstinence from the facilitating BPONG brand. When the archetypal carnival was played out normal order was restored, the conclusion of the contemporary branded carnival marks the restoration of normal consumption. Brands that were previously ritualistically mocked during the carnival become used as the marketer intended. Brands such as Gatorade, Vitamin Water, and Emergen-C are used as carnival exit rites, and as symbolic markers of the reintroduction to ‘reality’. Hence, the full cycle of the carnival has taken place regarding consumers’ ritualistic engagement: the ‘world upside down’ (Presdee 2000) returns to ‘official’ time with regard to behaviour and the consumption of branded resources.

While archetypal carnivals mocked authority, the contemporary carnival appears to mock brand meaning. Could it be that contemporary consumers experience a similar degree of constraint and oppression from the marketplace, its narratives, and brands that peasants and slaves experienced from rulers and masters? It may be the case that the rituals of transgression and inversion inherent to the carnival have not changed but instead the cultural pressures and boundaries consumers are exposed to have come to be associated with the marketplace and its dazzling icon – the brand. The branded carnival further supports the notion of consumer tribes as ‘paradox incarnate’ (Cova *et al.* 2007a), the branded carnival is a relatively conservative emancipatory practice in which the marketplace is temporary evaded via the use and ‘misuse’ of it’s own resources.

The branded carnival is an emancipatory practice through which a temporary community of consumers can elude and defy ideological imperatives of the marketplace and establish their own ‘utopian realm’ built upon brands that



facilitate their construction of carnivalistic life. The conceptualisation of the 'branded carnival' contributes to the under explored discussion on the central tensions between the logics governing markets and communal relationships. Firat and Dholakia (1998) suggest that all attempts at circumventing, rejecting, or rebelling against the market have been co-opted by the market as just another marketable commodity. This study illustrates how this particular consumption community's emancipation from the market, via enactment of the branded carnival, actively seeks out the support of marketplace resources, requires marketplace facilitation, and relies on the appropriation of marketplaces resources to generate 'carnavalesque linking value'. This ensures the symbolic 'rebirth' of the marketplace via its own resources. Through acts of collective 'mockery' and festivity the carnival community exhausts need for genuine revolution (Presdee 2000, Hanlon 2006). Effectively, the 'branded carnival' exhausts the desire to fully escape the constraints and pressures of commercial structures and instead allows for a cathartic return to unchallenged marketplace structures, therefore solidifying the cultural dominance of the market.

#### **5.4.1 The Marketization of Play? Paidia vs Ludus Tensions**

Discussion will now focus more directly on the context of the brand-orientated play community, and the tensions in the marketer-community relationship that have begun to emerge, primarily as a result of the specific play forms enacted within the realms of the play-ground. While the consumer culture theory literature places attention on marketplace tensions of extraordinary experiences (Kozintez 2002, Kozintez *et al.* 2004, Sherry *et al.* 2007, Tumbat and Belk 2011), our understanding fails to move beyond exclaiming marketers should not prescribe rules to the specific community but instead work with the community in order to best facilitate its communal needs (Cova and Cova 2002, Kozinets *et al.* 2004, Cova *et al.* 2007, Schau *et al.* 2009). Thus, it has been suggested that in order to avoid marketplace tensions, marketers should utilise co-creation in designing and implementing community based consumption experiences (Caru and Cova 2007, Cova and Dalli 2009).

However, while this prescription informs marketers on how to avoid tensions, it does little to inform as to what is it about the marketer overly insisting 'rules' that fosters such tensions.

This study found that when the marketer insists on rule changes to the consumer play-ground, what in fact they are doing is attempting to apply a more sophisticated framework onto consumer play behaviour i.e. directing the consumer from marketplace paidia play forms to marketplace ludus play forms. Paidia is concerned with the freedom and improvisation of play, there are no direct rules governing paidia, thus the paidia player has full freedom of play and is unrestricted by the boundaries of strict rules (Caillois 1962). However, ludus is concerned with sophisticated play and has a number of rules governing the nature of play. As Caillois (1962) discusses, paidia is the infant playing with his tooth with its tongue, the infant continues to play, even to the point of the infant damaging its tongue: paidia eventually breeds chaos. One can draw similarities between the infant and the toxic play behaviour of the BPONG brand-orientated play community.

BPONG members do not require rules, they wish for a lack of sophisticated play in the form of toxic consumption, and continue to do so to the point that it is extremely damaging (to the point of developing 'Pong Flu', vomiting blood, or being hospitalised). However, as observed in this study the marketer attempted to enforce more sophisticated play rules in order to move the community from the damaging (to the brand) paidia play behaviours to more sophisticated, less deviant, and thus more marketable, ludus play. However, the community maintains a taste for paidia consumption and have resisted the brand's prescribed ludus orientated rules, and as a result, tensions have emerged. So while this study accords that the marketer should co-create the rules of the play-ground in order to avoid community-marketer tensions, the marketer must also understand the contrast (and transition) in the forms of play desired and, thus, should not impose rules belonging to realm of ludus, if paidia play is desired. Such a rapid development of sophistication

(enforcement of new tacit rules) will result in tensions, and potentially what was observed this study – a loss of perceived marketer authenticity (Leigh *et al.* 2006). The author will now discuss more explicitly the deviant paidia play enacted therein.

### **5.5 Toxic Play: A Desire for Harmful Play**

The transgressive excitements of carnival play are not assumed to be completely positive: carnival play can be damaging, painful and harmful. Huizinga (1955) referred to the fact that forms of hyper or extreme play could be bloody or potentially fatal. However, carnivalesque play remains much desired in contemporary consumer culture (Maffesoli 1996, Kozinets 2001, Maclarann and Brown 2005, Presdee 2000, Hanlon 2006, Langer 2007, Sherry *et al.* 2007). While the increase in consumers' willingness to engage in potentially damaging and 'risky' play behaviours has been well documented (Lyng 1990, 2005, Le Breton 2000, Reith 2005, Canniford 2011), there remains an under examined phenomenon that ranges across a variety of consumption spheres – that of 'toxic play'. Toxic play encapsulates a form of play enacted as a means to support and/or maintain a collective emotional bond, in which consumers engage in a variety of consumption practices that are either physically, emotionally, or psychologically harmful to oneself or others.

During the branded carnival of the WSOBP numerous consumption practices implied as 'toxic', in a variety of semi-related literatures, are being enacted emphatically and simultaneously. While the harmful, hedonistic, and risky behaviours found endemic within the BPONG community have been previously documented in an isolated fashion, this study highlights their interrelated and dependant nature, which was foundational to the construction and reification of this commercial play-ground.

Toxic play enacted by the BPONG community has at its foundation excessive alcohol consumption (Reith 2005, Borsari 2004); edgework activities (Lyng

1990, 2005); a 'toxic sport'; poly-drug use (Reith 2005); upsetting the public (Presdee 2000); and endemic displays of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Avery 2012). However, these forms of toxic play are valuable sources of consciousness of kind (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) and enhance the emotional bond experienced (Goulding *et al.* 2002) during the WSOBP branded carnival. Participation in the branded carnival fosters emancipation from the dualism of excess and control (Reith 2005).

Toxic play is not considered normal, yet it is normalised within the BPONG community: members are willing to embrace the toxic consequence, provided it supports their desire for liminoid play. Abnormal alcohol consumption during the branded carnival results in community members developing what is emically coined 'Pong Flu', a sickness developed due to consumers' immune systems been weakened as a result of their extreme consumption. However, this is constructed as an essential aspect of the community experience and normalised via the development of such emic lexicon. Toxic play is 'carnivalistic life' in full realization – an engagement with the excess, deviant, and destructive. Could the emergence of toxic play mark the beginning of a critical turn within consumer culture, in which consumption practices will focus more on the excessive and toxic? Is the enactment of toxic play an act of resistance to the attempts of Western societies to reduce risks in all aspects of contemporary life? Is there something inherently attractive about toxic play and this apparent return to the archaic carnival life? The paradox of the reduction of risks and the enactment of toxic play within contemporary culture deserves further attention from consumer culture theorist and sociologists.

## **5.6 Toxic Sport and the Extended Theory of Play**

Caillois (1962) discusses that games generally do not fall neatly into the four classifications of play, that in their make-up games generally combine two of the classifications of play. There is a natural symmetry between agon-alea as both require precision and equity, and both of these can be regulated within the confines of the game. However, so too exists symmetry between mimicry-

ilinx based games, as both are generally unregulated. Dominant cultural sports are typically based on an agon-alea play combination. However, while there has been a relative cultural increase in the emergence of 'extreme sports' (Le Breton 2000, Donnelly 2006), based on physical risk, which incorporate ilinx into the components of these sport forms, such as mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011), white-water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), and motorbike racing (Murphy and Patterson 2011). The sport of beer pong incorporates ilinx components into the sport also, however, not pure ilinx in the form of induced speed (vertigo), but corrupt ilinx in the form of intoxication via the abnormal consumption of alcohol (Caillois 1962).

The BPONG community's alcohol consumption is considered abnormal (Reith 2005), resulting consequences of alcohol consumption include 'puking blood', 'passing out', and developing illness related to poor health following the WSOBP. While both professional beer pong and extreme sports can be subsumed under the edgework concept (voluntary risk taking), there is a significant difference between beer pong as a novel sport form and extreme sports. When a player engages in competition based on ilinx such as white-water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), snowboarding (Donnelly 2006), or surfing (Le Breton 2000), for example, the risk is conscious and directly related to the play environment, which means the risk can be controlled by the player according to the situation (Le Breton 2000). The player can react and attempt to maintain control of the ilinx induced by the rapidly changing environment, and also, if a player wishes he/she can eject from the vertigo induced at specific junctures (Caillois 1962). Essentially, extreme sports are based on controlling the vertigo induced by the external environment within the game/sport context (Le Breton 2002, Donnelly 2006).

However, according to the official rules of professional beer pong, players are not required to engage in any form of ilinx-based play. However, the players chose to incorporate ilinx based play into competition voluntarily. Players induce ilinx in the form of alcohol consumption, of which players believe to

enhance their capabilities of agon (competition). Players manage corrupt alcohol consumption in attempt to negotiate the 'edge' of optimum performance. If players consume too much alcohol their performance will deteriorate, as they will not possess the motor control or hand-eye coordination necessary for accurate shooting, but according to players, if they do not drink enough alcohol they will be too distracted by competitor's shouting and the spectator's roars, and thus performance will also deteriorate. The toxic sport of professional beer pong is primarily concerned with negotiating the boundary of the self-induction of *ilinx* rather than controlling *ilinx* induced by the agon environment. Thus, toxic sport is concerned with controlling internally induced corrupt *ilinx* states rather than *ilinx* induced by the external environment. It must be noted that the self-induction of corrupt *ilinx* states via the consumption of alcohol does not offer the player the freedom to depart from the vertigo play state in an immediate or considered fashion, the player is 'taken over' by the alcohol consumed and no longer free to eject from the play world at a specific juncture (Caillois 1962, Borsari 2004). While extreme sports are discussed in terms of players controlling *ilinx* (Lyng 2005), professional beer pong players induce *ilinx* in order to achieve optimum agon performance levels.

It is suggested that sport culture mirrors culture (Jonasson and Thiborg 2010), and thus, the emergence of toxic sport, further affirms the authors statement of an apparent emergence of a toxic-orientation within contemporary consumer culture. The author's conceptualisation of 'toxic sport' adds a novel dimension to our understanding of extended play theory. But what does play form inform about sport culture? Elias and Dunning (1986), highlight how sports have evolved from an association of force to finesse, however, the emergence of toxic sport, suggests a rotate in sport culture, in which a return to the carnivalesque and less structured appears to be emerging.

Guttmann (2000) suggests we are awaiting the turn of the postmodern sports era, in which sports will be characterised less by instrumental rationality and

more by spontaneity and playfulness. The BPONG community's creation of 'professional beer pong' can be understood as a milestone in the emergence of the postmodern sport era. Professional beer pong infuses the contrasting cultural categories of abnormal alcohol consumption and professional sport participation to create a 'sport' inherently carnivalesque, playful, and spontaneous – far removed from rational and overly regulated behaviour. Thus, professional beer pong, and the author's conceptualisation of toxic sport builds upon Guttman's (1978) model of Play, Contests, Games and Sports (see figure 8). Bromberger (1995, in Guttman 2000) suggests that there is *'no sign that modern sports have lost their almost magical ability to excite and enthrall'*, however, for the BPONG community it is only through participation in their 'toxic sport' that their excitement and desires for sport and meaningful play are satisfied.

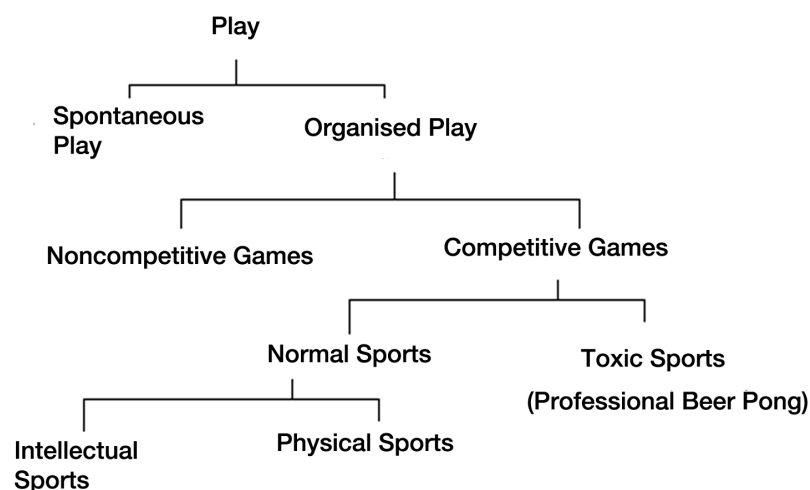


Figure 9. Extension of Guttman's (1978) Model of Play, Contests, Games, Sport

## 5.7. Playing Gender: The Hyper-Masculine Playpen

Within the BPONG community play-ground there is an ethos characterised by hyper-masculinity, and the mimicry of hyper-masculine roles. The tacit rules of the play-ground are based upon portraying and maintaining a strong masculine identity. Male-dominated liminoid zones are associated with the enactment of the utopian ideals of masculinity; examples include the Mountain

Men (Belk and Costa 1998), New Bikers (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and Beamish brand community (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). However, within each of these consumption communities the enactment of masculinity is based on atavistic ideals of masculinity, associated with the 'rebel' masculine roles. In their discussion on contemporary masculinity Holt and Thompson (2004) suggest that the male engagement with liminoid community forms is an escape from the pressures of negotiating the cultural expectations and representations of masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002). Hence, in order to subvert structured society, the enactment of masculinity within these consumption collectives tends to be based on the utopian ideals of the rebel masculinity myth, which has been widely lionized in contemporary culture (Avery 2012). However, the BPONG community incorporates into their liminoid play-ground a broad spectrum of masculine roles. Not only are masculine roles associated with the rebel masculinity myth enacted but so too are roles associated with breadwinner masculinity myth.

In structured society men navigate the culturally acceptable dimensions of the rebel and breadwinner masculine roles, by enacting the man-of-action-hero synthesis (Holt and Thompson 2004), by which men combine the socially constructed positive aspects of the rebel and breadwinner myths in order to ensure a balanced portrayal of masculinity. However, does the negotiation of this synthesis provide for the desired emotional and spontaneous expression of masculinity? For members of the BPONG community, it appears that entry into the liminoid zone is not to subvert the breadwinner myth like that of the Mountain Men (Belk and Costa 1998), but instead concerned with subverting the pressures of negotiating the man-of-action-hero synthesis – a diluted and calculated 'safe' representation of masculinity. The masculine roles enacted within the WSOBP carnival play-ground are dominated by the contradictory extremes of the breadwinner and rebel myths. Rather than enacting a sedate, controlled, and middle ground synthesis of these poles (man-of-action hero), the BPONG community enacts the extremes of the poles, in a constant back and forth, thus subverting the man-of-action-hero synthesis.



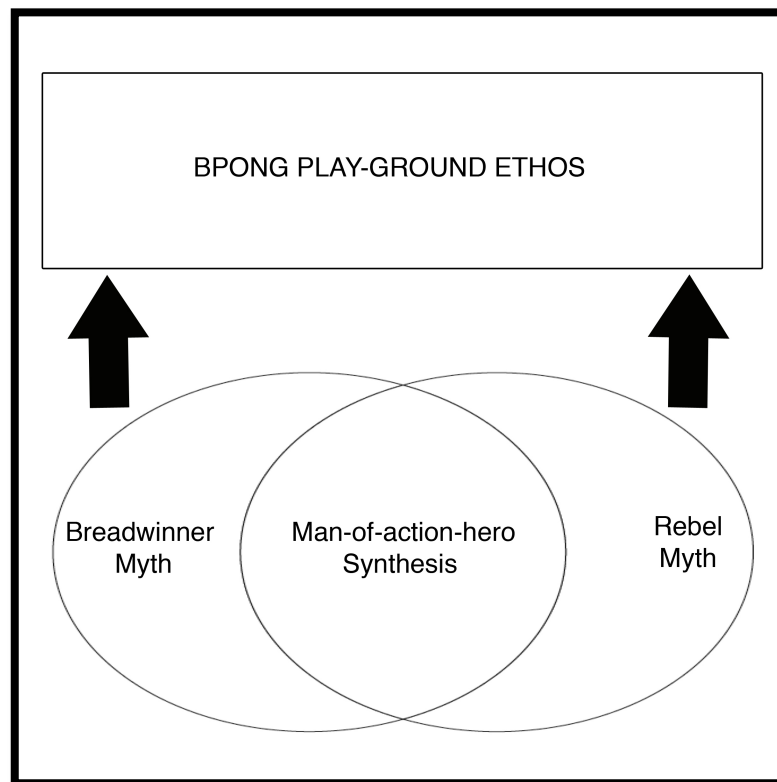


Figure 10. Subverting Man-of-Action-Hero Masculine Role

Within the BPONG play-ground participants switch back and forth in a constant manner between enacting the roles of the Sturdy Oak, Give Em Hell, and Big Wheel, each associated with the extremes of the breadwinner myth, and the roles of the Glutton, Playboy, and Peter Pan, which are associated with the extremes of the rebel myth. Carnivalistic life traditionally provided people with an opportunity to experience extremes not afforded in typical day-to-day life, however rarely is the enactment of gender discussed within this context. Within the confines of the BPONG carnival play-ground the extremes of the masculine myths, constructed in society as contradictory, are enacted in a manner that ensures an ethos of being the ‘best man one can be’ is maintained. Within the community it is not so much important which masculine myth is being enacted, what is important is that it matches the extreme nature the play-ground. This suggests that WSOBP participants require a catharsis from negotiating the cultural representations and expectations that serve to

limit (play safe) rather than enthuse spontaneous expressions of gender. Within the BPONG play-ground it is socially acceptable to enact a multitude of masculine roles provided the ethos of being the best man one can be is reproduced and a strong masculine collective identity maintained, thus a subversion of 'man-of-action-hero' synthesis is being enacted.

### **5.7.1 Femininity in the Hyper-Masculine Playpen**

Within the confines of the hyper-masculine playpen, traditionally women were viewed as objects of play, in the form of strippers and novelty teams. Women were included in the play-ground to ensure that male participants could enact the male gaze and subsequently the Playboy role. Women within the play-ground were not viewed as legitimate players, but instead as a resource for hegemonic play. In order to renegotiate their role within the community, and be accepted as legitimate players, female members adopt and co-opt a number of masculine roles. Carnivals require both male and female participation, however, the WSOBP carnival has an embedded hyper-masculine ethos governing play, which *all* players are expected to adhere to.

In a similar manner to the female members of the Harley-Davidson community (Martin *et al.* 2006), female BPONG members employ tactics of adoption and co-option of masculine roles in order to meet the hyper-masculine requirements of the play-ground rules. Female BPONG members adopt the hyper-masculine competitive roles in order justify their presence as competitors and co-opt many of the toxic roles, while underscoring their behaviour subtly with femininity. While, to a large degree, this study corroborates with Martin *et al.* (2006), it differs in the sense that female BPONG members are attempting to renegotiate their gender role within the community, rather than to be solely accepted within it. While the female BPONG members are not attempting to achieve a sense of gender equality so to speak, they look for player equality, and regardless of gender wish to be accepted as legitimate play-ground members.

This study highlights the importance of gender in relation to ethos of the play-ground, 'girls and boys' do play differently (Lever 1978), however, players should be treated as equal within the confines of the play-ground (Huizinga 1955). Thus, the tactics of the female adoption and co-option of masculine roles, within the play-ground appears not so much to be concerned with portraying a strong feminine identity, but more so about achieving player equality, while maintaining a some degree of femininity. Belk and Tumbat (2011), suggest that when discussing the liminoid, we should not discuss categories and demarcations central to structured society, for example gender identity. Thus, to a large degree, within the BPONG community, one can instead discuss in terms of player identity, and enacting player identity is related to the process of learning to be a tribal player (Goulding *et al.* 2012). Thus, the female members of the community have achieved, not gender equality so to speak but something more important within the liminoid zone – player equality. Female members have redefined their role within the community from 'playthings' to players, however the play-ground ethos remains directed by ideals of hegemonic masculinity, and players must play by the rules, as previously discussed.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONTRIBUTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND REFLECTIONS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

*This chapter draws the thesis to a close, and in doing so, offers reflections on the value of this empirical study. Section 6.2 highlights the aims and objectives of this study while drawing the reader's attention back to the main findings presented. The significance of these findings will then be discussed. Section 6.3 presents contributions regarding our conceptual understanding of marketplace cultures, while discussing the novel conceptualisation of the 'brand-orientated play-community'. Section 6.4 discusses the contemporary consumer carnival, its use of marketplace resources, and the cultural dominance of the brand. Section 6.5 discusses toxic play, and its significance to consumer culture. Section 6.6 discusses the author's conceptualisation of toxic sport and its contribution to the sport and play literatures. Following on from this, section 6.7 discusses the relationship between marketplace culture and gender expressions, particularly focusing on contemporary male consumer's subvertive gender enactments. Section 6.8 discusses the author's development of the ethnographic comic, and its contribution to ethnographic analysis and representation. Finally, section 6.9 reflects on the limitations of this study and discusses possible avenues for future research.*

### **6.2 Aims and Objectives**

Using a hybrid of ethnographic approaches, this study aimed to contribute to the field of consumer culture theory by investigating a marketplace culture using play as a theoretical lens. The consumer culture theory literature places substantial emphasis on 'sociality' and 'linking value' (Cova 1997, Canniford 2011) as foundational motivations for consumers to interact with, engage in, and frequently, initiate marketplace cultures (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). While many consumer culture theorists allude to playful consumption, in a frequent

yet shallow manner, they fail to give play an adequate treatment – there appears to be a reluctance to fully investigate marketplace cultures using such a complex, yet timely, lens (see Table 4). This author found it necessary to expand on the numerous shallow references made to play in the consumer culture theory literature, and to examine play, not as a symptom of marketplace cultures, but as a potential foundational element. Thus, the primary goal of this study was to investigate how play manifests within a marketplace culture, rather than persisting with a narrow understanding of the ‘playful rituals’ within these community forms.

This study examined a male-dominated marketplace culture, thus, a secondary aim of understanding the ritualised and liminoid forms of masculinity enacted within the culture was realised. Male consumers’ participation in marketplace cultures is understood as an emancipation from the pressures of evolving cultural representations of masculinity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998, Holt and Thompson 2004). This study aimed to explore gender performance within a marketplace liminoid zone, and its relationship with play, in order to garnish a fresh insight into the contemporary construction and enactment of masculinity.

### **6.2.1 Review of the Key Findings**

This study introduces the notion of the brand-orientated play-community (section 4.2), which is understood as a novel consumption community form. While the consumer culture theory demarcates clearly between consumption communities based on locus, such as activity, brand, or linking value, this novel community displayed a combination of these feature characteristics. The brand-orientated play-community displayed each of these characteristics, however, it was found that a desire to play was its foundational characteristic and that the communal engagement with an activity, branded consumption, and consumer-to-consumer relationships, were symptoms of the deep-rooted desire to play. This study highlights the potential value of a continued examination of the conceptual foundations of marketplace cultures, as this

study illustrates a strong relationship between play and marketplace cultures, previously unexamined in the consumer culture theory literature. The range of the play enacted within will now be expanded upon.

The BPONG community enacts a brand celebration conceptualised as a 'branded carnival' (section 4.3), a carnival in which marketplace resources are essential to the construction and maintenance of 'carnivalistic life' (Bakhtin 1984). The community enacts a novel form of play – toxic play – the apogee of the carnival (section 4.3.2), in which alcohol and drug consumption, hegemonic masculinity, the mocking of brand meaning, and upsetting the public reign supreme. This is understood as a contemporary and commercialised manifestation of carnivalesque play. The BPONG community is discussed in terms of a 'hyper-masculine playpen' (section 4.4) in which community members enact (mimic) a multitude of roles associated with powerful masculinity (Avery 2012). While liminoid zones are associated with the utopian enactment of masculinity, this community form enacts a number of contradictory masculine roles associated with the extremities of the breadwinner and rebel myths (Holt and Thompson 2004).

The rules of the BPONG play-ground are influenced by the enactment of extreme and often contradictory masculine roles: the rule governing play is 'be the best man one can be' – thus influencing directly the pursuit of toxic forms of play. Feminine identity is also discussed (section 4.4.3). It was found that female BPONG members have successfully renegotiated their role within the play-ground – a transition from 'play-things' to players is observed. However, within the realms of the liminoid zone, this study highlights our need to discuss in terms of player equality – and not gender equality. Following this, the activity of beer pong, the buttress of this toxic play-ground, is communicated as a novel form of play – a toxic sport (section 4.5). The sport of beer pong has a unique play foundation combination of agon and corrupt-ilinx, which are inherently contradictory play forms (Caillois 1962). Beer pong is discussed as a toxic sport due its foundations of abnormal alcohol

consumption (Reith 2005), as an edgework activity (Lyng 1990, 2005), and the ongoing communal construction as a 'professional sport'.

### **6.3 The Brand-Orientated Play-Community: Rethinking Marketplace Cultures (Revisited)**

This study introduces the notion of the brand-orientated play-community – a consumption community form, of which community locus is a desire for play. The brand-orientated play community is defined as a community of consumers bound by lived and/or mediated relationships based upon a shared veneration of play, which is facilitated by the symbolic properties of a single brand. While the consumer culture theory literature demarcates consumption communities based upon their locus of either an activity, a brand, or a desire for linking value (Canniford 2011), it was found that within the brand-orientated play-community these three characteristics featured consistently, but as a symptom of consumer play, not as a trigger of playful consumption, which is how the consumer culture theory literature suggests this process (Cova *et al.* 2007a). Play cannot be explained as originating from another phenomenon (Fink 1968), and as clearly communicated in this study, linking value, sociality, brand use, and engaging in a branded activity, can be explained as originating from play desires (see Figure 6). Thus, this study highlights the seriousness of play in relation to contemporary communal consumption.

This study highlights a novel relationship between the forms of marketplace culture discussed in the literature. Re-examining many of the consumption communities discussed in the literature, it was found that these could in fact be reconceptualised as play-communities (see Table 11). By employing play theory as a conceptual foundation we can explain much of the paradoxical and erratic behaviours of consumers (Cova *et al.* 2007b). Marketplace cultures are essentially play-communities, which incorporate a variety of play forms. For instance, the Harley-Davidson brand community (Fournier *et al.*

2001) is essentially an ilinx based brand-orientated play-community, the Warhammer brand community (Cova *et al.* 2007b) a mimicry and agon based brand-orientated play-community, the ecstasy tribe (Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009), a corrupt ilinx based play-community, and the Solomon consumer tribe (Cova and Cova 2002) an ilinx based play-community.

The conceptualisation of marketplace cultures as a contemporary manifestation of play presents significant value for consumer culture theory. While it is frequently discussed that there is an obvious and consistent blending of the characteristics of brand community, subcultures of consumption, and consumer tribes, this study illustrates that much of the erratic behaviours can be explained by the consumer desire to play, which may manifest in a variety of commercially orientated ways (Belk 2001). Thus, this study has contributed significantly to our understanding of the relationship between the behaviours of subculture of consumption, brand community, and consumer tribes and, in doing so, advanced our conceptual and theoretical understanding as to the potential foundation of these community forms – play.

This study also contributes to our understanding of marketplace tensions (Tumbat and Belk 2011). By using play as a conceptual foundation for marketplace cultures, further insight is garnered on the relationship between the marketplace and consumer behaviour (and contemporary play). While it is discussed that the marketer should not introduce too many 'rules' or attempt to dominate the consumer (Kozinets *et al.* 2004), or attempt to control the consumer, we previously did not understand why the introduction or enforcement of such 'rules' causes tension. However, this study contributes to our understanding as to how these tensions arise. Accepting that some consumers enter the marketplace to satisfy a need to play, it becomes apparent that the marketer's desired outcome – financial gain, and the consumer's desired outcome – play, are ideologically juxtaposed (Caillois 1962). The consumer desires the free play of possible identities (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011) and outcomes (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962) but the marketer



intends to direct the consumer into outcomes of loyalty and repeat purchase (McAlexander *et al.* 2002). The open forms of play consumers enact in the marketplace (Sherry *et al.* 2007, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011) are closer to the paidia forms of play – in which rules are not of concern (Caillois 1962). However, the marketer attempts to enforce more sophistication and structure to the marketplace play by coaxing repeat purchase and brand loyalty (Patterson and O'Malley 2006). As discussed in the play literature – the progress from paidia to ludus cannot be hurried or overly enforced, as flow states will not emerge due to an imbalance of free play possibilities, and thus, the potential benefits of play cannot be realised (Caillois 1962). Thus, there will be a certain anxiety maintained and tensions within the play-ground will persist: the consumer will resent the 'rule' enforcer as more sophisticated and structured play is imposed on their bespoke approach to play/consumption (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011). Marketers must pay attention to the variety of play forms enacted, and its classifications, before attempting to enter the consumer play-ground as more than a resource for play.

#### **6.4 The Branded Carnival: The Renewal of Marketplace Dominance**

Consumers desire novel consumption experiences (Sherry *et al.* 2007), and thus are willing to participate in 'brand fest' celebrations as a result (Cova and Pace 2006, Schouten *et al.* 2007a). This study found that the members of the BPONG community are willing to participate in the marketer-facilitated WSOBP but also enact a bespoke toxic approach to consumption, and in doing so, escalate the brand celebration, or brand fest, to that of contemporary commercialised carnival (the toxic nature of the carnival will be discussed in the following section). While traditionally brand celebrations incorporate one dominant brand (McAlexander *et al.* 2002, Cova and Pace 2006), in this instance, it was found that community members incorporate a number of brands into their contemporary carnival celebration.

The archetypal carnival represented the interplay between the market and hyper-play behaviours (Kavanagh et al. 2011). Carnivalistic life is understood as the mad, and often deranged, behaviours that arise from the world-upside-down ethos central to carnival (Bakhtin 1984, Presdee 2000, Hanlon 2006, Thorn 2012). Historically, in full frenzy, the carnival ritualistically mocked the authority of the church and masters, and as a result of the frenzy the marketplace could not function (Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). What was found in this instance, with regard to the WSOBP branded carnival, is that the utopian realm of carnivalistic life accessed, not only engages with the marketplace but requires the full support of the marketplace – specifically the marketplace's most dazzling icon – the brand (Muniz and Schau 2005).

During the branded carnival a number of brands (Gatorade) have their meaning inverted, while other brands (Jack Daniels) have their meaning affirmed and celebrated. Thus, the commercial market is central to this contemporary carnival – it is in fact the foundation and facilitator of it. Commercial resources, primarily the brand, are used for the ritualistic inversion and mocking central to carnival (Thompson 2007), however, brands are also required to access the revelry, excess and toxic behaviour central to carnivalistic life (Bakhtin 1984). Following the carnival normal consumption is restored and renewed: brands that had their meaning inverted to access carnivalistic life are used as intended, as markers of normal consumption, the cycle of carnival has been fully enacted.

The archetypal carnival was a form of emancipation from the oppression of dogmatic rules (Turner 1982, 1983, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011) – the contemporary branded carnival is somewhat paradoxically in this regard. Consumers are emancipated temporarily from the oppression of brand meaning central to the marketplace. Paradoxically, emancipation is achieved through the use, misuse, and celebration of that which is being subverted. While in the traditional carnival the marketplace could not function as a result of the deranged behaviours, during the contemporary carnival, the marketplace not

only functions as intended but is the essence of carnivalistic life – the heart of the carnival. This study illustrates that the logics of the market continue to operate successfully even in the inverted logic of carnivalistic life.

The branded carnival further contributes to our understanding of marketplace cultures as paradox incarnate (Cova *et al.* 2007a). The branded carnival is an emancipatory practice through which a temporary community of consumers can elude and defy ideological imperatives of the marketplace and establish their own utopian realm built upon brands that not only facilitate their construction of carnivalistic life, but are essential to it. As discussed, the branded carnival exhausts the desire to fully escape the constraints and pressures of commercial structures (Kozinets 2002b) and instead allows for a cathartic return to renewed and unchallenged marketplace structures, thus, solidifying and perpetuating the cultural dominance of the commercial market and its epaulettes.

## **6.5 Toxic Play: A Reflection of Consumer Culture?**

Risky, damaging, toxic, and deviant behaviours are well documented in the consumer culture literature (Goulding *et al.* 2002, 2009, 2012, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Canniford 2011, Hackley *et al.* 2012). Presdee (2000) discusses the delight in being deviant and the carnival of crime in relation to cultural criminology. Lyng (1990) discusses the sociology of risk taking, which subsumes risky consumption such as extreme alcohol consumption (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2011), mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011), and extreme sports (Le Breton 2000). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss 'masculine' practices such as competition, alcohol consumption and dominance over women (via the male gaze) as being inherently toxic in nature. Goulding *et al.* (200, 2009, 2012) discuss the ecstasy tribe in which the toxic play form of drug consumption is enacted. Cova *et al.* (2007a) discuss the means by which contemporary consumers are hijacking the meaning of brands as a resource for playful, and often, deviant consumption (Bavaria 8.6% street walkers example discussed in Cova *et al.* 2007a). While

these phenomena dominate the consumer culture literature, this study highlights their interrelated and dependant nature as a form of play – ‘toxic play’, which was foundational to the construction and maintenance of the BPONG collective play-ground identity. This is a significant contribution to the consumer identity project dimension of CCT research: it highlights the deviant and darker elements of play that may be used to construct a communal identity (Hanlon 2006, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2010); this deserves further investigation by consumer researchers.

Toxic play is the apogee of contemporary carnivalistic life. Toxic play encapsulates a form of play in which consumers engage in a variety of intentional or unintentional ‘abnormal’ consumption practices, which can be either physically, emotionally, or psychologically harmful to oneself or others, and enacted as a means to support and/or maintain a collective play-ground identity. Participation in the toxic play-ground enables emancipation from the dualism of excess and control, which lies at the heart of contemporary consumption (Reith 2005). This study contributes to the growing body of literature discussing toxic practices (Belk 2001, Goulding *et al.* 2002, Lyng 2005, Reith 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Hanlon 2006, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Hackley *et al.* 2012), and illustrates the interrelated and dependant nature of ‘toxic’ phenomena as a form of emancipatory and transgressive contemporary manifestation of play.

Play is understood as a mirror of cultural progression (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1962, Turner 1983, Elias and Dunning 1986), while contemporary culture is understood as a ‘civilized culture’, in which limited spontaneous expressions of emotions are provided for adults (Elias and Dunning 1986), the apparent desire for toxic play forms in the marketplace (Goulding *et al.* 2002, Lyng 2005, Hanlon 2006, O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011) suggests that consumers desire more destructive and spontaneous experiences. Such a strong desire for toxic and deviant behaviours marks a turn within contemporary culture: a turn marked by desires for regressive carnivalesque, toxic, and essentially more

paidia (unregulated) anti-structure experiences. The enactment of destructive and dark play behaviours is understood as a reflection of the pressures of consumer culture – toxic play is consumer's inversive action in response to constant lowering of risk observed within Western society (Lyng 1990) and the increasing enforcement of structured experiences (Elias and Dunning 1986).

## **6.6 Toxic Sport: A Milestone in the Emergence of the Postmodern Sport Era**

This study introduces the concept of 'toxic sport', which has the play foundations of agon and corrupt ilinx (Caillois 1962). Postmodernity involves the free play of cultural categories: categories that may be inherently contradictory are fused together as means to produce authentic and decommodified meanings and experiences (Cova 1997, Kavanagh *et al.* 2011). Caillois (1962) discusses the incompatibility of agon-ilinx based games, as the essence of these forms of play are contradictory – agon is primarily concerned with control, skill, and competition and ilinx is primarily concerned with the lack of control and frenzy. However, recently we have observed the emergence of extreme sports (Le Breton 2000, Donnelly 2006), which combine the play classifications of agon-ilinx.

However, while both toxic sport and extreme sport can be subsumed under the edgework concept (Lyng 1990), there is a significant difference in these emerging play forms. Extreme sport is primarily based on the players ability to control vertigo states induced by the environment (Le Breton 2000, Lyng 2005, Donnelly 2006), and thus, the more adroit one is at controlling limited vertigo the greater chance of winning. However, with regards to the toxic sport of beer pong, ilinx is voluntarily incorporated into game play – it is essentially an agon based game but players incorporate alcohol as a means to achieve ilinx states. Thus it is understood as corrupt and toxic, as it is not concerned with the control of vertigo but the attainment of vertigo while attempting to maintain finesse and aiming (agon). This study contributes to our

understanding of the evolution of sport culture: it highlights a return to spontaneous and carnivalesque sport forms (Guttman 2000). This marks a milestone in the emergence of the postmodern sporting era in which consumers are beginning to combine contradictory cultural classifications (professional sport and alcohol consumption) to create inherently novel and unique consumption experiences (toxic sport). Thus, for these consumers, dominant more sedate (*ludus*) sports are beginning to lose their cultural appeal, and their sporting needs are only met through playing a toxic sport. This further highlights the emerging desire for toxic and carnivalesque experiences (*paidia*) and the apparent toxic turn in consumer culture.

### **6.7. The Hyper-Masculine Playpen: The Subversion of Man-of-Action**

Marketplace cultures are associated with the enactment of utopian ideals of gender (Holt and Thompson 2004). Typically observed within male dominated marketplace cultures are rituals enthused by ideals of atavistic masculinity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Belk and Costa 1998, Martin *et al.* 2006, O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010, 2011). Male consumers participate in marketplace cultures in order to express and enact strong masculinities, primarily associated with the rebel myth, in a manner free from cultural judgement (Holt and Thompson 2004). However, observed during this study is not a subversion from either the rebel or breadwinner myth masculinity but a subversion from the synthesis of these – the calculated gender performance of the man-of-action-hero role. The man-of-action-hero role is understood as a 'safe' masculine role, in which the culturally constructed positives of the breadwinner and rebel are combined, and negatives discarded. It is a calculated and diluted performance of gender – which provides little opportunity for the expression a strong masculine identity (Holt and Thompson 2004, Avery 2012).

However, observed within the hyper-masculine playpen is a differing tactic than that of enacting one dominant ideal of masculinity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) or the enactment of a middle-ground masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004). Within the confines of the hyper-masculine playpen – a multitude of masculine roles are being enacted. Male consumers tack back and forth between the extremes of the breadwinner and rebel myths, thus enacting contrasting roles in a constant manner within the play-ground. The play-ground is governed by a ‘be the best man one can be’ ethos, and it is thus not important which masculine role is being enacted provided it is a powerful, non dilute, display of masculinity. This is a significant contribution to the consumer identity projects dimension of consumer culture theory: it highlights the consumer desire for strong expressions of gender and highlights the need to subvert the calculated and sedate masculine role of man-of-action-hero. Thus, suggesting a supplementary consumer response to the shifts in cultural representation of masculinity (Patterson and Elliott 2002). Male consumers no longer appear to be subverting the extremes of the poles of the breadwinner and rebel myth, or to be satisfied to enact one utopian ideal of masculinity, but in fact they desire an opportunity to subvert the middle-ground man-of-action synthesis (the epitome of structured society). Alternatively these consumers enact powerful and contradictory masculine roles as the ultimate liminoid expression of gender identity – thus secure in the fact that they are indeed ‘real men’.

### **6.7.1 Player Equality**

Carnivals require both male and female participation (Bakhtin 1984). However, while women originally participated in the hyper-masculine playpen as playthings, and objects of the male gaze (Patterson and Elliott 2002), female members have successfully renegotiated their role within the play-ground – from playthings to legitimate players. This study corroborates with Martin *et al.* (2006) in the sense that the female participants of this male dominated culture engage in the tactics of adoption and co-option of male behaviours as a means to achieve a form of gender equality and to manage their relative gender paradox. However, when discussing liminoid zones, we

should not discuss in terms of categories belonging to the realm of structured society (Tumbat and Belk 2011), gender identity being a case in point, as this is a dominant structural category. When discussing the liminoid zone of a marketplace play-ground, we should instead discuss in terms of player identity and play equality. The renegotiation of the female role within the play-space was extremely successful: they are no longer viewed as playthings. However, female members do engage in a number of practices that are understood as toxic, and primarily masculine (Avery 2012). However, this should not be understood as a battle of the genders but instead viewed as female members learning to be tribal (Goulding *et al.* 2012) – learning the rules of the play-ground (Huizinga 1955). Play must be governed by rules (Huizinga 1955) and the rules of the game must be the same for all players (Caillois 1962). Thus, any female or male participants that enter the play-ground must play by the previously established play rules or else the whole play world collapses (Huizinga 1955). Thus, the masculine roles enacted by female members should not be viewed as symptom of hegemonic masculinity, but instead viewed as player equality – the play-ground rules dictate behaviours, regardless of gender.

## **6.8 Contributions to Ethnographic Practice: The Merit of Visual Ethnography and The Ethnographic Comic**

This study makes a number of contributions to ethnographic practice. The hybrid approach taken via the combination of traditional ethnographic field note taking with the application of visual ethnography (Pink 2001), in the form of photography and videography (Belk and Kozinets 2005), contributed greatly to the richness of data collected and the sophistication of the study's main findings. Adapting a dual approach in the field struck a balance in the trade-off between experiencing the culture through full immersion while also ensuring that hard 'evidence' of the culture was being noted during full immersion phases. Emerson *et al.* (2001) suggest that ethnographers should employ a dual strategy of immersing oneself fully in the culture on certain field trips, in



which *experience* is priority, and engage in a more distant stance during other field trips in which note taking should be priority. While this approach was taken during this study, it was augmented with the use of visual ethnography (Pink 2001, 2006). During field trips in which immersion and experiencing the culture took preference, visual ethnography was employed in order to ensure the culture under investigation was being captured and recorded nonetheless. As a data collection method it also served to preserve the naturalistic behaviour of the culture (Belk and Kozinets 2005), as the capturing of photographs and video were ubiquitous during communal celebrations of play.

It is felt that without the adoption of such an approach many nuances surrounding the communal construction of play may not have been fully captured, and thus misunderstood. Belk and Kozinets (2005) suggest that visual ethnography is particularly well suited to certain consumption contexts. This author suggests visual ethnography is particularly useful for the study of marketplace cultures and play. The use of visual ethnography during this study ensured that the behaviour of actors could be reviewed a number of times, be compared 'live' to the comprehensive data set frequently, and be used as a refresher of the lived experience, which could be referred to whilst transcribing field notes.

The use of visual ethnography not only supplemented data collection but also the analysis of data. Emergent themes from field notes, netnographic observations and interviews, were tested against visual content using a quasi-storyboard approach. The thousands of photographs were triangulated with textual data to create 'ethnographic comics' (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013) based on emergent themes. The process of designing ethnographic comics aided greatly to the analysis of data, and the documenting of analytical milestones, which are often difficult for researchers to articulate (Spiggle 1994). Analysis could now be traced, depicted, and tested in a relatively 'live' fashion (see Appendix B for examples of the ethnographic comic approach). Drawing comic books is associated with frivolity and joviality, thus it is asked,

what is the contribution of such a practice to the 'serious' consumer researcher? There are five distinct advantages of supplementing the research process with an ethnographic comic approach:

- Firstly, the ethnographic comic provides a structure for triangulating the data set (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). In essence, rather than in an ad hoc fashion, the comic structures provide a visual template for triangulation. Using photographic data as the foundation and triangulating with the range of textual data (netnography, observational, interview, informal conversation) will ensure that the researcher's attempts at theme/construct development will consider each form of data within the comprehensive set (Spiggle 1994).
- Secondly, the process of drawing an ethnographic comic visually layers the sophistication of emergent themes/constructs, thus assessing strength of a theme as the comic is being constructed – it provides instant and visually measurable feedback to the researcher (research team). Thus, providing an opportunity to critique one's own work visually.
- Thirdly, following the comic structure, and then supplementing it with theory-based narrative, encourages (requires) the researcher to practice inference. The process of incorporating theory boxes into the comic at particular junctures encourages the researcher to move back and forth between data and theory sources (Spiggle 1994, Stewart 1998). Thus, the researcher's understanding of the relationship between the theory and the data is enhanced. Thus, learning can be incorporated into future development of the theme/construct. The inclusion of theory boxes ensures a balance between the emic and etic representation of the culture (phenomenon) is attained.

- Fourthly, the final comic (which can be compiled into poster form for international conferences [see appendix B]) communicates a relatively 'live' representation of the culture in a widely accessible manner. When engaging in presentations, the more intense and context specific the detail the greater the clarity and opportunities for learning (Tufte 2003). While the ethnographic comic is positioned between textual presentation and video presentation, with regards to visual intensity, its combination of both visual and textual intensity ensures greater speed of access and more directed feedback from peers, and community members in the form of 'member checks'. Both these avenues of feedback, are not only essential to the future development of the theme/construct presented but also to the researcher's personal development and learning.
- Finally, as alluded to above, the ethnographic comic is positioned between traditional presentation in academia and videography (Belk and Kozinets 2005). The ethnographic comic can be understood as a milestone practice for novice researchers aiming to eventually conduct a videography. The process of 'drawing' an ethnographic comic provides the researcher with an introduction into the complex process of managing visual data, learning how to use visual software, and conducting aesthetical critique of one's creative work.

The author feels this study highlights the merit of visual ethnography to support data collection and transcription, and the introduction of the ethnographic comic (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013) contributes to ethnographic analysis, the development of emerging themes, and representation. The ethnographic comic is a significant contribution to juncture of art and science called experimental ethnography (Marcus 1994). It is also felt that the inclusion of visual content in the final ethnographic report provides the reader with a moderate opportunity to experience the 'lived' culture being reported. However, the prime value acquired from the application of visual

ethnographic methods is the richness of data it collects: not only does a picture tell a thousand words but a picture captures a thousand words.

## **6.9 Limitations and Future Research**

This study aimed to investigate the manifestation of play within a male dominated marketplace culture. This study has made a number of contributions to consumer culture theory, specifically, the conceptualisation of the brand-orientated play-community, and a revised understanding of the relationship between the marketplace culture forms as a desire for play. Accompanying the conceptualisation of the brand-orientated play-community is a novel discussion on the manifestations of play with the marketplace, the author introduces his conceptualisation of the 'branded carnival', 'the hyper-masculine playpen', in which 'toxic play' and a 'toxic sport', is enacted. However, while this study has made a number of valuable contributions to consumer culture theory research and ethnographic practice, it is not limitation free.

This study introduces a number of valuable insights in relation to the status of consumer play in a marketplace culture. However, this study began five years following the emergence and concretisation of this specific play-community form. While the author discusses his novel conceptualisations with academic conviction, it is felt that participation in the culture from its emerging stages, would have provided a fuller and more complete understanding of the relationship between marketplace culture and play. While the author attempted to combat this undesired position through the study of cultural artefacts, informal conversation, netnography, and interviews, it is felt that full participation from the emerging stages of the culture would have resulted in a deeper contextual understanding of play within the marketplace, and thus, would have strengthened the conceptual contributions to the consumer culture literature. A further limitation of this study was its examination of a single communal context. Schau *et al.* (2009) suggest that in order to provide the valuable insights necessary to advance our understanding of marketplace

cultures that communal consumption can no longer be examined in individual cases and that researchers should employ a multi-sited approach with regard to research contexts. In order to combat this limitation, the author intends on examining a number of this study's conceptual contributions in a variety of supplementary contexts.

Future research intends on examining the conceptualisation of play as a foundational element of marketplace cultures. In doing so, this will allow the author to also investigate the notion of the 'branded carnival' in other consumption contexts, with specific attention to be placed on the communal appropriation of marketplace resources as a means to produce 'carnavalesque linking value'. The author intends on further developing his conceptualisation of 'toxic play', which influences two specific areas foundational to CCT research: consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures. Toxic play will be explored in other contexts to further dimensionalise its contribution to our understanding of contemporary consumer culture. Finally, the author feels that there is potential in examining other themes, which arose during this study but were not communicated in the final report. One of which includes an investigation of the evolving nature of tribal entrepreneurship and its relationship with brand evangelism (Belk and Tumbat 2005) and a desire for active play in the marketplace (Goulding *et al.* 2012).

This author was duly warned when examining the play literature that the perpetuating complexity of play makes it irresistible to researchers (Grayson 1999). For this author, play has become irresistible, and despite this extensive study of consumer play, the author intends on further indulging his enduring fascination with contemporary play manifestations, not only to make significant contributions to consumer culture theory but to our understanding of the interplay between culture and play – primarily the emergent toxic complexion.

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## ***APPENDICES***

### **Appendix A: Methodological Appendix**

#### **7.1. Choice of Research Site**

The overall goal is to collect the richest possible data. Above all, a research site must provide the opportunity for holistic learning. Lofland and Lofland (1995) campaign for the relevance of conducting research in an appropriate site where the researcher already holds a level of acceptance as either, a researcher or member, or preferably both. However, while Lofland and Lofland (1995) promote a researcher being able to benefit from their current situation, they highlight that the clear distinction between ‘starting where you are’ and staying there, needs to be understood. ‘Staying there’ represents a form of ‘autobiographical’ research, that while it has the potential to present some valuable insights, it also presents risk: the novice researcher is left open to the possibilities of self-indulgence, narcissism, excessive bias, and excessive self-reflexivity. As a novice researcher lacking in prior experience, I chose an alternative mode of immersive research typically used by marketplace culture researchers. During this study ‘staying there’ was combated with periods of reflection, outsider feedback (peer reviewed conference/journal submission), member checks, and periodic debriefings with my supervisor.

This study seeks to provide an overdue insight into the relationship between play and marketplace cultures. Following a study of the Beamish brand community (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011), I was conceptually interested in exploring further the theme of play. The Beamish brand community study heightened my awareness of brands becoming the locus for collective identity; and how the forms of play associated with subcultural practices may become the foundation of a brand community’s rituals. I thought it would be interesting to examine these processes further, on a larger scale. I examined a larger community with a more comprehensive longitudinal study.

This study included a pilot phase in which the Mini Club of Ireland (MCOI) brand community was explored. The MCOI was original chosen due to their practice of relatively disruptive play rituals. One (relatively) sunny Sunday afternoon I was walking through Cork city when I heard cars revving and beeping; when the noise came closer I realised they were all Mini cars of various models and ages. One of the Mini cars had a MCOI sticker on it. I decided to investigate what was the intention of the interruptive public display when I returned home. I was brought to the [www.miniclub.ie](http://www.miniclub.ie) website following a google search of 'Mini Club of Ireland'. I realised that this community could be explored further given my interest in marketplace cultures, and forms of play (communal driving). However, as an 'active member researcher' role was being carved in this community, I came to an undesired barrier to my progression within the community. The MCOI brand community, while openly accepting of new members, seemed reluctant to engage openly with me. The important role of the apprentice-like progression of the ethnographer (Schouten and McAlexnader 1995) could not have progressed any further within the MCOI.

I believed that immersion into the MCOI community would not produce the necessary view of the spectrum of actors in the community, nor allow me to experience the full range of the culture. This would have had serious consequences on the range and quality of data collected (Stewart 1998). The following is an example of one particular episode (of many) during the course of my MCOI investigation:

*"It was difficult to spark up conversation... people barely said hello... I may get into a car with someone... who doesn't really want me there... 'G' walked passed me and went up to the reception, he had very little interest in me... he was supposed to be the 'main man'... people began to get excited, moving about and edging slowly towards the door. They were ready to drive off. I was still standing nervously in contrast to those rattling keys with anticipation of the 100 mile rally... I wasn't driving a mini, and needed someone to offer a*

*place (I asked in the forum the day before, no one replied). I was looking at people who recognised me for an invite... they were not very friendly and I was totally unacknowledged. They all walked towards the door, no one even gave an inviting nod... I thought there is no point in me continuing on with research today, there seems to be some sort of tension here and I don't really know what to do besides leave...I drove home feeling like the child who didn't get picked for a team at the play-ground." – Field Notes, MCOI, 100 Mile Run, Midleton, Cork, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010*

While engaging with the MCOI site, I also began studies of other marketplace cultures. The Lovely Jumper Fest, a charity fundraising event in which 'lovely' (hideous) jumpers are worn. The festival incorporated a number of Irish TV cultural references; Irish TV shows such as Glenroe and Bosco had a large influence on the 'fest' but the hit TV show Father Ted had the most influence. There was a particular reliance on 'childhood in the 80s nostalgia' and 'Irish simplicity', both foundational to the play enacted during the 'fest'. The Midleton Tattoo Show, the annual show attracts a large number of attendees from Munster and a large number of international tattoo artists, the layout of the 'show' resembled an archetypal marketplace, however, the most interesting observation during this study was based on the spectacle, performance, and co-creation involved in the process of buying and getting a tattoo drawn. The BPONG study intended to explore types of play enacted during the World Series of Beer Pong, and its relationship with other forms of play available in Las Vegas, and to contrast/compare with the forms of play observed previously in the Beamish Community. However, the BPONG community proved the most fruitful research site with regards to my research objectives; it eventually provided the most potential for the holistic investigation of play in a marketplace culture setting. The BPONG community has many rituals based on playful consumption, and I had also been accepted as both a researcher and an active member following my participation at WSOBP V, as Maxim magazine confirms:

*“... they also brought a buddy with them, an ethnography professor named Stephen O’Sullivan... Ostensibly he’s here to do field research, but mainly he’s just drinking. A lot. Hoisting a bottle of Corona, he cracks a smile: Is this what they call ‘going native’?” - Eells (2010)*

During my *first* exposure to the BPONG community (WSOBP V 2009/2010) acceptance into the community and immersion were my prime goals (I felt particularly insecure as a researcher due to many difficult experiences with the MCOI). By immediately engaging fully in community practices, my position as a researcher was easier to communicate, as they believed I was also one of them. My relationship with the BPONG community stood in stark contrast to that with the MCOI. Those who were unaware I was researching at WSOBP V were duly informed by an article in ‘Maxim’ magazine from which the above quotation is taken (Eells 2010) (a widely celebrate cultural artefact).

It has been noted that the study of a cultural field of which the researcher already holds physical or psychological access is deemed truly opportunistic (Lofland and Lofland 1995). I held a complete member role in the BPONG community; thus I was presented with an opportunity to explore the BPONG community and the concepts surrounding marketplace culture play holistically. Hence, choosing a research site in which the researcher can ‘start where they are’ provides a foundation for advantageous research.

*“Meaningful linkages between the personal and emotional on the one hand, and the stringent intellectual operations to come on the other. Without a foundation in personal sentiment, all the rest easily becomes so much ritualistic hollow... Unless you are emotionally engaged in your work, the inevitable boredom, confusion, and frustration of rigorous scholarship will endanger the completion – not to speak of the quality...” (Lofland and Lofland 1995 p. 22)*

A similar sentiment is echoed in Stewart (1998) – the levels of acceptance achieved by the researcher and the ability to participate fully in the community



combine to influence the degree to which a researcher can experience *personally* the full range of a culture. This naturally has a positive impact on the overall quality of the final ethnographic report. It must remain a priority for the researcher to be cautious of the danger of being *too* familiar with the culture being studied: the researcher must cultivate a reflexive stance (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989) by engaging in periodic reflexivity, debriefings, and by examining emergent themes with a broad range of literature.

With this in mind, and given the high levels of carnivalesque play experienced during WSOBP V, I chose the BPONG community as a research site for the investigation of play within a marketplace culture. The BPONG community originally conceived in the USA also has an emerging international sphere. It was deemed opportunistic to engage in multi-sited international research; the main research sites included the BPONG community in the USA, and subsequently, the emerging BPONG Ireland community (in which I was also positioned as a tribal entrepreneur (Goulding and Saren 2007)).

At this juncture it is important to highlight that while the main methodological reference for this study was Stewart (1998), it was felt that the elements of the guidelines put forth by Lofland and Lofland (1995), Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) and Pink (2001, 2006), and marketplace culture researchers such as Kozinets (2001, 2002(a)(b)); McAlexander *et al.* (2002); Schau *et al.* (2009); Cova and Cova (2002), and Cova *et al.* (2007(b)) could be adopted successfully to enhance this study. First, I draw the reader's attention to the timeline of the ethnographic milestones of this study, before expanding upon these through reflexive narrative.

Table 12. Timeline of This Study's Ethnographic Milestones

<b><u>Date</u></b>	<b><u>Milestone</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>
October 2008	Conceptualisation that a conversion experience and sacralisation maintenance are foundational to brand community reification and that play is central to the construction of collective identity within a brand community	Submission of "How brand communities emerge: The Beamish Conversion experience to Journal of Marketing Management
November 2008	Study of the 'Mini Club of Ireland' to examine themes discussed in the Beamish paper in a larger context	Non-participant observation, netnography, study of cultural artefacts
November 2008	Identification of other possible alternative research sites	The Lovely Jumper Fest, the Midleton Tattoo show, & the BPONG brand community
December 2009 – ongoing	Study of BPONG community: Attended WSOBP V with view of studying the themes observed in Beamish community i.e. Conversion experiences, sacred consumption and play as a foundation for group identity	Participant & non-participant observation, Photography, Videography, Informal conversations
January 2010	Netnographic study of the BPONG community began	Observation and participation on the BPONG.COM forum, Befriending other BPONG community members on Facebook
February 2010	Official exit from the Mini Club of Ireland research site	Access issues limited the holistic study of play
February 2010 – ongoing	BPONG Ireland founded: investigation of tribal entrepreneurship; a tribal marketing approach to brand	Ethnomarketing, Netnography, Brand management, Business-to-business meetings,

	community development; multi-sited ethnography, holistic approach to the study of play, glocalization of a brand community	Social marketing campaign
May 2010	BPONG Ireland brandfest events organised	Participant & non-participant observation, Photography & Videography Ethnomarketing
June 2010	<p>“Play and Transparency: facilitators of symbiotic corporate – brand community relationships” – Poster (Ethnographic Comic) submitted to UCC Doctoral Symposium</p> <p>‘co-creation’ theme appeared inherent to BPONG’s marketization strategy</p>	<p>Building upon previous work of Beamish Community concerning play, Extreme transparency/co-creation observed in BPONG-community relationship appeared to have solidify the community</p> <p>Comparison of data with themes discussed in Cova and Dalli (2009), Schau <i>et al.</i> (2009)</p>
July 2010	USA Beer Pong Tour (New York, Boston, Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Chicago)	Aim: to observed local BPONG sub-tribes outside of the WSOBP & to investigate the broader beer pong subcultural practices Included: participant & non-participant observation, photography and videography
July 2010	<p>Typography of beer pong player identified: those who construct beer pong as either a ‘sport’ or those who construct it as ‘drinking game’</p> <p>Beer Pong as a ‘postmodern’ sport theme emerges</p>	(I identify more readily with the professional beer pong player for two reasons; firstly I have played sport at an extremely high standard from a young age, and secondly, I had an unusual introduction to beer pong as I played professional beer pong

		from the beginning, most other players would have played beer pong as a drinking game prior to playing professionally)
August 2010	BPONG Ireland Community identified as a brand community	Data analysed against Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), and McAlexander <i>et al.</i> (2002). Observation data confirmed the emergence of consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, moral responsibility, among admirers of a brand Community members began developing there own brand based rituals and traditions (such as playing new variations of beer pong prior to events). Members began enacting brand ambassador to new comers display a degree of moral responsibility to the tribe, and a sense of consciousness of kind.
September 2010	ULMS Ethnography Conference "It's important to be earnest? The seriousness of play in constructing group identity" (based on ethnographic study of Beamish and BPONG communities)	Feedback suggested reviewing carnival and cultural criminology literature Identification of gender identity management issues within the BPONG community Hegemonic masculinity identified as possible emergent them
October 2010	Toxic Play themes emerge	Comparison of data with Based on review of Bakhtin (1984), Presdee (2000), Caillois (1962),
December 2010	Interviews conducted	Interviewees selected

	with 'EOS' and 'ED' – both members of the BPONG and BPONG Ireland communities	on the basis of emergent themes of toxic play/carnavalesque and beer pong as 'sport'
December 2010	WSOBP VI	Aim: search for disconfirmation/further confirmation of emergent themes Interviews organised with BPONG members (members cancelled) BPONG members asked to keep diaries of WSOBP VI (members failed to complete task)
January 2011	BPONG Ireland emergent themes  Search for disconfirming observations begins	Conversion as ongoing process Consumer-consumer-brand relationship foundational to tribal marketing approach, Tribal entrepreneur career path
March 2011	Member Checks of emergent themes	WIP papers and conference papers sent to two BPONG members and BPONG brand owners for review (unlikely to have been read by BPONG owners)
April 2011	Disconfirming observation: BPONG no longer enacting a transparent and co-creative strategy	BPONG owners unwilling to co-create with Irish sub-tribe  BPONG Ireland brand ceased (rebranded as WSC Beer Pong)
July 2011	World Pong Tour Championship, Atlantic City, New Jersey	Travelled to Canada to experience tournaments from North American member's perspective, Immersion into BPONG sub-tribe 'International Empire' Compare and contrast experience to BPONG

		events, Identify flows and similarities of events
July 2011	“And in the beginning there was no brand: The BPONG Ireland community” presented at Academy of Marketing annual conference, Liverpool	Outlined the creation of the BPONG Ireland brand, community management practices with focus on c-c-b relationship to reify the community  Feedback suggested submitting the BPONG Ireland paper as a case study
July 2011	Emerging theme: Edgework (Lyng 1990, 2005) as foundation to alcohol consumption and the activity of beer pong in BPONG community  Expansion of toxic play theme to sporting behaviour of BPONG members	Murphy and Patterson (2011) at Academy of Marketing Conference discussed the concept of ‘edgework’ (Lyng 1990)  Further reading of Edgework concept (Lyng 1990, 2005, Reith 2005) highlighted the relevance of edgework activities to this study
July 2011 – ongoing	Investigation of the Ecstasy Tribe and Pillreports.com website	Aim: to study emerging themes of BPONG study in an other context i.e edgework branding and the blackmarketization of toxic play
August 2011	‘How brand communities emerge: the Beamish conversion experience” published in the Journal of Marketing Management	*Subsequently this paper has been cited by Sierra, Taute, and Heiser (2012) in the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services(May 2012).
August 2011	2 <sup>nd</sup> Round of Interviews conducted with ‘Keany’, ‘GOS’ and ‘LC’  Search for disconfirming observations	Emergent themes and search for disconfirming observations directed the selection of participants; toxic play, business-to-business relationships, conversion experience

		as progression
September 2011	"BPONG Ireland: Using a tribal marketing approach to achieve marketing growth" submitted and accepted by Ecch	
October 2011	'Brand Carnival' theme emerges	Important texts that led to this construction include Bahktin (1984), Langer (2007), Goulding <i>et al.</i> (2002, 2009), Reith (2005), Kavanagh <i>et al.</i> (2011)
October 2011	Dutch Series of Beer Pong, Venlo	Aim: study the glocalization of the BPONG brand and beer pong as an activity Identify flows and contrast in brand meaning Compare events with BPONG Ireland events and the WSOBP
November 2011	"Abnormal Sport' theme emerges	Reith (2005), Guttman (1978), Coakley and Pike (2009), foundational to the construction of abnormal sport theme
December 2011	"Abnormal sport' theme to include eSport of 'Skype Pong'	Jonnasson and Thiborg (2010), Hemphill (2005), and Rowe (1999), Guttman (2000) as foundation for conceptualisation of 'skype pong' as abnormal sport
December 2011	WSOBP VII	Search for disconfirming observations
January 2012	Disconfirming observations lead to emergent themes of 'contested linking value', BPONG moving outside its community, further support of the "Brand Carnival' theme	Avery (2012), Connell and Messerschmidt

	<p>Emergence of theme that play is foundational for the construction of two forms of hegemonic masculinity: Competitive &amp; Toxic</p> <p>Emergence of anti-structure/structure iterative relationships within BPONG tribe and WSOBP theme emerged (not reported in final ethnographic report)</p> <p>Female identity management – co-option and adaption of masculine roles</p> <p>“Brand Network Orbit’ model constructed</p>	<p>(2005), Holt and Thompson (2004) foundational to conceptualisation</p> <p>Tumbat and Belk (2011) foundational to the identification of contrasting masculine roles</p> <p>Avery (2012), Schouten <i>et al.</i> (2007), Martin <i>et al.</i> (2006) foundational to conceptualisation. Data analysed against themes discussed in this articles</p> <p>Merz <i>et al.</i> (2009) and the BVCC model foundational to the conceptualization</p>
March 2012	<p>Submission and Acceptance of “Beer Pong: The Emergence of Abnormal Sport” Ethnographic Comic to Consumer Culture Theory (7) Conference, Oxford, August 2012</p>	<p>(see appendix B for comics)</p> <p>Aim: to receive feedback on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The ‘ethnographic comic’ as a means to communicate ethnographic research</li> <li>▪ And as storyboard approach to analysis</li> <li>▪ The concept of ‘abnormal and toxic sports’</li> </ul>
May 2012	<p>Theme of ‘2<sup>nd</sup> Tier Tribal Entrepreneur as means to achieve communal glocalization’ emerges</p>	<p>The Subcultural Lifecycle used to analyse the BPONG community Goulding and Saren (2007), The notion of ‘communal glocalization’ Cova,</p>



	<p>Model of communal glocalization finalized June 2012</p> <p>Brand-Orientated Play-Community concept</p>	<p>Pace and Park (2007), compared to sub-tribal BPONG brand meaning. The brand curator role identified in the BPONG tribe (Leigh <i>et al.</i> 2006). The tribal marketization process re-analysed after reading Goulding <i>et al.</i> (2009)</p> <p>Conceptualisation based on reading of Huizinga (1955), Tumbat and Belk (2011), Turner (1982)</p>
July 2012	<p>“Facilitation of consumer-consumer-brand relationships and developing a brand network orbit: two sides of the brand community development coin’ presented at Academy of Marketing Conference 2012</p> <p>“Play and Transparency: facilitators of symbiotic corporate – brand community relationships” – poster submitted to Academy of Marketing 2012</p>	<p>Feedback suggested writing up paper for submission focusing solely on BNO model in order to relate more clearly its merit to tribal entrepreneurs</p> <p>Communication error resulted in poster not being on display (please see appendix B for ethnographic comics)</p>

## 7.2.Veracity and Methodological Requirements: Participant observation and Prolonged Immersion in the field

Adherence to Stewart’s (1998) guidelines for ethnographic research was not adopted in an overly strict manner: guidelines were complied with in an overall sense to ensure that the study would achieve methodological rigour. However, it was deemed particularly important to follow Stewart’s guidelines for veracity in order to regard the findings from this study reliable and scientific, and to

ensure best practice for 'good' ethnographic research was followed. The foremost useful tool a researcher can adopt, as a coping tactic to achieve veracity, is to engage in prolonged fieldwork. The longer the time spent within in a culture conducting fieldwork, the deeper the contextual understanding of the cultural system will be (Stewart 1998). The longer the time spent in the field the more opportunities presented to the researcher to breakdown old understandings, in order to develop new insights, and ultimately, report a more holistic understanding of the culture. Stewart advocates that the less time spent in the field that the less the ethnography – what then is the appropriate length of time to spend in the field?

While there has been a move towards more 'focused' shorter-term ethnographies that require less time in the field (Van Maanen 1988); there is also the argument that one should be sceptical of rapid studies, as they do not satisfy Stewart's requirements for veracity. Fetterman (1989) suggests that classical ethnography requires between two and six years in the field. While this study respects the minimum requirement of two years, I believe that the exploratory nature of this specific study, complying with Stewart's guidelines, directed the length of time spent in the field, which was 30 months (see Table A).

The prolonged immersion yielded particular dividend; it contributed greatly the sophistication of my research findings. An example of the benefit of prolonged immersion is the finding discussed in section 4.5, in which professional beer pong is constructed as an abnormal sport – a toxic sport. During WSOBP V (2010) I observed a highly carnivalesque atmosphere and a significant sporting atmosphere, the following year at WSOBP VI (2011), the carnival atmosphere of WSOBP V had decreased slightly and there was a substantial increase in the construction of beer pong as 'sport', this was escalated further at WSOBP VII (2012) where the sporting mentality overpowered aspects of the *friendly* carnival – this aided to my understanding of beer pong as an emerging new form of sport – a 'toxic sport'. The community constructs beer

pong as a sport, but alcohol consumption (Reith 2005) and edgework activities (Lyng 2005) are considered essential foundations to the sport. Without prolonged immersion I would not have understood beer pong beyond 'a sport that happens to have alcohol' and could not have constructed beer pong as an evolutionary step towards 'postmodern sport' (The relative to-ing and fro-ing between Bakhtin (1984), Lyng (1990, 2005), Caillios (1962, 2001), Guttman (1978, 2000), Coakley and Pike (2009), Reith (2005) and the data set influenced the emergence of this theme (see Table A).

The prime ritual of the BPONG community is the World Series of Beer Pong (WSOBP), which is held annually from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of January. One can look at this in terms of a cycle; each year is itself a cycle of the community. However, as this is a community centred around a newly emerging activity, it was not deemed appropriate to divide the time spent between the community's main events as a cycle but rather treat the community as a continuously developing and evolving phenomenon.

As mentioned previously the study has been conducted on an international basis; while below I have not separated out my involvement with the community in terms of a temporal cycle, or chronologically, instead for clarity in terms of depicting prolonged immersion, I outlined the study of the different sites; namely the BPONG USA community and the Irish BPONG community, in order not to complicate the duality of research engaged in during data collection.

### **7.3 The BPONG Brand Community (USA)**

#### **7.3.1 WSOBP V**

The study began by attending the community's prime event, or 'brand fest' (McAlexander *et al.* 2002) from December 30th 2009 to January 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This event had over 1,000 participants from five different countries competing for the grand prize of \$50,000. This was my first exposure to a professional beer pong tournament and it allowed me to

conduct fieldwork with little to no preconceptions of what was going to be experienced. I attended with the aim of studying forms of play within a marketplace culture and subsequently the aims of establishing a good participant relationship role and a level of acceptance by the wider community. While at the time, I was not engaged in studying the group via netnography, there had been some excitement throughout the community that there were going to be Irish participants at 'World Series Five'. This certainly helped me earn acceptance from the vast majority of participants as a member.

When travelling to the WSOBP V I had not fully decided on a narrower direction of inquiry (beyond that of the broad notion of play) within the community, but decided that the beer pong phenomenon as a form of play deserved academic attention.

This first visit to the WSOBP V produced 32 single spaced pages of typed field notes, 200 photos, and over 4 hours of HD video, along with many valuable informal conversations with participants, brand owners, and reporters. Field notes were jotted in situ and openly (to the point of some community members taking my note pad and writing their own 'stories' about beer pong). There were a handful of 'ethnographic' journalists present that were also taking notes, however, they did not experience the same level of acceptance I did, mainly due to their strict adherence to their professional non-participative roles. Participation at the WSOBP does not particularly suit constant field note taking, hence, the relatively low page count of typed field notes at this early, fully immersed stage of the study (Emerson *et al.* 2001). The WSOBP is particularly carnivalesque, high energy, and toxic; requirements to 'play' are constant, the writing of field notes in many situations is inappropriate. Visual ethnography (Pink 2001, 2006, Belk and Kozinets 2005) was deployed to address this issue and supplement the collection of data.

The BPONG community were very supportive and inquisitive as to what I was doing. I openly said that I am a researcher as well as a beer pong player and that the study was for 'college work', fellow players immediately began telling me stories and showing me things. I felt truly blessed with the level of acceptance and guidance I was receiving; my apprenticeship to beer pong had begun. One of the BPONG community's goals is to spread the word of professional pong, and if I was to help do this (in an academic sphere), I was of value to the community. The goal of achieving a level of acceptance and entry into the community was achieved during this first fieldtrip.

While an outsider beginning this study, it was advantageous to see the community with fresh, naïve eyes. Being accepted so emphatically (my nationality helped considerably, many of the beer pong players are situated on the East Coast with Irish heritage, and in general community members were happy to have an Irish connection in the community, due to the connection between Irish culture and alcohol consumption) ensured I was to experience the full context of the culture rather than acting in a 'looking over the shoulder' manner (Stewart 1998). Everyone wanted to talk to the 'Irishmen' and 'show them around'.

To gain acceptance and truly participate at the WSOBP entailed engaging in a vast amount of play and communal alcohol consumption, the WSOBP is for a majority of the participants their yearly vacation (USA workers are typically allowed 10-15 vacation days a year). To quote Lofland and Lofland (1995) *"...the epistemological foundation of field studies is indeed the proposition that only through direct experience can one accurately know much about social life"*. Thus, engaging in the extreme behaviours of the BPONG community indeed enhanced the study by ensuring swift acceptance but also enhanced my understanding of the consequences/and relative enjoyment of engaging in such experiences, and how they related to the communal construction of identity.

While it may have been ‘fun’ to engage in aspects of the carnival and play, a mixed approach was necessary moving forward. Emerson *et al.* (2001) recommend a dual approach, that is, maximising immersion occasionally, by virtue of full participation in the experience, and conducting other field visits with more an emphasis on observation – both are indeed necessary. It is fair to say that the approach I took to the initial field visit of the WSOBP was to engage with the community and their behaviour fully, rather than taking an isolated approach to fieldwork.

It was important to engage wholeheartedly in the aspects of behaviour at the WSOBP as it gave me an important sense of what it meant to be a true *first time* visitor to the WSOBP, something you can only do once. I have an academic interest in sacred consumption, specifically the phenomenon of conversion experiences (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2011); it was truly advantageous research to ‘go through’ what a new ‘ponger’ goes through when embarking on playing in the ‘World Series’. This was also my first experience of such constant extreme play behaviours, which aided to my understanding of the community’s construction of masculinity (as discussed in section 4.4).

At the time I was conducting a study on the WSOBP V and had little interest in becoming a full-time professional ‘ponger’, however, during my experience of the WSOBP V, I was left with unshakeable conviction: a conversion to professional beer pong and the WSOBP. I had observed an emotional change in my behaviour towards beer pong; prior to attending the WSOBP I had no intention of purchasing a beer pong table with view of enhancing my beer pong skills. However, I purchased a beer pong table, along with a variety of other merchandise that I felt I simply had to buy.

*“... such commitment directs attention to the sacred, which becomes a strong part of one’s identity” (Belk et al. 1989 p.7)*

While prior to investigating the WSOBP, beer pong was far from a substantial aspect of my identity, it was a 'game' I often played prior to going to a nightclub, solely as entertainment. However, following the WSOBP, it was a *sport* to me. I began to practice with view of returning to the WSOBP and competing more comprehensively. I also embarked on replicating the WSOBP experience via the introduction of the BPONG Ireland brand. My behaviour was then compared with the conceptual literature on conversion experience and sacred consumption (Belk *et al.* 1989). The conversion experience theme was also examined extensively during interviews.

Before having left the WSOBP the three Irish players, who originally travelled to Vegas, decided to organise professional beer pong tournaments in Ireland on return. Originally, BPONG Ireland was established in order to practice for WSOBP VI, however, this became a feasible small business, in which a vast amount of ethnomarketing (Cova and Cova 2002) was conducted.

The BPONG community provided the desired position necessary to conduct an ethnographic study, and my conceptual interests were observed during my first field trip; community rituals were built upon *playful consumption*. Within eight weeks of returning from the WSOBP I had officially exited the Mini Club of Ireland brand community to focus more deeply on the BPONG brand community and the themes emerging there.

Immediately following the experience of the WSOBP the netnographic (Kozinets 2002, 2006) stage of the study began. The experience of the WSOBP was an obvious 'in'. I joined the BPONG.COM forum, and participated thereon, I continue to engage with the forum daily. Kozinets (2002) highlights four important factors when choosing a discussion forum as a research site. As the only forum dedicated to professional beer pong it was nonetheless characterised by frequent rich interaction. While the student subculture play beer pong regularly during college parties, this study focused solely on the professional BPONG players, as I had interest in specifically

examining a marketplace culture and its playful nature, rather than broader student subculture practices.

I began befriending many participants encountered during WSOBP V and brand owners on Facebook in order to supplement netnographic data from the forum, with the overall goal of producing a more holistic understanding of the community.

While netnographic research was being conducted from January 2010, it was considered necessary to revisit the USA to study the BPONG community outside of the extreme carnival setting of the WSOBP (the prime event of the community). It was necessary to visit other locations in the USA to view the 'typical' nature of the BPONG community. I needed to understand BPONG culture outside of the WSOBP (see Table A).

### **7.3.2 USA Beer Pong Tour 2010**

During the summer of 2010 (July 2<sup>nd</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup>), I visited the United States to play in a number of BPONG 'satty' tournaments. A 'satty' (satellite tournament) is essentially a qualifier to the WSOBP, its cost approximately \$40, and first place receives entry package to the WSOBP, which includes tournament registration and hotel fee (value of approx. \$450 per person). It was my first time visiting the USA outside of Las Vegas, and days in which beer pong was not being played were spent sightseeing/relaxing. Another side goal of this fieldwork was to experience beer pong in other settings associated with beer pong such as bars and house parties (outside of the BPONG community). I am somewhat of an outlier in the beer pong community as I experienced beer pong in a professional sense without having playing the more casual style of beer pong constructed as a 'drinking game' first. This provided me with an opportunity to experience how members of the BPONG community may have progressed from this form of beer pong to the more serious competitive ranks.



Fieldwork was conducted in New York City, Boston, Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Chicago. Participation in the BPONG 'satty' tournaments further secured membership status and the community displayed openly a great deal of joy that we had visited 'just to play in satellite tournaments' (a considerable cost when compared with similar cost to attend the WSOBP). This proved to be an invaluable experience: it highlighted many relational aspects and levels of commitment to beer pong that may not have been experienced otherwise.

On a personal note, and as a beer pong player, the trip was made also to receive some experience in organised beer pong competitions; and to earn a degree of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) as a skilled beer pong player, not just 'the Irishman'. We finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the first Detroit Satellite tournament, a very respectable result, and I finished 5<sup>th</sup> in the singles tournament in Chicago, earning me a great deal of subcultural capital as a 'good shooter'. My own obsession with performance provided insight into how others within the community constructed beer pong as 'sport'. The entire USA beer Pong Tour 2010 yielded 23 pages of single spaced typed field notes, over 200 hundred photographs, and an hour of HD video (various different clips). Field Notes (images and video also) were mainly taken at BPONG related events and during other parts of the trip HD video and photographs were used (especially in bar/party settings). This trip allowed for many vacation days between beer pong events, which I respected as vacation days, however, if something beer pong related came up – it was documented on return to the hotel. This trip also included a day vacation with BPONG brand owner 'Skinny', which included trips to local bars, a gift of a beer pong table, his 30th birthday party in his home, and plenty of discussions regarding the possible co-creation of beer pong in Ireland between BPONG and BPONG Ireland.

### **7.3.3 WSOBP VI 2011**

As a researcher I founded it important to develop the skills necessary to see the community holistically (Stewart 1998). There are many cliques in the community, primarily based on skill status. I have spent hundreds of hours

practicing beer pong over the course of the study and have been accepted as a 'good shooter'; this has opened many doors to experience the culture holistically. Without the necessary skills these experiences would only have been related to me via interview or informal word of mouth. I developed a more important role in the community and a greater level of acceptance within the community due to my skill level. This allowed me to gain access to a great deal of behind the scenes activities, such as invitation only cash tournaments in hotel rooms, various exclusive parties with a wide range of 'pongers', and opportunities for casino gambling with fellow players. I have developed a good rapport with the vast majority of the BPONG community and have earned the nickname 'Captain Ireland' due to my skill set and relationship with the community. I believe that my original emphasis on full immersion during WSOBP V paid dividend through my acceptance by many of the cliques within the community, and hence I gained desired holistic insight into the culture.

The hours of practicing I spent achieving my skill set provided an insight into the emic construction of beer pong as 'sport', it also impacted my personal perception of beer pong as a sport rather a mere game; the investment of hour after hour of psychic energy (McCracken 1988) into the activity served to embed beer pong further into my sense of self.

In December 2010, prior to WSOBP VI, I asked 20 beer pong players to keep diaries of their experience of the upcoming WSOBP VI. While 10 said they would certainly do this, and had the best intentions, not one actually returned a diary in any shape or form. I also had organised five interviews for December 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> but again, these participants did not follow through due to being 'sick'. This further supported the extreme play involved and the community's commitment to play above more mundane commitments at the WSOBP. This is not a culture by any real sense that lends itself to opportunities to conduct interviews, to participate in diary logging, or even to sit down and write up fieldnotes for that matter; hence the breach of promise by participants. However, I subsequently addressed this issue by spending as

much time as possible with those selected to be interviewed, and following WSOBP VI I engaged in many informal Facebook conversations with those asked to write diaries. All these participants' (and other's) photographic and video content from WSOBP VI were analysed in entirety.

The WSOBP VI was an excellent opportunity to see how the community had developed over the year cycle and how my own relationships within the community had developed. I was well known throughout the community, more so now for my work organising professional beer pong in Ireland rather than being a researcher. Evangelising the WSOBP internationally is in tune with community goals, and hence, I earned a degree of subcultural capital for this also. I assessed my level of subcultural capital by engaging in constant monitoring of the number of unsolicited requests to 'hang out' with players, to play 'cash games', to go to 'room parties', drinks bought for me by players, requests to stand in for photographs, and also the number of beer pong t-shirts received as gifts.

Five Irish participants travelled to WSOBP VI, which added more opportunities for communal bonding. It mirrored a typical member's experience; members tend to travel in sub-tribes to and from the WSOBP. I also had developed a stronger relationship with BPONG brand management both in a personal and business manner. Overall my research was greatly strengthened by frequent repeat visits to the WSOBP field.

WSOBP VI yielded 30 pages of typed field notes 6 hours of HD video and over 300 photographs. All visual content was analysed in accordance to suggestions made by Pink (2001, 2006) (as discussed in chapter three). Such substantial inclusion of visual ethnography captured many nuances of the toxic play theme, in which I believe written fieldnotes may not have fully captured. The toxic play theme emerged from initial codes such as 'binge drinking', 'smoking', 'excessive language', 'use of illegal drugs', photography and video captured of some of these behaviours and added in a live sense

additional meaning – body language and facial expression visible in photography and videography added to the conceptualisation of these practices as ‘play’ rather than ‘binge’.

#### **7.3.4 World Pong Tour Championship Atlantic Cit, NJ, June 25<sup>th</sup> – July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011**

During the summer of 2011 I conducted fieldwork at a competing brand’s professional beer pong tournament (WPT), of which approximately 30% of the BPONG community would be in attendance. During this phase of research I flew to Canada to play in the WPT tournament with a Canadian friend. I chose to arrive in Canada in order to experience the ‘pilgrimage’ USA/Canadian players make to and from ‘major’ tournaments; this also served to immerse myself into one of the emerging BPONG sub-tribes: “International Empire”, affectionately referred to as ‘IE’ (IE is a sub-tribe made up of Montreal, upper NY state, and Irish players). The prime goal of this fieldtrip was to compare the behaviours and relationships experienced at WPT to those experienced at the WSOBP and identify flows among sites. This specific WPT tournament introduced a change in equipment, and a change in rules, of which the professional beer pong subculture and the BPONG community were not in favour of, many BPONG community members boycotted the tournament (Only 5 teams from outside of the East Coast travelled to the tournament my team being one). This particular field trip yielded 20 pages of single spaced typed field notes and an hour of HD video (various short clips).

#### **7.3.5 WSOBP VII 2012**

The primary aim of the WSOBP VII field trip was the search for disconfirming observations (Stewart 1998) and a secondary goal of further tracking the evolution of the community practices regarding sport construction, edgework activities, and also the emerging gender issues within the community. Attending WSOBP VII provided substantial contradictory data concerning the possible tribal marketing strategy of the BPONG brand, which previously was believed to be an intentionally transparent co-creation strategy. This will be

discussed later under disconfirming observations; it highlights the necessity of prolonged immersion and highlights this study's methodological rigor.

A considerable length of time (30 months) has been spent with the BPONG community, in a wide variety of community settings, both online and socially. I chose a complete member researcher role for the study and intend to continue participation in the BPONG community post study, as a player and a researcher, but for how long is uncertain. It would be beneficial to continue my ongoing study of toxic play in other research sites as well as the BPONG community. I would like to continue investigating the community-brand relational tensions and also the effects of re-branding on the community (However, my research position following this study may direct future research).

Stewart (1998) argues that the researcher who becomes a 'complete member researcher', can retain sufficient detachment, I achieved this by regular reflection and debriefing with peers. Given my complete membership role in the BPONG community, I ensured I included safeguards to cultivate a level of distance to the community; strict adherence to a variety of observational guidelines; including regular reflection on my own perspectives; member checks; and regular meetings with my supervisor. The periodical meetings with my supervisor were invaluable to ensure I was conducting best practice. One debriefing discussion with my supervisor, led me to search for various other ways to construct the anomaly that professional beer pong appeared to be. I believed wholeheartedly (and still do, although a new form of sport) that professional beer pong was a 'real' sport, and my supervisor discussed the emic and etic construction of beer pong and sports, this aided in the construction of a new form of sport – hence, the themes 'abnormal sport' and 'toxic sport' emerged (see Table A).

#### **7.4 The BPONG Ireland Community**

While attending WSOBP V, myself and those who travelled made a decision to found BPONG Ireland, originally the goal was to get more people in Ireland playing so as we could practice for the next WSOBP, while earning a small profit along the way. There was months of planning involved and BPONG Ireland began organising competitive beer pong tournaments on a weekly basis on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010. This proved to be a valuable research site as it presented an opportunity to investigate the community-brand relationship, and the marketization of play using a two-pronged approach. I was positioned to examine marketization of play from both perspectives: brand owner and consumer. I was also able to investigate attempts to glocalize beer pong. Fieldwork was carried out on a weekly basis from May 2010 – January 2011 (from hereon research took a specific attention to business-to-business relationships).

I then also took a step back from fieldwork to focus on seeking disconfirming observations. Each field trip during the BPONG Ireland study yielded between 10-15 single spaced typed pages, 50-100 photographs and between 45 minutes and 90 minutes of HD video. During these tournaments I was positioned on my laptop, at the 'staff table', orchestrating the tournament; it allowed for inconspicuous and constant field note taking. The BPONG Ireland site provided a valuable opportunity to gain insight from the tribal entrepreneur view of the relational aspects of brand community development, and the complexities involved in the marketization of play.

Involvement with the BPONG Ireland brand community is on a continuing basis; I have attended *all* community events, owner meetings, business-to-business meetings, and Skype conference calls. The netnographic element to the BPONG Ireland study began in January 2010 and is operated on a continuing basis as part of an ethnomarkting strategy. The BPONG Ireland community has been both a valuable research site and a (relatively) financially rewarding tribal entrepreneurial endeavour. While the majority of

the themes emerging from the BPONG Ireland site have not been included in the final ethnographic report, it yielded many new direction for research and has provided opportunities to publish managerial based researcher papers (O'Sullivan and Richardson 2012a/b).

#### **7.4.1 Dutch Series of Beer Pong 2011, October 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>, Venlo, Holland**

In a similar vein to the WPT field trip, I believed it important to visit an alternative research site in Europe with affiliation to BPONG. This trip provided a valuable insight into the tribal entrepreneurial relationship in Holland, and also served to provide understanding of how beer pong was being glocalized in Holland. This field trip yielded 15 pages of single spaced typed field notes and 50 photographs.

#### **7.5 Guidelines followed during field observation**

The goal of fieldwork is to write sensitive, useful, and stimulating field notes. I recorded both what I learned and observed about the activities of others and my own actions, questions, and reflections. From the beginning of this study I wholeheartedly believed and practiced, that the more organised the ethnographer, the easier the task of conducting fieldwork. Prior to engaging in fieldwork I ensured I had an adequate notebook for jotting notes, comfortable pens, my camera and video camera charged, and my mobile phone was ready to use as data collection tool also, if needed. I found this organised approach essential, and engaged in it ritualistically. I found it quite therapeutic to be in control of my personal situation prior to the fieldwork, as once field note taking begins the experience is directed and controlled by the environment/research site; often the experience of a novice researcher can be chaotic (and particularly so at the WSOBP!).

From the beginning of the study, when I was granted an opportunity, field notes were jotted openly. I was aware of the effects this may have on participants (Emerson *et al.* 2001), but with the level of open acceptance achieved, personally and academically, I deemed it unnecessary to retreat to

concealed areas to quickly jot covert field notes. However, I did engaged in preserving particularly intimate/insightful moments by waiting until post conversation to jot notes. One such instance occurred at WSOBP V, BPONG brand owner Duncan was discussing the BPONG community informally with me while watching a competitive game, it was an intimate moment in which I the apprentice was being taught by the 'master', a moment in which field note taking would have been inappropriate.

While members of the community are aware that I am a researcher, the exact direction of my study is rarely discussed and both the USA and Irish community appeared unconcerned. The USA community appear content that they are receiving legitimate academic attention. When asked to describe what I do for a blog about professional beer pong player's professions for Pongstars.net, my answer translated into the following:

*"Stephen O'Sullivan is working as a university professor in the area of Consumer Behavior. He is also working on his PhD. In his studies to earn his PhD he has chosen to focus on professional beer pong and its subculture. During his studies he has published multiple papers on pong including one about the question of whether pong is a sport, or not, entitled, "Beer Pong: The Emergence of Abnormal Sport." Such details of the sport that he delves into includes the fact that we drink to increase our ability to play the game, as well as the different behaviors of players before, during, and after tournaments... He says: 'So basically I play beer pong, I study beer pong players, write about beer pong players, and own WSC Beer Pong. I can't escape beer pong at the moment...'"*

Also following conference presentations I normally upload a Facebook status to the extent of:

*"Just presented at another conference 20 more people now know about the world of professional beer pong and the WSOBP." – Facebook Status, September 2010, Following ULMS Annual Ethnography Conference*



These Facebook statuses are generally liked by a vast amount of BPONG community members with additional comments of encouragement also. This aided greatly to the maintenance of my relationship with informants, it portrayed my commitment to the community, and aided in the maintenance of access to behind the scenes data.

My field notes have always been written in a relatively 'illegible' style, I can decipher them, but others would have great difficulty achieving this; on occasion it often took a number of minutes for me to understand a word I had written. The tactic of making notes relatively incomprehensible is to protect the confidentiality of the notes, to protect both my personal feelings documented of my experience and the behaviour of others. While I had received acceptance by the community, I often found other members highly offensive, out of control, and irritating – which I documented freely. However, I would not have liked these notes to be read by anyone else as it could have damage my advantageous position within the community, and more importantly damaged the reputation of the participants. While the vast majority of notes were written, occasionally mental notes were taken to be included in the more detailed write-up following fieldwork, while constantly being supported with visual ethnographic techniques (Pink 2006).

Emerson *et al.* (2001) recommend that detailed field notes, that elaborate on jotted notes, be written up and the end of each day's fieldwork. This proved problematic on many occasions. Beer pong weekly tournaments in Ireland ran from 7:00pm to approximately 12:30am; often community gatherings ran longer than the official time organised by BPONG Ireland brand management. In order to experience the community holistically it was deemed necessary on occasion to continue fieldwork until 2:30am. Fieldwork conducted in the USA posed a similar problem, at the end of official tournament time it was not deemed appropriate to return a hotel room to write more detailed field notes and miss opportunities to engage with the community and it's range of actors

while they engaged in important community rituals post 'official BPONG time', typically centred on toxic play. Often at BPONG events participants may not engage in any form of sleep for days; finding time to write more detailed field notes was difficult to manage, I was presented with a trade-off – which was more valuable, to write detailed field notes or to experience the culture holistically? I attempted to achieve a balance by ensuring written field notes were supported with visual ethnographic note taking also.

The practice of writing up field notes took place in the morning following site visits, or upon returning from the USA. This practice was greatly aided by the use of video recordings and still photography. While photography and video recordings were analysed separately (Pink 2001, 2006, Penaloza and Cayla 2006, Belk and Kozintes 2005), they were also used in this study to enhance jotted field notes by providing a refresher to the 'live' context. This made it easier to bring the scenes back to life, for instance, the noise of the spectators, players, and music, and peoples' body language and gestures, were recorded during different moments of the events, which aided recall (Youtube.com search: "WSOBP V Clips" for one example of a visual ethnography compilation).

Photography and video recordings also provided a perspective on field interactions that were meaningfully different from (Pink 2001, 2006, Belk and Kozinets 2005), but yet complementary to jotted field notes (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). It is a practice I wish to continue in future research studies. (I intend on making a video documentary titled 'The World Series of Beer Pong: Postmodern Sport?' to be submitted to ACR Film festival using my 40 plus hours (approx) of HD footage over the past 3 years.)

There was one instance on my first fieldtrip at the WSOBP V where on the last day of data collection I believed I had lost my video camera, with all the recordings. Although it was found, this was a very uneasy and stressful experience, so much so that I was compelled to combat the fear of this

repeating itself on the 'USA Beer Pong Tour 2010', I brought a number memory cards on this field trip. These were stored following each day's fieldwork; subsequently at the WSOBP VI and VII, I combated this further by bringing a laptop so as data could be uploaded a number of times a day (between games).

Recall, and initial analysis was enhanced by adding a virtual aspect to the process of writing up field notes; edited videos and photos were uploaded to Facebook/Youtube.com, conversations between and with actors were monitored, and where applicable, web forums were also studied, namely the BPONG forum and side groups created on Facebook by the community.

After all of my earlier fieldtrips, I spent a good deal of time studying and reflecting on my performance and experience as a researcher. On numerous occasions, I referred back to the texts I was using as foundational guidance for my study, such as; Stewart (1998), Van Maanen (1988), Wallendorf and Sherry (1989), Emerson *et al.* (2001), Lofland and Lofland (1995), and Arnould and Wallendorf (1994).

Having reviewed and analysed fieldwork from previous beer pong events, I decided to focus on certain patterns of behaviour during the events. These appeared to be the re-occurring themes that had emerged from previous fieldwork. I turned my focus to pay more attention on disconfirming these specific themes such as co-creation (derived from first order codes such as 'open communication', 'transparency', 'feedback requests', 'member suggestions', brand carnival (derived from first order themes such as 'dancing', 'drinking', 'costumes', and 'carnavalesque', hegemonic masculinity (derived from first order codes such as 'status display', 'aggression', 'laddish behaviour') and sport construction (derived from 'sporting mentality', 'practice', 'stats', and 'jerseys') (see Table A). Prior to conducting fieldwork I engaged in a quick run down of less significant events that occurred between research

visits, and where my research priorities lay, this helped me to focus on the task ahead.

### **7.6 Separation of observational field notes from analytical field notes**

Analytically material and personal reflection were included in my field notes during the jotting phases; also some further analysis was included while typing the jotted notes. The normal procedure was to type out jotted field notes after studying the video recordings and photographs of the event, elaborating on the recall keys and adding some preliminary analysis along with the analysis added during note taking. Field notes provided an opportunity to develop initial interpretations and insights for further inquiry; I met with my supervisor twice monthly who served to critique and question my emergent interpretations before themes were fully committed to, as discussed previously with the beer pong 'sport or not sport?' example.

I found it necessary to log my own personal emotions and reactions to what I was experiencing in the field; this was found to be advantageous in three distinct ways. Firstly, as Goffman (1989, in Emerson *et al.* 2001) emphasised, the researcher's emotional responses may mirror those that naturally occur in that setting; secondly, emotional reactions may provide important analytical leads (Shankar 2000), and thirdly, recording one's emotions enables the ethnographer to highlight biases and prejudices as well as the changing attitudes towards actors and events (Emerson *et al.* 2001). By engaging in such logging I was able to identify that I myself had begun to normalize 'toxic play'. This served to highlight the process BPONG members may go through and how the collective identity was constructed on endemic toxic practices. It also allowed me to maintain a critical academic stance to community practices.

After a briefing with my supervisor we discussed the separation of analytical points raised, personal emotions logged and field notes, he suggested that one possibility is to use different colour pens for the different type of note

being jotted; this was practiced on one occasion but I found it awkward and time-consuming during the carnivalesque setting of the WSOBP ballroom. Rather than separating these points out in the field my supervisor suggested that I separate them out while typing my jotted notes using italics and brackets to distinguish between the different points, also suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1995).

Emerson *et al.* (2001) note that most researchers prefer to “*engage in various kinds of analytical writing during or close to the initial production of field notes*”; this was reflective of my personal habits. In-process analytical writing allowed me, when engaging in the analytical procedures of coding and memoing, to contrast the initial insights to more developed alternative insights. I found it valuable to engage in this form of analysis. Analysis was guided by the approaches of Stewart (1998) and Spiggle (1994); however, it did take time to grasp these rigorous guidelines for analysis of qualitative research.

## **7.7 Pilot Interviews**

There is a great deal of scope in the literature on initial informant selection. I used Stewart’s (1998) method of purposive sampling for selecting interviewees. The purposive sampling approach was deemed acceptable due to the large amount of field notes previously collected; the data drove the research collected, specifically the emergent themes of ‘toxic pay’, ‘beer pong as sport’ and ‘conversion experience’. I selected two participants for the pilot interviews to explore the emerging themes from observational data.

Pilot interviews were carried out with ‘EOS’ (Male, 26), on the basis that he attended WSOBP V and was involved in the organisation of BPONG Ireland, he had played casual beer pong for a number of years, and frequently informally discussed the toxic aspect and damaging aspects of playing beer pong. ‘ED’ (Male, 21), was chosen on the basis that he had been playing casual beer pong for about a year, was a frequent attendee at BPONG Ireland

tournaments, was attending the WSOBP VI, and extolled beer pong as 'sport'. The pilot interviews were useful to explore emerging themes, and provided insights into many other possible themes. On a practical basis they provided me with an opportunity for refining interview structure and technique; and were excellent additions to my ethnographic data set. Interview data corroborated the emergent themes under investigation.

### **7.7.1 Methodological Approach for interviews**

Interviews placed an emphasis on "obtaining narratives or accounts in the person's own terms" (Lofland and Lofland 1995); they provided an opportunity to explore topics that often get neglected in ordinary conversation (Stewart 1998). The intention of the interviews was to allow a natural conversational flow to emerge, while maintaining a level of control over the conversation. I believed it relatively important not to have an over-structured approach to the interviews in order to leave the interviewee be able to discuss what was naturally important to him/her.

Following McCracken's (1988) 'long interview' approach maximised the value of time spent interviewing community members; it allowed me to discuss certain topics, while allowing the interviewee to express their own interests and issues naturally. The experience of these interviews was invaluable; not only due to the interesting data but also because of the subsequent debriefings carried out with my research supervisor; my interview technique developed following each interview conducted. I met with my supervisor regularly over this period to analyse the data and to attain a degree of triangulation in interpretation (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, Stewart 1998).

### **7.7.2 Preparation of interview discussion topics**

The reflexive, personal account style I often wrote in during field note taking proved to be a valuable source for interview discussion topics (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Other valuable sources for discussion included themes that were emerging from observational data, 'hot topics' on discussion forums, and

the general conversation topics between actors in a casual manner on-line. Many of the themes explored during pilot interviews that elicited rich data were deliberately examined further. Unexpected and novel themes that emerged from previous interviews/informal conversations were incorporated into future interview topics when deemed appropriate. On occasion the respondents natural environment highlighted possible avenues to explore. For example during an interview with 'GOS' he had a beer pong table erected for playing, his daughter was also present and she was began asking could they play against each other – it highlighted a very different meaning of beer pong previously unobserved and opened up an avenue for further exploration.

### **7.8 Post interview work and initial data analysis**

I usually kept post interview comment sheets as recommended by Lofland and Lofland (1995). The transcript of each previous interview was re-read prior to conducting a new interview; this helped me to judge what conversation topics flowed well in the previous interviews, it highlighted key terms that were being used by respondents, and allowed me to see flaws in my own interview technique. The manner in which I conducted interviews improved greatly over time. I temporarily stopped collecting data for a period after pilot interviews to reflect on all the data I had gathered and explore other literatures, such as sport, carnival, and gender identity.

My efforts at analysis were guided by my readings of Spiggle (1994) and Stewart (1998). While I grew accustomed to using Spiggle's (1994) approach for the analysis of qualitative data it did however take me a great deal of practice to establish more correct coding practices. Proper iterative comparison codes and development of higher order themes only fully established itself after a number of debriefings comparing codes with my supervisor. As greater analytical skill developed, previous data collected was re-analysed under correct practice. Examples include the initial codes of 'binge drinking', 'anti-social behaviour', 'costumes' and 'dancing', which

developed into the higher order themes of 'toxic play' and the 'branded carnival'.

### **7.9 Re-entering the field: Interviews with other BPONG Ireland members**

Interviews with a second group of BPONG players took place in August 2011. These respondents were again chosen using a more thematically informed approach to purposive sampling (Stewart 1998), the respondents were chosen and took place following the analysis of all previous data collected. Respondents were chosen based on certain characteristics that would provide an opportunity for the identification of disconfirming observations. Interviews were carried out with 'Keany' (Male 28), 'GOS' (Male 32) and 'LC' (Female 26).

'Keany' a school teacher, was chosen on the basis that he attended the WSOBP twice; he is a committed professional beer pong player; and is one of the organisers of BPONG Ireland. He has been playing beer pong for over 6 six years in a variety of different settings and has a wealth of experience in the international beer pong community; and hence has exposure to the developed themes.

'GOS', an engineer, married with a young child, started playing beer pong only since BPONG Ireland was founded (May 2010). He is the oldest player in the community, it was deemed important to get a more mature perspective, as the majority of the BPONG Ireland community were under 25 years of age. He was specifically chosen for insight into his relative growing interest towards beer pong and his possible conversion experience.

'LC', a make-up store assistant, attended a single beer pong tournament. She was chosen on the basis that she did not return to play beer pong again despite having a good time at the tournament she attended. It was deemed important to explore the conversion experience concept from a non-returning



players view. 'LC' was also chosen to examine a female perspective on beer pong, regarding gender identity and masculine roles adopted during competition.

No further interviews were conducted after this point, I believed I was uncovering more useful data from field notes, netnographic observations, photography, videography and the study of cultural artefacts, as these presented more natural reflections of members' engagement with play, rather than official interviews conducted. However, possible future research of the BPONG community intends to include further interviews, possibly via the medium of Skype.

During interviews conducted, on many occasions participants gave highly skewed versions of the events I had recorded via field notes, photography and videography. Participants frequently portrayed themselves in a more positive way than observed regarding their behaviour at tournaments, specifically regards alcohol consumption and their competitive nature. I also felt that participants relayed experiences that they believed I wanted to hear, rather than what actually happened. An example of this occurred during an interview with 'EOS'; he mentioned on numerous occasions that he viewed 'Bud Light' as his beer pong beer alcohol brand, and that he purchased it regularly, despite the fact that I never once saw him purchase it, and at the time I played beer pong with him once a week, he was not in anyway brand loyal to Bud Light. However, despite such instances some valuable insights were obtained from the interviews such as during an interview with 'Keany' he commented frequently on the toxic nature of beer pong and the dangers of engaging in such play. This highlighted BPONG members' full commitment to the brand carnival.

### **7.10 Reliability/Objectivity**

Having outlined the veracity of the study in the above notes I will now address briefly questions of reliability and objectivity. Reliability is understood as a

combination of objectivity and consistency; it assumes stability and replicability. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggest that these do not fit with the emergent design approach to ethnographic research. Objectivity is understood as independence between knower and known, which in ethnographic inquiry is often regarded as impossible (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Stewart (1998) also highlights the inevitable limits on objectivity; ethnographic research is highly situated and affected by the orientations of both researcher and respondent (Stewart 1998). However, Stewart (1998), and Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) suggest several tactics that can be used to ensure the study is characterised by good practice relative to objectivity, dependability and integrity.

In the interest of objectivity Stewart (1998) suggests the adoption of the 'trail of the ethnographers path' technique; this can be used to document the researcher's work so as readers can assess the extent and type of any partisanship on the part of either the reader or any key informants. The reflexive elements of my field note taking were used in this manner; it allowed ethnographic objectivity; it allowed my history and involvement to be considered critically (see Table A).

The issue of bias was dealt with by engaging in purposive sampling, outsider checks, search for disconfirming observations, and member checks. Also a large number of actors/informants have been interacted with in order to ensure that the full range of the culture has been explored, and different perspectives documented. I made tactical decisions to spend time with as many 'cliques' within the community as possible (cliques are generally associated with locality, namely the State/city which players are from). Also the overall commitment to visual ethnography techniques yielded an abundance of rich data.

This assures that I not only had opportunities for disconfirming observations but also biases, which may have occurred from representing only one facet of

the community. Rather than confining the study to those extremely committed to beer pong, it also focused on people who are less serious and happy to have beer pong remain as side activity, incorporated only to their night out and holiday.

The most prolific examples of disconfirming observations lay in the community-BPONG relationship. While in the earlier stages, possibly due to my favourable relationship with my BPONG owners, and my overall experience of the WSOBP, I had noted that BPONG were displaying brand community marketing, in the sense that they displayed transparency and provided opportunities for the co-creation of beer pong experiences. However, due to prolonged immersion and the search for disconfirming observations, and attempts to remove bias from my relationship with BPONG owners, I discovered that while their management of the brand displayed elements of a brand community marketing strategy, it was not intentional brand community marketing. The brand is currently attempting to develop into a more commercially appealing brand and avenues for co-creation and transparency appear to be decreasing. The BPONG brand is slowly moving from a humble community focus to a mass directed strategy (area for future research).

Stewart recommends three further tactics to maximise ethnographic objectivity. These tactics include; respondent validation, feedback from outsiders, and interrater checks on indexing and coding. He also lists a fourth tactic, maintenance of a comprehensive data archive, but strongly recommends against its use, and hence, it is not discussed here. With regards to respondent validation in my experience it did not contribute any new insights to the study, but was useful to have community members confirm my understanding of the community practices. I asked two members of the BPONG Ireland community to read a conference paper that discussed an aspect of my findings; it did not lead to any further insight, but confirmed the general themes. A number of conference papers were also sent to the BPONG brand owners for review, and to discuss, however despite one brand

owner saying that the paper was 'fine' I don't think it was read in any great detail. However, while this form of feedback can be useful, ultimately the responsibility for description and for interpretation rests with the writer (Stewart 1998). I found it valuable to show members of the community the ethnographic comics (O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2013) as a means to get member checks. I found this method extremely useful due the accessible nature of comic books. See appendix B for examples of ethnographic comics created during the duration of this study.

### **7.11 Feedback from outsiders and interrater checks on index and coding**

Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) refer to the technique of periodic debriefing by peers; those who are not actively involved in the research can bring a fresh perspective to bear on both data and interpretations. Valuable feedback was received at conferences such as the ULMS Ethnography Conference 2010, the Academy of Marketing 2011, and 2012, and also from my Consumer Culture Theory Conference 2012 submission. I also had an article published in the Journal of Marketing Management although it concerns a previous research site, on the area of brand community and sacred consumption, it overlaps with many aspects of this thesis are built up. There is a clear cross over between the JMM paper and sections 4.3/4.4/4.5 of this thesis. I also have published an Ecch case study, which discusses the glocalization of beer pong. Peer debriefing provided possible further areas to explore and highlighted valuable linkages with other concepts in consumer culture literature. For example, it was at the ULMS Ethnography Conference 2010 in which I first began to discuss the concept of toxic play within the BPONG community, after a number of academics commented on the binge and anti-social aspect, I was advised to look into areas such as cultural criminology and carnivalesque consumption, hence eventually I conceptualised the community brand fest as the 'branded carnival'.

The role of periodic debriefing and external checking was performed by my research supervisor and occasionally other consumer behaviour PhD students. This was essential in attaining the necessary level of objectivity for the research. Without these debriefing sessions it would have been very difficult to retain sufficient detachment from the community. As a committed professional beer pong player, and brand owner, it was necessary for my supervisor to engage in critical conversations regarding the community. This ensured I was not placing an excessive emphasis on issues and themes that were closer to me in a non-academic way, such as my intention to 'win big' at the WSOBP and my financial attachment to the BPONG Ireland brand.

I undertook a comprehensive re-examination of the data after all fieldwork was finished. I re-analysed every interview, field note, all visual content and netnographic material in the iterative manner described by Spiggle (1994). This task was carried out to ensure that each final theme had been subjected to full scrutiny for disconfirming observations against all available data. It proved necessary foundation to develop the themes that provided a fresh unique perspective on the brand community phenomenon and consumer culture theory (CCT) rather than focusing on established elements in the literature. The process of interrater checks ensured that the study focused more on novel aspects under explored in the brand community/CCT literature (such as the brand carnival and toxic play discussed in section 4.3, abnormal sport section 4.5) rather than focusing solely on the previously established relational aspects (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander *et al.* 2002).

### **7.12 Generalisability and Perspicacity**

Ethnographic studies cannot make claims for external validity or generalisability in the same manner as positivist studies (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Ethnographic data are temporal and situated; they are not separate from the context in which they are being studied. However, this is not to say that research conducted in a particular context cannot be valuable to another context (Flygerberg 2005). Wallendorf and Sherry (1998) suggest

the use of the term transferability, which is the extent to which working hypothesis can be employed in other contexts. Stewart (1998) suggest the more apt term of perspicacity in which a researcher should be able to show where his/her findings tally with other studies and contexts.

Stewart (1998) suggests two devices for the verification of perspicacity: intense consideration for data, and exploration. I believe the intense consideration of the data has been made clear. In terms of exploration it is hoped that it is also clearly shown that potential points of contrast were sought out (attending WPT and DSOBP) and more than one field was explored, using multiple data collection methods. This suggests that the insights I obtained in this study could be applied to other consumption communities beyond the brand community phenomenon. This study also takes into consideration diverse streams of literature; it was felt that the ethnographic gaze (Stewart 1998) that I employed was as wide as practically possible; it included gender issues, philosophy of play, carnival and festival rituals, sport culture, edgework, the tribal entrepreneur, and glocalization. This suggests that the findings of the current study may carry significance for other domains of consumer culture theory.

For example, this overall thesis carries contributes to the darker side of consumption communities, introducing the concepts of the brand carnival, constant opportunities for displays of hegemonic masculinity, and abnormal sport; these concepts contribute to a broader emergence of what I construct as toxic play. I am currently examining the concept of toxic play in other research sites such as the online ecstasy tribe via a netnographic study of the Pillreports.com (ecstasy pill database/forum). I also intend on examining the concept of abnormal sport further in other contexts, as I believe its emergence is becoming more widespread.

### **7.12.1 Intended future publications arising from this thesis**

“The Branded Carnival: Toxic Play and Contested Linking value” (to be submitted to *Consumption, Markets, Culture* or *Journal of Consumer Research*)

“Professional Beer Pong: The Emergence of Abnormal Sport” (to be submitted to *Sport in Society*)

“Rethinking marketplace cultures: Theories of play” (To be submitted to the *Consumption, Markets, Culture*)

“The Hyper-Masculine Playpen: Multiple Masculine Roles” (to be submitted to the *European Journal of Marketing* or *Consumption, Markets, Culture*)

“Carnivals are unisex: The role of women in the male dominated BPONG brand community” (to be submitted to *Gender & Society*)

“The Ethnographic Comic: Storyboarding Emergent Themes From Fieldwork” (to be submitted to *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*)

### **7.13 List of field trips**

#### **International**

The World Series of Beer Pong V, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, Las Vegas, Nevada.  
The USA Beer Pong Tour (New York, Boston, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Chicago) July 2010, July 2<sup>nd</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>  
The World Series of Beer Pong VI, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, Las Vegas, Nevada.  
The World Pong Tour Atlantic City World Championship June 24<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup>, Atlantic City, New Jersey 2011  
The Dutch Series of Beer Pong, October 7<sup>th</sup>- 10<sup>th</sup>, Venlo, Netherlands  
The World Series of Beer Pong VII, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, Las Vegas, Nevada.

#### **Irish**

BPONG Ireland Tournaments:

May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2010, May 26<sup>th</sup> 2010  
June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010, June 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010  
August 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, Kilkenny  
August 11<sup>th</sup> 2010  
August 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, Kilkenny  
September 8<sup>th</sup> 2010  
September 15<sup>th</sup> 2010  
October 10<sup>th</sup> 2010  
Irish Beer Pong Championships November 27<sup>th</sup> 2010  
(Various business meetings with commercial brand managers in 2011)  
(Ongoing full participation in BPONG Ireland/WSC, informal note taking)

**Other Tournaments:**

Cork Beer Pong Tournament, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2010

Cork Beer Pong Tournament, May 28<sup>th</sup> 2010

Paddy Power Irish Winter Festival, October 26<sup>th</sup> 2011

Paddy Power Irish Open, April 7<sup>th</sup> 2012

**Nentnographic sites:**

BPONG.COM Forum and Blogs

MDBEERPONG.COM Blogs

PONGSTARS.NET Blogs

Facebook Profiles

Facebook BPONG Ireland/WSC

Facebook Discussion Groups: Beer Pong Will Be A National Sport, Skype Pong, WSOBP VII Updates

Youtube.com

Skype group "Skype Pong"

**7.13 List of Interview Participants****Pilot Interviews**

Interview with EOS (Irish, WSOBP attendee, male, 26) 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2010

Interview with ED (Irish, WSOBP attendee, BPONG Ireland member, male 21) 30<sup>th</sup> December 2010

**Second Round Interviews**

Interview with 'Keany' (Irish, WSOBP attendee, BPONG Ireland owner male 27) August 31<sup>st</sup> 2011

Interview with 'GOS' (Irish, BPONG Ireland member, male 32) August 2011

Interview with 'LC' (Irish, Tournament attendee, female 26), August 2011



## Appendix B: Ethnographic Comic Books



BPONG Ethnographic Comic Vol.1 presented at UCC Doctoral Symposium 2010 and Academy of Marketing Annual Conference 2012, Southampton





BPONG Ethnographic Comic Vol.2 presented at The Consumer Culture Theory Annual Conference 2012, Oxford