


# Use of Brand Community Markers to Engage Existing Lifestyle Consumption Communities and Some Ethical Concerns

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## Abstract

This study explores how alcohol brands use markers of brand community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) to engage existing lifestyle consumption communities. Drawing on consumption community and ethics theory, the article examines the interface between brands and a lifestyle consumption community, and explores ethical issues and implications from this phenomenon. A mixed methods research case study examining alcohol sports sponsorship of the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) is presented to generate understanding of the live context and explore the use of markers of brand community to engage adolescent members of the NRL lifestyle consumption community. Evidence of consciousness of kind, and rituals and traditions relating to brand activity, was identified, but was less evident in relation to moral responsibility. The study also identified some important theoretical, practical, and ethical implications. This research addresses a significant gap in the current literature by identifying how community markers can be used by brands to engage existing lifestyle consumption communities, and distinguishing ethical implications that warrant attention.

## Keywords

adolescents, ethics, social marketing, brand community, lifestyle consumption communities, CSR, marketing ethics, macromarketing, alcohol, vulnerable consumers, NRL, Australia

## Introduction

Extant research on consumption communities has primarily focused on community structures falling within one of three forms: subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand communities (Canniford 2011). More recently, the idea of lifestyle consumption communities has been identified (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela 2013). Despite acknowledgement of the often fluid and hybrid nature of consumption communities (Canniford 2011), there is less research examining structures that may overlap or coincide – for example when commercial brands engage existing consumption communities. Furthermore, there has been little consideration of the ethical issues relating to consumption communities – particularly from a marketing ethics perspective.

The present mixed methods study aims to increase understanding of consumption communities by examining whether, and how, alcohol brands engage existing lifestyle consumption communities through sports sponsorship. The lifestyle consumption community that is the focus of this study is formed around the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) in New South Wales (NSW). The study examines alcohol brand activity in this space, and explores how adolescent consumers interpret, participate and navigate such phenomena. The ethical implications of alcohol brands using community markers to

engage existing communities are then also considered. The study aims to address the following research questions: How do alcohol brands use markers of community to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community? How do adolescent consumers engage in such community structures? What are the ethical implications of this use of brand community markers to engage existing lifestyle consumption communities?

In addressing these questions the research makes two important contributions to the knowledge base. First, the study contributes to broader understanding of consumption communities by exploring the use of brand community markers to engage existing lifestyle communities, and how consumers engage in this domain. Second, the article considers unexplored ethical dimensions of consumption communities, identifying theoretical and practical implications, and encourages increased attention in this area.

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**Table 1.** Three Important Markers of Brand Communities.

Consciousness of kind	Rituals and traditions	Moral responsibility
Consciousness of kind is the principal element of community. Members of a brand community share a sense of unity, and feel connected to a brand but also to each other. Although members of a brand community might have never met, they can feel like they know one another. Consequently a triangular rather than dyadic social interrelationship can form.	Rituals and traditions embody important social processes through which the meaning of a community is transmitted internally and externally. Such rituals and traditions are usually centred on shared consumer experiences with the brand.	Communities are also characterised by shared moral responsibility – a sense of duty to the individuals within and the community as a whole. Moral responsibility is only evident in brand communities to a point, and is mostly identifiable in the process of integrating and retaining members, and assisting brand community members in the appropriate use of the brand.

Source: Muniz and O'Guinn (2001).

The article begins by reviewing the consumption community, and ethics theoretical perspectives informing the present study, and the links between branding, sport, and alcohol. A mixed methods study design featuring an NRL TV match footage and NRL website content analysis, observation research in NRL grounds, and friendship group interviews with adolescent NRL community members, is then outlined. The results then examine whether brand community markers are used to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community, and explores some theoretical implications. Important ethical considerations are then identified. The article concludes by considering implications for producers, marketers, policy makers, and consumer researchers emanating from the study.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Consumption Communities*

Canniford (2011) proposes three main forms of consumption communities: brand communities, consumer tribes, and subcultures of consumption. Research has identified that consumption communities can form around sports, and sports brands (Kerr and Emery 2011), and brand activity in this space can increase brand equity and influence consumer purchase intentions (Kerr and Gladden 2008; Ngan, Prendergast, and Tsang 2011).

Subcultures of consumption concern the lifestyles of various marginalized and deviant consumers (Canniford 2011), conditions that do not seem to apply to popular sport. Consumer tribes are fluid groups of people who share ephemeral experiences on the basis of particular products, services, brands, or consumption activities (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). Group dynamics are relevant when considering sports, and the consumer tribes lens moves beyond the singular focus on a given brand found in brand communities. Tribal marketing can be relevant when examining alcohol sports sponsorship given the tribal nature of sports such as rugby league (McGuirk and Rowe 2001). However, Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford (2013) highlight that consumer tribes are often driven by strange logic, and can be perceived as unmanageable and relatively autonomous that elude manipulation and control. These characteristics were not identified in the present study.

Brand community is a concept that explains how consumers form “communities” that reflect the role and meaning of brands in their everyday lives, and the bi-directional relationships between consumers and the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Brand communities display three recognized elements of a community: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (see Table 1). Brand activity relating to sport has been identified as using markers of community (see Kerr and Emery 2011) – although consumption communities in sport may not always locate around a single brand.

The differences in expression of these markers in brand communities make them distinct and significant in their own right. Research suggests that fostering brand communities can have a positive impact on consumer satisfaction and loyalty (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). Hur, Kwang-Ho, and Kim (2011) propose that brand loyalty can be facilitated through building brand communities. Also, it is theorized that membership creates value for consumers by allowing them to evangelize to non-members the benefits of belonging to a brand community, to empathize with other members, and to contribute towards governing the community (Schau, Muñiz Jr., and Arnould 2009).

Early studies in this field on niche and luxury brands such as Apple (Belk and Tumbat 2005), Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and Mercedes (O'Guinn and Muñiz 2005), suggested that brand communities develop through a relatively organic process. More recent studies have considered convenience goods such as Coca Cola (Sicilia and Palazón 2008), and have identified how firms have sought to create and foster brand communities such as the “my Nutella Community” in Italy (Cova and Pace 2006). However, less research has addressed hybrid structures where brands may use community markers to engage existing consumption communities, for example, alcohol brands engaging the NRL community as occurs in the present study. An exception is Kates (2004) who considered how brands such as Levis and The Body Shop engaged the gay community to co-create brand communities. His study suggests further inquiry at the intersections of community typologies is warranted.

Canniford (2011) finds, unsurprisingly, that brands are central to brand communities. Although commercial brands are an active presence in the NRL community, this brand centrality

feature is not necessarily present in this study. Indeed, Canniford (2011, p. 63) acknowledges that a problem with the brand community concept is that research has shown that “consumption communities do not always locate their socialisation around a single brand.” Fournier and Lee (2009) identify examples of consumption communities revolving around a lifestyle activity rather than a brand, which seems to align more with the current study.

### *Lifestyle Consumption Communities*

Scholars have recently proposed that some communities may be lifestyle consumption communities where a community revolves around a lifestyle interest instead of a single brand (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela 2013). A lifestyle is a way of life that is often expressed through leisure activities including sport (both playing and watching), and material goods (Featherstone 1987; Horne 2006). Lifestyle consumption communities can feature active negotiations rather than unison and uniformity, and are where member heterogeneity and conflict can exist (de Valck 2007; Heinonen 2011). Yet such communities still function communally (Heinonen 2011), contain rules, rituals and hierarchies, and can be managed (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela 2013). This concept of a lifestyle consumption community appears appropriate for this study, which features a lifestyle interest around the NRL. Indeed, sports have been identified as a lifestyle consumption practice that fosters a sense of community and common meaning (Perks 2007; Putnam 1993, 2000). Furthermore, the idea of community consumption focused on a lifestyle interest such as sport, rather than a tribe or group, appears worthy of consideration in this study. Lifestyle consumption community appears to be an appropriate categorization for consumer communities formed around sports competitions, such as the NRL, in which rituals and rules, member heterogeneity and conflict, and cultural value through competition and loyalty pervade (McGuirk and Rowe 2001).

The focus of the present study is on how alcohol brands use markers of community – consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility – to engage adolescent consumer members of the NRL lifestyle consumption community. The study therefore identifies and advances understanding of hybrid consumption community phenomena acknowledged in the literature (Canniford 2011; Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford 2013). The study also considers ethical issues in relation to use of community markers by alcohol brands to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community.

### *Business Ethics*

Currently there is little discussion of the business or marketing ethics concerning brand activity in consumption communities, a gap that the present study seeks to address. In his pyramid model of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Carroll (1991) describes how corporations and managers have philanthropic, ethical, legal, and economic responsibilities.

Specifically within the ethical pillar, Carroll (1991) argues that actors have responsibilities to be ethical, an obligation to do what is right, just and fair, and to avoid harm. This framework considers five tests of ethical behavior: 1) performing in a way that is consistent with societal and ethical norms, 2) recognizing and adapting to emerging or evolving ethical and moral norms in society, 3) preventing ethical norms from being compromised in order to achieve corporate goals, 4) good corporate citizenship as being defined by behaving ethically and morally, and 5) recognizing that corporate integrity and ethical behavior go beyond simple compliance with law and regulations.

Research has indicated that consumers are concerned that businesses conform to their ethical responsibilities (Maignan 2001). However, these ethical considerations do not only apply to firms and marketers. For instance, in relation to the present study, alcohol firms and marketers operate within the legal and social frameworks currently in place. Therefore, policy makers may also have ethical responsibilities to ensure that laws and regulatory systems are in place that ensure harms to consumers and society are limited (Wolff 2011). Representative bodies and organizations such as sports leagues and franchises also have an ethical responsibility to consider the implications of sponsorship deals and co-branding with products such as alcohol.

### *Marketing Ethics*

From a general marketing ethics perspective, the principle concern is whether particular marketing practices harm consumers, other businesses, or society as a whole (Kotler and Armstrong 2009). The American Marketing Association (AMA 2013) has issued a statement of ethics stating that marketers must do no harm, adhere to all applicable regulations, and recognize special commitments to vulnerable market segments such as children. The present study is relevant to the broad categories of marketing ethics related topics identified by Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010), of which four interdependent dimensions are pertinent: 1) ethical issues relating to product (alcohol), 2) ethical issues related to promotion (use of community markers to promote brands), and 3) ethical issues related to vulnerable consumers (adolescents). The findings and implications from considering each of these dimensions then generates insight concerning a fourth dimension of marketing ethics: 4) corporate ethical decision making (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder 2010). Specific ethical issues relating to each of these dimensions are applicable in the present study.

Concerning ethical issues related to product, alcohol is a restricted and potentially harmful product and there are legal and regulatory dimensions to its place in the market. The minimum legal purchasing age for alcohol is 18 years in Australia, and alcohol-marketing regulation does not permit the targeting of underage consumers. Therefore, it may be argued that ethical concerns over its role in the marketplace are important. For instance, should alcohol be present in sports lifestyle

consumption communities, such as the one attached to the NRL? In relation to the ethical issues related to marketing promotion, the type of approach used, which in this case is using community markers to promote alcohol brands, could be perceived as non-informational and thus warrants consideration of whether this is ethical. Sher (2011) raises the question of whether marketing activities that influence consumer behavior by means other than the provision of straightforward and true information may violate the autonomy of individuals and impinge on their capacity to make rational choices. Scholars have long argued that using branding, and influencing consumers on emotional rather than rational grounds, can be perceived as dishonest (Sneddon 2001).

Considering the ethical issues related to vulnerable consumers, considerable debate exists about the ethics of using marketing that engages vulnerable consumers including the adolescents featured in this study. For some scholars, it is morally impermissible to market goods (such as alcohol) to vulnerable populations (such as adolescents) in ways that take advantage of their vulnerabilities (Brenkert 1998). Others contend that specifically targeting vulnerable consumers is not unethical and immoral provided general principles of being honest, accurate and non-manipulative are met (Palmer and Hedberg 2013). In the present study, legal and regulatory considerations, such as the legal purchasing age and alcohol-marketing regulations, do not permit the targeting of underage consumers. This creates an imperative for marketing organizations to foster ethical behavior in this context given the potentially significant personal, organizational and societal costs associated with not doing so (Laczniak and Murphy 1991).

Concerning corporate ethical decision-making, alcohol companies would be expected to try to meet their ethical responsibilities. Utilizing the guidelines offered by the AMA and Carroll's (1991) CSR frameworks, this involves adhering to regulations and avoiding harm to others. Indeed, such objectives are often enshrined within the strategy documents and public relations activities of alcohol industry stakeholders (International Center for Alcohol Policies [ICAP] 2011). Yet research suggests significant exposure, and associations between alcohol marketing and youth drinking (Anderson et al. 2009). Furthermore, evidence suggests alcohol marketing in Australia often breaches regulatory codes such as The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) (see [www.abac.org.au](http://www.abac.org.au)), which contains clauses stating that alcohol marketing must not have a strong or evident appeal to children or adolescents (Jones and Gordon 2013). Research examining the nexus of alcohol, sport and consumers has identified ethical concerns over brand marketing activities (McDaniel and Heald 2000; McDaniel and Mason 1999; Palmer 2011). As Hastings (2012) points out, this is a global issue, with debate and critique regarding effective solutions ranging from regulations, codes of ethics, legislation, and changes in marketplace practice. Empirical research such as the current study offers insights into the nature and breadth of these ethical issues, and can make small contributions to help inform understanding, and responses to this international issue.

## Research Context

Alcohol sports sponsorship is a commonly used marketing tool (Rehm and Kanteres 2008). Numerous sports franchises in Australia are sponsored by alcohol brands. Alcohol sports sponsorship was estimated to be worth between \$300 million and \$500 million in Australian dollars in 2009 (Sinclair and Canning 2009). Popular sports such as football (soccer), rugby union, and rugby league attract significant numbers of supporters, and are described as fostering community identification and a sense of belonging among supporters (Armstrong and Guilianotti 1999). Furthermore, sporting codes or teams often generate considerable "brand" loyalty that is life-long; with consumers attending matches or purchasing branded merchandise repeatedly (Bodet and Bernache-Assolant 2011).

The relationships between alcohol sports sponsorship, alcohol brands, and consumption communities are particularly relevant when considering young consumers. For young people, branding can make the buying and consumption of potentially risky products such as alcohol easier and brands act as a guarantee that "this product is for you" (de Chernatony 1993). This idea of group identification and belonging achieved through marketing is particularly relevant to alcohol sports sponsorship, which is often facilitated through sports in which community already exists (Sutton et al. 1997). Prominent sports sponsors attract greater brand recall, and affective intensity (positive or negative feelings towards a sport or team) enhances cognitive processing by consumers of brand sponsors' activities (Wakefield and Bennett 2010). Madrigal (2000) found that favorable purchasing intentions towards sponsors' products are more likely to occur as identification with a sports team increases and when such intentions are perceived as a group norm. Recent research has also suggested alcohol sponsorship of sports is associated with hazardous drinking among sportspeople (O'Brien et al. 2011). UK research has found associations between awareness of sports sponsorship and adolescent drinking and binge drinking (Davies 2009).

Political and societal concern about alcohol sports sponsorship has also emerged (House of Commons Health Committee 2010). Studies have suggested that alcohol sports sponsorship can positively influence consumers' attitudes towards a brand (Bennett 1999), and that adolescents have a high level of cognizance, awareness, and involvement (e.g. ownership of alcohol branded sports clothing) with alcohol sports sponsorship (Gordon et al. 2011).

The present study investigates the use of community markers by commercial alcohol brands, through the mechanism of alcohol sports sponsorship, to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community in Australia. Ethical issues are also discussed in this context. The NRL is the most popular sports competition in New South Wales (NSW) and attracts fans across age, gender, and social spectrums (NSW Office of Sport & Recreation 2010). The NRL has been described as a lifestyle that fosters community and builds social capital (McGuirk and Rowe 2001).



## Methodology

The study utilizes a mixed methods approach increasingly used in consumer research (Harrison and Reilly 2011) and designed to provide multiple data sources that can be triangulated to address the specific research questions. This study features content analysis of brand marketing on the NRL website and television advertising during games, observational research at stadium grounds, and friendship group interviews with adolescent male rugby league fans to investigate the research questions outlined in the introduction.

Specifically, the website and television content analysis, and observational research focused on identifying how commercial brands utilize markers of community to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community. This approach focused on three key loci for consumption relating to the NRL: online, on television, and in stadiums during NRL games. The qualitative focus group research subsequently explored the response of adolescent consumers to these phenomena. Data were then triangulated, extensively discussed, and interpreted among the team of researchers to develop a representation of meaning and present the findings. The University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee approved the protocol for the entire study.

### NRL Website Content Analysis

A content analysis of the NRL website ([www.nrl.com](http://www.nrl.com)) was conducted to describe and make inferences about the characteristics and consequences of alcohol brand sponsorship communications. Specifically, the process focused on identifying and interpreting community markers used by alcohol brands to facilitate co-option of the NRL lifestyle community on the site (Holsti 1969). The NRL website is a central focus point for the community, and features information on the competition, all the teams, corporate sponsors, and can be viewed as a collective force in the community. It attracts an average of approximately 2.5 million unique visitors per month during the season (National Rugby League [NRL] 2010). Furthermore, alcohol brands are particularly active on the NRL website. The website was monitored by two trained researchers for seven weeks to account for temporal effects in brand activity across a reasonable stretch of the season. This period corresponded with the live games attended by researchers, and the televised broadcast of these games, which were also included in the study. Following protocols for content analysis identified by Krippendorff (2012), quantitative analysis was conducted to record the total amount of alcohol brand sponsorship, and brand community markers themed communications on the site. Qualitative thematic analysis was then conducted to interpret these data. The website featured 10 sections, and each section was audited for alcohol brand related content such as advertising, brand logos, click through banner ads to alcohol brand websites, links to chat forums, pop-ups, and interactive games. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify content relating to brand community markers (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions,

moral responsibility). Examples of brand activity that aligned with each of the brand community markers were categorized accordingly. Coders met periodically during the process, and inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on the entire sample between the two researchers. The coefficient of agreement (the total number of agreements [ $n = 15$ ] divided by the total number of coding decisions [ $n = 16$ ]) was 93.75%, and a third researcher resolved any disagreements.

### TV Broadcast Promotion Content Analysis

Live television broadcasts of five NRL games (see Table 3a) were recorded onto DVD for coding and analysis of alcohol, and non-alcohol brand promotion (to offer a comparison point for overall commercial brand activity). Television broadcast of games was of interest given the high viewership of the NRL (being the most watched Australian sport in 2010 attracting 128.5 million aggregate viewers), and thus likely to engage NRL lifestyle community members. A coding tool was designed following a template from existing research (Jones et al. 2010) and the data were coded for the type of alcohol beverage, the brand, and the form and theme of promotion. Two researchers recorded each time point (and the length of time) that a promotion appeared on the broadcast, and coded the form of promotion such as on field logos, player uniforms, fence or rotating signs, brand logos appearing in the corner of screen, corner poles, goal posts, scoreboard, and commentator announcements. The content analysis process then followed the same protocol as the website content analysis, by categorizing data according to the three brand community constructs. Coders met periodically during the process, and inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on 20% of the sample (332 of 1,659) of coding decisions between the two researchers. The coefficient of agreement (the total number of agreements [ $n = 301$ ] divided by the total number of coding decisions [ $n = 332$ ]) was 90.66%, and a third researcher resolved any disagreements.

### Observational Research

NRL games attract high attendances with crowds of up to 83,000 and an average attendance of 17,367 over the whole season and 37,872 during the finals in 2010 (Jefferies 2010), and, therefore, likely engage members of the NRL lifestyle consumption community. As such, covert observational research to explore brand activity was conducted on NRL grounds due to the requirement to naturally observe the environment and brand promotions. Covert research of this nature involving non-participatory observation of legal activities in a public place has been deemed as relatively free of ethical problems (Riemer 1977) and has also been identified as beneficial by allowing collection of unbiased data that can shed light on important topics that have a public health dimension (Petticrew et al. 2007). The observational research on NRL grounds followed recommended protocols by featuring trained researchers matched to the environment in terms of age and gender,

**Table 2.** Friendship Pair and Group Interviews Sample Table.

Group	Age	Socio-Economic Status (SES)	Number of Participants
1	10-11	Low	3
2	10-11	Medium	3
3	12-13	Low	3
4	12-13	Low	2
5	12-13	High	2
6	12-13	High	2
7	13-14	Medium	2
8	14-15	Low	4
9	14-15	Medium	4
10	14-15	Low	4
11	16-17	Low	4
12	16-17	Low	2

<sup>1</sup>SES status is based on the Australian bureau of Statistics classification of low, medium, and high SES and was ascertained from participants' home postcode.

working in pairs, using audit sheets using a template developed in previous research to collect data, and being briefed on a clear explanation if noticed and queried (Petticrew et al. 2007). Two trained researchers attended five NRL games in NSW and each completed a circuit of the stadium grounds (achieved through purchasing highest value/access all area tickets) to document the extent and nature of the various alcohol brand promotions at the sporting venue. At each game the two researchers each completed their own audit sheets recording each type of alcohol and non-alcohol brand promotion identified. Similar to the website and television footage content analysis, data were categorized according to brand community constructs. Again, inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on 20% of the sample (191 of 951 coding decisions) between the two researchers. The coefficient of agreement (the total number of agreements [ $n = 180$ ] divided by the total number of coding decisions [ $n = 191$ ]) was 94.24%, and a third researcher resolved any disagreements. Following this, the researchers discussed and developed an interpretation of meanings from the data emerging from the content analysis and observation research.

### Qualitative Friendship Group Interviews

**Sample selection and recruitment.** A series of twelve friendship pair/small group interviews were conducted with adolescent males ( $n = 35$ ) aged 10-17 years in NSW identifying as rugby league fans (see Table 2). This component of the study aimed to explore adolescent consumer responses to brands co-opting the NRL lifestyle consumption community. Small friendship groups are an effective method for qualitative interviews as they create a naturalistic environment in which participants feel more comfortable engaging in discussion (Bryman 2012). This is especially important considering the young age group and sensitive topic. This target group was selected as this is the period when most people are socialized as consumers (Ward 1974), and when they start experimenting with alcohol (Gordon, MacKintosh, and Moodie 2010). Furthermore, research

has suggested that adolescent males have a high likelihood to be sports fans (Armstrong and Guilianotti 1999), and that their drinking can be influenced by alcohol sports sponsorship (Davies 2009). A purposive sampling approach was used, in which local networks such as youth NRL rugby league clubs; local community groups and social networks were approached to recruit a sample of adolescents fitting the recruitment criteria. Information sheets, and participant and parental consent forms were then distributed, and written informed consent was obtained. Participants received a \$30 gift voucher as recompense for their time, and groups were held in a local amenity.

**Research process.** A semi structured discussion guide was utilized to ensure that themes relevant to the research questions were addressed in each group. This began with a general discussion about rugby league and the NRL lifestyle consumption community, followed by discussion of top of mind NRL sponsors, then specifically alcohol brand sponsors. Within each context issues relevant to the concept of brand community – consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility – were explored. To stimulate discussion at the beginning of each interview, a promotional video for the 2011 NRL season entitled “This Is Our House” (IRoosterMan1 2011) was shown on a laptop. Participants were then asked about the NRL community in general, and then whether they could name team and NRL brand sponsors unaided. Participants were prompted to think about adverts or other sponsorship activity they might have seen while watching the NRL on television, or when in the stadium attending a match.

Participants were then shown commercials for five of the main sponsors of the NRL: Mother Energy Drink, the official sponsor of the NRL youth league match ball (takeblogs 2010); VB Beer, the official beer of the NRL (mUmBRELLA 2010); Coca-Cola, the official soft drink of the NRL (The Official NRL Live Scores 2011); Powerade, the official sports drink of the NRL match ball and finals series (Cactus09 2011); and Bundaberg Rum, the official dark rum of the NRL and naming rights sponsor of Friday Night Football and Super Saturday Football (DrinksupermktTV's channel 2011). This prompted an aided discussion of NRL brand sponsors. To explore how brands may have used brand community markers to engage the NRL community, questions relating to the three key markers of community outlined earlier were asked. For example, how did brands relate to and identify themselves to the NRL community, teams and fans? How did brands identify with the rituals and traditions of the community, such as match analysis? Did and participants think that people might look out for each other if they identify with these brands and their sponsorship of the NRL? Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and data entered into QSR NVivo 9 qualitative data software tool for analysis. A coding structure was then developed, informed by theoretical constructs and after extensively reviewing and discussing the friendship group interview transcripts among the researchers.

**Table 3.** Content Analyses Selected Findings.

Table 3a: NRL games analysed

Game	Home Team	Away Team	Stadium	Location
1	Cronulla Sharks	Sydney Roosters	Toyota Park	Wooloware, NSW
2	Sydney Roosters	Gold Coast Titans	Sydney Football Stadium	Moore Park, NSW
3	West Tigers	Melbourne Storm	Leichardt Oval	Leichardt, NSW
4	Parramatta Eels	New Zealand Warriors	Parramatta Stadium	Parramatta, NSW
5	St George Illawarra Dragons	West Tigers	ANZ Stadium	Olympic Park, NSW

Table 3b: Frequency &amp; viewing time on screen of alcohol and non-alcohol brand promotion during games

Game	Frequency of alcohol ads (% of total brand ads)	Viewing time of alcohol ads (% of total viewing time)	Frequency of non-alcohol ads (% of total brand ads)	Viewing time of non-alcohol ads (% of total viewing time)
1	348 (71%)	21m: 30s (41%)	140 (29%)	31m: 21s (59%)
2	108 (62%)	8m: 14s (47%)	65 (38%)	9m: 09s (53%)
3	7 (6%)	1m: 45s (8%)	116 (94%)	16m: 46s (92%)
4	126 (23%)	8m: 21s (13%)	420 (77%)	56m: 55s (87%)
5	233 (71%)	12m: 09s (36%)	96 (29%)	21m: 30s (64%)
Total	822 (49.5%)	51m: 59s (28%)	837 (50.5%)	2h: 15m: 41s (72%)

Table 3c: Number of brand ads identified during observational research in stadiums

Game	Number of alcohol brand ads (% of total brand ads in stadium)	Number of non-alcohol brand ads (% of total brand ads in stadium)
1	29 (20%)	113 (80%)
2	79 (43%)	101 (57%)
3	7 (5%)	131 (95%)
4	37 (20%)	151 (80%)
5	27 (9%)	276 (91%)

## Results

### NRL Website Content Analysis

The content analysis found 16 unique ads for alcohol brand sponsors on the NRL website over a seven-week period, as well as placement of brand logos and links to brand websites. The marketing activities in this domain were representative of the brand community construct of fostering consciousness of kind with eight of 16 ads categorized as such. These did so by strongly associating the brands with playing, watching and supporting rugby league. Examples included frequent statements of official beer or rum of the NRL (“Bundaberg Rum is the proud naming rights sponsor of Friday Night Football and the official dark rum of the NRL”), and referring to being a man in advertising (“smoothness waits for no man”). Alcohol brand advertising on the NRL website also referenced community rituals with four examples identified. These referenced activities such as betting on a game or being associated with highlights and analysis packages. Site visitors could also join online chat forums. This aligns with the Nutella brand community study by Cova and Pace (2006), which identified the ability of “fans” to post comments, and even photos of themselves consuming the product, thus engaging consumers in the co-creation of brand messages and image. The evidence of this

non-informational form of alcohol brand promotion could raise the ethical issues related to promotion dimension of marketing ethics presented by Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010), and could be conceived as a form of manipulation identified by business ethics scholars (Sneddon, 2001).

### TV Broadcast Promotion Content Analysis

Across the five games 822 instances of alcohol promotion (49.5% of total brand ads), including both television commercials and on-field/stadium promotion were recorded, equaling 51 minutes and 59 seconds of total viewing time (see Table 3b). Total alcohol promotion ranged from 1 minute (m) and 45 seconds (s) in game three, to 21m and 30s in Game one. In three of the five games analyzed alcohol promotion frequency significantly exceeded non-alcohol promotion. Game one had a high amount of alcohol promotion primarily due to the three Bundaberg brand logos sprayed on the field (Bundaberg is the naming rights sponsor for Friday night football), which were visible intermittently depending on where play occurred on the field. Conversely, game three had no visible on-field alcohol promotion, with all promotion occurring through television commercials or on screen logos.

On-field sprays were the most commonly viewed form of promotion (23m: 38s total across the five games), followed



**Figure 1.** Bundaberg brand logo sprayed on field.

by television commercials (9m: 11s) and electronic on-field signs with rotating messages (7m: 24s). Bundaberg (rum) and VB (Victoria Bitter, beer), the naming rights sponsors, received the most exposure (26m: 32s and 08m: 12s respectively), although Tooheys New (beer) also received significant exposure (6m: 34s). Television commercials for alcohol were present during all five games audited. A total of 27 alcohol commercials were viewed, with 11 unique television commercials identified across the five games. Game four, a Saturday afternoon game, had the largest number of alcohol television commercials ( $n = 10$ ), and Game one (a Friday night game) had the smallest number of alcohol television commercials ( $n = 3$ ). Eighty examples of promotions were categorized as aligning with consciousness of kind, 62 with rituals and traditions, with eight categorized as aligning with moral responsibility. It was found that many symbols of the brand community themes identified in the website content analysis were replicated by the TV broadcast promotion analysis. The omnipresence of alcohol and alcohol brands in this context relates to the ethical issues related to product dimension of Schlegelmilch and Öberseder's (2010) marketing ethics topics. It could be questioned whether it is ethical that alcohol is present and marketed in this NRL community at such a high level as it is a potentially harmful product. Leading on from this, the ethical issues related to promotion and the ethical issues related to vulnerable consumers dimensions are also relevant, as it is questionable whether it is ethical to market alcohol brands so heavily, across a large range of marketing channels, in a domain in which young people are highly engaged.

### Observational Research

The observational research conducted during the corresponding five NRL games identified significant alcohol promotion, often as a substantial proportion of total brand promotion in

grounds (see Table 3c). The level of alcohol promotion was dependent on the venue, the time/day of the match and the team that was playing. Traditional signage featuring brand and logo (occasionally with a short slogan) was by far the most prominent form of alcohol promotion at all five games and this was in keeping with televised events. Types of signage observed included static fence signs, digital fence signs with rotating messages, goal post protectors, brand logos sprayed onto the field (see Figure 1), on-field foam triangles, uniform sponsorship, branded vans (for the sale of alcohol), dead ball signs and concourse/bar signage.

As an example of the embedded nature of alcohol branding in the NRL community, the Roosters vs. Titans game at Sydney Football Stadium had 79 instances of alcohol promotion amounting to 43% of total brand promotion compared to 101 instances of non-alcohol brand promotion (57% of total brand promotion). Alcohol promotion included 24 static VB fence signs around the ground, one Yalumba wines static fence sign, four Singha beer goal post protectors, two concourse stadium VB banners, 22 concourse "VB Bar Here" overhead signs, one Hardy's wine foam triangle at the end of the field, 16 VB electronic signs running the length of the field, and six Bundaberg Rum posters on pillars near each bar. After the game two VB commercials were shown on the big screen at either end of the field. This ubiquitous promotion in stadia ensures a strong association between alcohol brands and the sport. The messaging and slogans in selected ads were symbolic of markers of community. Twenty-nine promotions were categorized as reinforcing consciousness of kind, with examples such as "Beer of the NRL". Twenty-three instances of *rituals and traditions* were categorized, for example "for a hard earned thirst" which relates to the working class traditions of rugby league. These communications are similar to those identified by Hastings (2012, pp. 77-78) in his exploration of alcohol brand sports



sponsorship in the UK. Whilst such activities may primarily be targeted at legal age drinkers, the spill over effect of exposure to underage youths creates an ethical dilemma of whether such activities may engage vulnerable consumers.

### Qualitative Friendship Group Interviews

*The NRL lifestyle consumption community.* Participants in all age groups identified the linking value of the NRL lifestyle consumption community:

Q: "What do you like about rugby league?"

A: "Well rugby league's a great way to socialize with other people because when I play and watch - you get new friends all the time" (Group 2).

This identifies social cohesion and communality in lifestyle consumption communities identified by Heinonen (2011), and Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela (2013). Indeed, the NRL often formed a locus for family connections and shared consumption practices:

Q: "What team do you go for and how did you start supporting them?"

A: "Tigers. Dad did and then I did and then I started liking them (West's Tigers), so... My dad bought me a jersey..."

Yet, heterogeneity often pervades in the NRL community, with people of all ages being members, and even families displaying different loyalties:

Q: "So does everyone in your family go for the same team?"

A: "My sister and mum both go for the Panthers, so, yeah, and my dad goes for the Dragons."

Q: "So do you have a few fights in your family?"

A: "Yeah" (Group 6).

Q: "Do you go to the games with anyone?"

A: "Well, I go with my dad most of the time and sometimes with my nan" (Group 7).

This diversity, and heterogeneity adds further credence to the identification of the NRL as a lifestyle consumption community (Heinonen 2011). Conflict - even fighting, and power relations in the NRL community was also discussed by participants:

Q: "Are there any other things you like about rugby league?"

A: "I like how everyone can get involved... It's like everyone can play it and yeah, it's fun... It can be tough but you look out for your mates on and off the pitch" (Group 3).

Q: "Do people look out for each other in rugby league, and if so how?"

A: "On the pitch. I don't mind a bit of action... Yeah and your team mates are always there to back you up" (Group 10).

A: "At the games you give each other sh\*t if you barrack for other teams - it's part of the game" (Group 1).

Participants also suggested that hierarchies exist in the community, with legends of the game acclaimed: "people look up

to guys like Wally (Lewis) and Joey (Andrew Johns) "(Group 9), whilst supporting losing or unpopular teams devalued status in the community "Manly... losers. Hey I support Manly... Oi shut up!" (Group 5).

*Brand activity in the NRL lifestyle consumption community.* Participants in all age groups displayed a high level of unaided awareness of sponsorship of the NRL by commercial brands, naming sponsors such as Telstra, Harvey Norman, VB beer, and Bundaberg. Participants mentioned that they noticed brand sponsorship and promotion in a variety of places such as logos on the playing surface, kicking tees, goalpost padding, sports bottles, caps and a range of other apparel and equipment. Participants' unaided levels of awareness of NRL sponsorship by alcohol brands were also found to be high. Participants were generally cognizant of the two alcohol brand sponsors of the NRL, VB and Bundaberg Rum unaided. Participants discussed the various activities and marketing executions used.

Q: "Where do you see VB in relation to the NRL?"

A: "Yeah, a lot of the signs outside the grounds and stuff have VB on them... On the sidelines and on the front of boxes and things... On jerseys" (Group 3).

Q: "Why do you think Bundaberg sponsors the footy?"

A: "It's rich (Bundaberg)... Yeah, it's got heaps of money- They sponsor all the pads and stuff, like... Yeah, like hit pads and everything" (Group 9).

Adolescents identified a symbiotic relationship between rugby league and alcohol. Some believed that alcohol brands were sponsoring the NRL to try to influence people playing and watching the sport to use their products, particularly men, which supports existing research suggesting male consumption behaviors are influenced by sponsorship (Davies 2009). This powerful role of alcohol brands in the NRL community relates to ethical issues in the product dimension of the marketing mix, raising concern that adolescents identify this role for alcohol and alcohol brands so clearly. Furthermore, an ethical issue relating to promotion was identified in Bundaberg's use of the Bundaberg Rum Bear to promote the brand. This is of concern in light of tobacco control research findings that use of anthropomorphic marketing holds strong appeal to children and raises serious ethical concerns over such activities (Fischer et al. 1991).

Q: "Why do you think alcohol brands relate to the NRL?"

A: "More men watch rugby league than girls do so they kind of look for things that men go to and then like watch more to show their ads so they'll come in and drink that... And if you're at the footy and you see the ad on the big screen they might feel like a beer, go to the bar and get them" (Group 3).

Q: "Why do you think Bundaberg might sponsor the NRL?"

A: "People like to drink alcohol while they watch footy... Yeah... Bundy. That's why they've got the bear and they have, they had it playing before on the goal post thing though, the pads... You're thirsty... Have a rum and get drunk" (Group 8).

*NRL alcohol sponsorship and brand community: Consciousness of kind.* Consciousness of kind is a concept proposed by sociologists (Giddens 1984) and is loosely based upon Adam Smith's (1776) conception of sympathy or shared moral reactions. It is regarded as the most important marker of community. Members of a community share what Bender (1978) describes as "w-ness" or a sense of togetherness. In consumption communities, this results in members feeling not only a connection to brands, products or sports, but towards one another, generating a shared sense of belonging. Research suggests that sport facilitates connectedness (Wann and Weaver 2011), and this is typified by the NRL slogan for the 2011 season, "This is Our House."

During the prompted (aided) discussions participants commented on how alcohol brands engaged the NRL community:

Q: "Why do you think VB (beer) sponsors the NRL?"

A: "it's basically about what fits the NRL . . . with the supporters when they go to the game or watch the game it (VB) fits in with having fun and entertainment" (Group 5).

A strong influence of family in relation to interest in the NRL, or support for a particular team, was also identified reinforcing the suggestion that the consumption communities and consumer relationships that form around sports and sports teams are close, and can often be life-long with considerable loyalty to the team, and sponsoring brands (Bodet and Bernache-Assolant 2011).

Q: "What do you like about rugby league?"

A: "It connects us. My whole family goes to the Dragons" (Group 2).

Q: "Is rugby league and the NRL important to you?"

A: "I couldn't do without it . . . No way man. 100%" (Group 5).

Branding co-existed with socialization processes with friends and family facilitating connectedness and group identification with the sport, (Wann and Weaver 2011). Also, participants mentioned how branded jerseys were a way to represent the rugby league community and your team, but also the brand sponsors.

Q: "Where have you seen these brand sponsors?"

A: "You see VB in between footy games and stuff . . . At half time or something . . . footy games it always comes up . . . my mum always goes to games and it has VB on it . . . People that go to pubs . . . go to a game and they just want to have a drink . . . just go with their mates and have a drink at the footy" (Group 3).

Q: "What about shirt sponsors – how does that work for fans and sponsors?"

A: "People buy jerseys to support the team. And when you like wear that jersey, you are gonna walk around the street with that one you are representing your team but also these sponsors. If you wear a jersey you are more committed" (Group 12).

The NRL players as influential members of the lifestyle consumption community play an important role in facilitating this consciousness of kind, with participants commenting on how the behavior and engagement of stars with alcohol brand sponsors

influenced these relationships. The embedded nature of alcohol brands within the NRL community was further demonstrated by one group describing how a youth NRL team travels to games in a bus sponsored by Bundaberg rum, demonstrating the power of sponsorship suggested in existing research (Madrigal 2000), and of brands co-opting communities (Kates 2004). This also raises serious ethical concerns according to Schlegelmilch and Öberseder's (2010) dimensions of marketing ethics, particularly about the form, and target of such promotion.

Q: "Why do you reckon Bundaberg might sponsor the NRL?"

A: "People like to drink alcohol while they watch footy . . . Have a (Bundaberg) rum and get drunk . . . If you want to be like Carney (an NRL player) drink a bottle of this a day" (Group 5).

Q: "What do you guys think of the Bundaberg brand, and it being a sponsor of the NRL?"

A: "I like it. On Friday they have the box. Yeah you see they have someone (in the Bundaberg skybox) you can identify with . . . a retired NRL player like one night it might be an old player and the next night it might be Terry Lamb or someone. They like take you up in the air" (Group 9).

Q: "Are there any other ways that Bundaberg are part of the NRL community?"

A: "this team . . . they've got a Bundaberg bus . . . all the kids and their team they all came on this Bundaberg bus" (Group 11).

*NRL alcohol sponsorship and brand community: rituals and traditions.* Within consumption communities *rituals and traditions* refer to entrenched activities that relate to shared consumption and experiences. In this study participants described how alcohol brands integrated with certain routines relating to the NRL and rugby league. Participants in one group commented that their local NRL youth team sponsor, a pub, would get the team to visit and parade their sponsored jerseys. Others discussed how alcohol and alcohol brands fit into the routine associated with watching rugby league such as being with mates, gambling, drinking together, and match analysis.

Q: "How do you think the VB brand fits with the NRL?"

A: "Well you know it's like people who go to, like a bar to put on a bet, like they stop for a VB . . . Yeah, that like the footy." (Group 3).

Q: "Can you tell me how the brand sponsors fit with the rituals of being an NRL fan – how is it part of the process?"

A: "it's like having sort of a man thing to watch the footy and have a VB and have a pie . . ." (Group 11).

These routines were discussed not only in terms of drinking behavior, but also taking part in other activities such as entering competitions, highlighting the association between community rituals and traditions and consumption behaviors (O'Guinn and Muñoz 2005). That these underage consumers freely discussed these matters further identifies ethical issues relating to using brand community markers to engage lifestyle consumption communities. The slogan that introduces the ritual halftime analysis during televised games was also mentioned.

Q: “How do you guys think VB aligns with the NRL and people that like the NRL?”

A: “You associate the VB ad with working hard, being a man – hard earned thirst, that’s what they say about VB. Yeah VB hard earned thirst half highlights (a slogan)” (Group 12).

This reinforces the rituals and traditions identified in the content analysis. Considering these findings in relation to marketing ethics, the fact that a restricted product is promoted using a co-opted approach, and utilizes rituals and traditions that engages under age consumers raises ethical concerns across each dimension.

*NRL alcohol sponsorship and brand community: Moral responsibility.* Less evidence of use of moral responsibility as a maker of community by alcohol brands was identified in the present study, a phenomenon identified in existing consumption community research (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). A sense of moral responsibility was more identifiable within the NRL community itself. The tough nature of rugby league and its physicality can lead to incidents such as fights and injuries. Participants reported that when things like this occur, a pack mentality kicks in with NRL team members and fans looking out for one another: “You back each other up – your mates and your team” (Group 8). This is similar to the description of how a UK alcohol brand positioned itself as a “social glue, [through] achieving dominance [and] owning sociability” (Hastings 2012, p. 83). Therefore, it seems that this sense of moral responsibility may be attached to the lifestyle consumption community, but may not always be used by brands to co-opt the community.

## Discussion, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

### Discussion

With respect to the first research question “How do alcohol brands use markers of community to engage the NRL lifestyle consumption community?” group interview participants commented on the social ties, yet heterogeneous nature, and conflict and debate evident in the community. These characteristics have been found in the lifestyle consumption communities identified in previous research (Heinonen 2011; Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela 2013). The study identified ubiquitous alcohol marketing activity used to associate and embed alcohol brands within the NRL community. The content analysis and interviews with adolescent male rugby league fans identified that the marketing language and activities deployed by alcohol brand sponsors is geared towards tapping into the existing NRL community. Furthermore, the interviews identified evidence of alcohol brand sponsorship fostering consciousness of kind, and identifying with rituals and traditions of the NRL, but with less evidence of moral responsibility.

Marketing strategies used by alcohol brands identified in the study included associating them with consciousness of kind by being part of the NRL community as official beer or rum of the NRL, with Bundaberg rum sponsoring Friday night football,

and youth team buses. The interviews demonstrated that adolescent males were highly conscious of these activities and associated brands like VB and Bundaberg with rugby league, the players, and with the social processes involved in being a fan. This captures the consciousness of kind brand activity that establishes them as part of the community identified in existing studies such as on European car clubs (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Hermann 2005).

Brands also associated themselves with rituals and traditions in the NRL community such as betting on, or discussing and analyzing the game, particularly on the NRL website. Use of slogans by VB beer referencing “being a man” or “for a hard earned thirst” also identifies with the community markers of players and fans of the NRL. Cova and Pace (2006) identify the importance of such rituals in community structures, discussing how Nutella parties, recipe books and consumption tips on fan sites emerged.

Participants also associated these brands with alcohol consumption and some participants mentioned consuming these brands themselves. As such the use of non-informational alcohol promotion, and the engagement of, and potential influence on vulnerable consumers generates ethical concerns about whether alcohol should be present in this environment, and whether alcohol brands should be promoted in this way when under age consumers are engaged.

It is perhaps unsurprising that alcohol brands use these approaches given the potential to create a powerful and influential marketing device, and due to the strong identification, loyalty and lifelong support consumers often have with sports and sports teams (Tapp 2004). Sport often incites passion, emotion and a communal sense of togetherness with other fans. Therefore, brands that engage existing communities through sponsorship can form strong relationships with or even be co-created by consumers – an increasingly common strategy for marketers (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004). This suggests that brands not only seek to create bounded brand communities, but can influence and infiltrate existing communities (Kates 2004).

In relation to the second research question “How do adolescent consumers interact with and respond to alcohol brands embedded within the NRL community?” the friendship group research found that adolescent males appeared to have high aided and unaided awareness of alcohol branding and promotion, and discussed how brands engaging the community related to social norms and consumption behaviors in relation to alcohol. For example, participants discussed how drinking VB beer with mates would be part of the NRL experience. This is particularly relevant given that there is a evidence base linking awareness of, and involvement with, alcohol marketing (including sports sponsorship) to young people’s drinking (Anderson et al. 2009; Gordon et al. 2011). In addition, research has shown that alcohol marketing has a strong effect on young people’s perceptions of drinking and their normative behaviors (Fleming, Thorson, and Atkin 2004).

Concerning the third research question “What are the ethical implications of this use of brand community markers to co-opt existing lifestyle consumption communities?” the study

findings identified some issues that warrant consideration. As the AMA (2013) code, and Carroll's (1991) CSR framework for business ethics explicate, and the marketing ethics topics identified by Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010) identify, producers and marketers of alcohol products should meet their ethical responsibilities, seek to do no harm, and recognize their commitments to vulnerable market segments such as children. However, there are also macromarketing considerations given the apparent acceptance of marketing practices like engaging vulnerable brand community consumers in relation to potentially harmful goods. The findings suggest that use of brand community markers to engage lifestyle communities such as the NRL can be influential and attract members, including when brand products are potentially harmful, and promoted in communities including young people. This raises ethical concerns, particularly given research evidence that alcohol marketing influences the drinking behavior of young people. Should alcohol brand marketers be using brand community markers as a device to co-opt lifestyle consumption communities like the NRL? At the macro level, are discussions required on the appropriate norms governing the use of branding practices acceptable to all stakeholders in society?

Furthermore, such activities may contravene regulatory codes such as the ABAC self-regulatory code which states that alcohol marketing must not have a strong or evident appeal to children or adolescents, or link brands with social and sporting success or achievement (Jones and Gordon 2013). Returning to Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid, alcohol firms are arguably not adequately considering the ethical responsibilities set out in the model. Considering four of the relevant dimensions of marketing ethics offered by Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010), in using devices such as brand community to co-opt lifestyle consumption communities, promoting a potentially harmful product in an environment in which vulnerable consumers are highly engaged, and seemingly not always complying with law and regulation, the alcohol industry and alcohol brand marketers do not always meet Carroll's (1991) tests for ethical behavior.

Therefore, important considerations emerge, such as whether use of brand community to promote potentially harmful products, or in marketplaces and lifestyle communities including young people, adhere to principals of marketing ethics. It may be argued that the present study raised serious ethical concerns across each relevant marketing ethics topic. As such, marketers should utilize frameworks for ethical marketing to reconsider whether these marketing practices are ethical. Policy makers should reconsider the legal and regulatory environment governing marketing particularly in relation to alcohol and other stakeholders, such as sporting codes and teams, might also reconsider soliciting sponsorship from products like alcohol, particularly when young people are part of their consumer market. As some scholars have argued, a communicative and more critical analysis and rethink of ethics in such contexts may be required (Hastings 2012). This will involve discussion and dialogue of acceptable norms in use of brand community among all relevant stakeholders including

policy makers, business interests, sporting bodies, consumers, and public health organizations. Such a communicative approach at the macro level can help inform the development of laws, regulations, and marketing practices that are reflective of the dominant norms and values in society (Nill 2003).

### *Implications*

The findings from the present study suggest using community markers in brand activity is effective for engaging existing consumption communities. Evidence of significant brand activity and receptivity by adolescent consumer was identified here; suggesting that marketing to and with consumption communities is a powerful tool. However, the findings also advise some caution, and that firms and marketers should consider the ethical implications associated with using marketing to engage consumption communities. This is particularly relevant with respect to potentially harmful products, and when co-opting lifestyle communities that include vulnerable groups such as adolescents. In such instances these activities may not be entirely ethical. Frameworks on marketing ethics (Laczniak and Murphy 1991; Sher 2011) can assist practitioners in decision-making. Furthermore, the present study applied four relevant dimensions from Schlegelmilch and Öberseder's (2010) ethics related marketing topics and found that it offers a useful reference tool for analyzing marketing ethics, to which tests for ethical behavior identified by Carroll (1991) can be applied. These frameworks should act as a guide for businesses and marketers to seriously consider whether their activities raise any ethical issues related to the product, promotion, and vulnerable consumers. Going through these frameworks will then inform strategic direction and corporate ethical decision-making. The onus is on firms and marketers to reflect upon their ethics frameworks and ensure appropriate processes are in place. Indeed, firms can be profitable, and behave ethically and socially responsibly at the same time, by applying a societal marketing approach in which consideration is made of a businesses' wider impact on, and relationship with, society (Abratt and Sacks 1988).

The findings also have implications for policy makers. There is an increasing focus by decision makers on policy and regulation concerning alcohol marketing and sports sponsorship (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs 2008). Yet sports sponsorship is less tightly regulated compared to traditional advertising in countries such as Australia and the UK (Hastings and Sheron 2011). Policymakers might consider reviewing and tightening regulatory controls to ensure such marketing activities utilize ethical frameworks, and do no harm. In addition sports organizations also have a role to play by exploring alternative and socially responsible sources of sponsorship.

### *Future Research*

The study has implications for consumer researchers. First, the NRL community displayed characteristics of the emerging



lifestyle consumption community concept, suggesting further research to explore this idea across consumer groups, product and service categories, and countries would be of interest. Second, the study identified how brands can use community markers to engage existing consumption communities, and further inquiry here would be welcome. Indeed, this mechanism could be simultaneously commercially and socially beneficial, for example the relationship between F.C Barcelona and UNICEF. Third, the findings identified some ethical problems with marketing activity relating to consumption communities, an area that has been relatively unexplored. Further research on the ethics of marketing and brand activity in consumption communities, particularly relating to potentially harmful products and among vulnerable consumer groups would be beneficial. Consumption research from an ethics perspective highlights some of the inherent tensions in current theory in ethical marketing. Whilst extant theory acknowledges that firms should try to meet other social expectations and avoid harm, these are often subjugated to a primary focus on economic responsibilities. Rebalanced systems in which ethical considerations have increased prominence in relation to economic responsibilities may be required to address this situation. Scholars could contribute to this debate through conceptualization, and empirical testing of new models of marketing ethics.

### Limitations

It is acknowledged that there are some limitations to our study. First, the study was exploratory. Therefore, although the findings offer some further understanding of ethical issues relating to marketing in consumption communities, quantitative research would be required to produce generalizable findings. Second, although adolescent males are an important group in relation to examining alcohol brands, other segments such as females, or older adults, may have important views and attitudes towards constructs such as self-identity, and structures and markers of community. Third, although focus group participants were asked about unaided recall of NRL brand sponsors, later discussion in the groups prompted and aided discussion about alcohol brand sponsors. As such, it is important to acknowledge this may potentially lead participants and influence their responses. Nevertheless, the interpretation of triangulated data can help limit biases. Finally, the study only considered one lifestyle community in relation to the NRL. Future studies that examine other lifestyle communities, such as football or techno music, may generate further useful insights and understanding.

### Conclusions

This article has explored how alcohol brands use markers of community (fostering consciousness of kind and referencing rituals and traditions) to engage the NRL community. The NRL community itself was identified as being heterogeneous, containing conflict and debate between members, yet possessing social communality – supporting the suggestion of a fourth

form of consumption community – lifestyle consumption communities. That brands engage with such communities suggest greater complexity and overlaps in understanding typologies of consumption communities. The study identified the power and potential of using brand marketing to engage consumption communities, particularly when passion, competition, rivalry and sociality exist. However, important ethical considerations are raised, especially when selling potentially harmful products to young people. This suggests that organizations critically rethink their brand practices, at least in relation to alcohol, and accentuate a stronger focus on ethical decision-making, social impact, and responsibility. At the macro level, a communicative discussion on acceptable norms for branding practices in marketing systems and involving societal stakeholders is warranted.

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