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Beer Consumption and Perceptions of Utopic Authenticity

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Abstract

Authenticity is particularly highly valued by consumers who perceive specific particular products to be authentically associated with a specific place (Moulard, Babin and Griffin, 2015). In a continuing trend towards ‘neolocalism’, identified by Flack (1997) over twenty years ago, many consumers are increasingly rejecting homogenised global products in favour of local products, and are ‘using products and experiences to reconnect to places, history, culture, and one another’ (Eades, Arbogast and Kozlowski, 2017:57). Within the brewing industry, there are many examples within the literature of breweries establishing with authentic local names or creating beer brands with authentic local names (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009; Eades *et al.*, 2017; Flack, 1997; Gatrell, Reid and Steiger, 2018; Hede and Watne, 2013; O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers, 2014; Patterson and Hoalst-Pullen, 2014). However, there are equally many other examples, especially in the beer industry, where brands attempt to claim a fake provenance through their naming strategies to create a false perception that the beer may be associated with a particular place (Simms, 2008). On the other hand, in some markets, foreign beer brands ‘such as Heineken and Beck’s can make use of their country of origin images by emphasizing their superiority in product quality and social acceptability’ (Phau and Suntornnond, 2006:39) over local less well-known brands. This research into consumer perceptions of beer brand authenticity is part of a wider study that has researched the corporate identity and territorial brand management decisions of Corfu Beer (Melewar and Skinner, 2018; forthcoming), a microbrewery on this Greek island, that produces a range of craft ales and soft drinks for a local market, a near export market in adjacent Ionian islands and certain cities in the Greek mainland, and also to a tourist market, in order to provide consumers with authentic local products and therefore a wider consumption choice than some major beer brands that currently hold 90% of the Greek beer market share.

Indeed, it was the dominance of these global brands in the local market that inspired Mr Kaloudis, the brewery’s owner, to establish the company, asking himself “*why would anyone come to Corfu to have a Heineken?*”

HeinekenNV, headquartered in the Netherlands, owns the Athenian Brewery. Its beer brands, Amstel, Heineken and the Greek sounding Alfa beer brands hold 75% of the Greek beer market share. Denmark’s Carlsberg Group also own the Mythos Brewery which holds a 15% share of this market. Mythos is seen to have ‘a loyal - some would say fanatical – following’ (Vrellas and Tsiotras, 2014:36). Mythos is also now available to purchase in 30 countries (Vrellas and Tsiotras, 2014), allowing many tourists to re-create their Greek vacation experience on their return home. Many of the Facebook groups relating to destinations in Corfu (and other Greek destination) are replete with examples of tourists posting pictures of a pint of Mythos, accompanied by wording similar to “not long now and I’ll be back in my favourite place drinking my favourite Greek beer”. As pointed out by Bech-Larsen, Esbjerg, Grunert, Juhl and Brunsø (2007:7) food and drink conveys ‘cultural meaning’ that can be particularly evidenced in the tourism literature, where consumption of local food and drink is

often seen to enhance a tourist's authentic destination experience. However, as also pointed out by Mr Kaloudis' son Thanasis "*Mythos is not Greek, Alfa is not Greek, but they sell like they are Greek*". Therefore, this research draws out some of these associations between a utopic vacation experience, where tourists indulge in authentic consumption experiences, while also questioning the very authenticity of these experiences in relation to beer consumption.

This paper presents the findings of an online consumer survey distributed via social media comparing these 3 main Greek named brands: Alfa, Mythos, and Corfu Beer.

The survey was returned by 191 respondents (who either lived or holidayed on Corfu).

- Which of these three brands do you preferred to drink (on a 5-point Likert Scale between 1 - extremely low preference, and 5 - extremely high preference)
 - Mythos was rated as 4 or 5 by 69.47% of respondents, Corfu Beer by 66.12%. Results for Alfa were quite split between 36.5% of respondents who rated it 4 or 5, 32.5% who rated it around the mid-point, and 30.9% of respondents rating it 1 or 2.
- How important is it for you to consume local food and drink products when in Corfu?
 - Extremely important - 87.96%
 - Of some importance - 10.47%
 - Of no importance 1.57%
- If a beer is brewed by a Greek company, does it matter to you if that company is owned by a global company such as Heineken or Carlsberg?
 - Yes - 50.79%
 - No - 49.21%
- The extent to which beer brand names convey a sense of place.
 - 72.25% of respondents stated that a beer's brand name helps them know which
- country it is from.
- Based on the name alone, how authentically 'Greek' do you consider these beer brands to be? (1 being the least authentic, and 5 being the most authentic)
 - Corfu Beer was deemed the most authentically Greek by 76.51%
 - Mythos by 62.91%
 - Alfa by only 36.49% (with 32.43% of respondents rating it at the mid-point and 31.08% of respondents rating is as the least authentically Greek brand by name alone).

However, when cross tabulating these responses based on the beer drinking preferences of the respondents, while over 98% of respondents who rated a strong preference to drink Mythos, Alfa, or Corfu Beer also believed it was of extreme or some importance to them to consume local products when in Corfu, over half of all respondents who preferred to drink Alfa or Corfu Beer believed it mattered if a beer was brewed by a Greek company that was owned by a global company such as Heineken or Carlsberg, yet over half of those who prefer Mythos did not think it mattered.

Giving beer brands such names as Mythos and Alfa can persuade consumers perceive them to be authentically Greek, even though the brands are now owned by large multinationals. However, the very strong attachment consumers have to the utopic ideal of the perfect Greek island vacation, accompanied by a pint of the favourite 'Greek' brand, Mythos, can help interpret some of these seemingly paradoxical results.

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