Broadening the brandfest
Play and ludic agency
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Brandfests are “corporate-sponsored events provided primarily for the benefit of current customers” (McAlexander and Schouten 1998, p. 378). They represent event-based opportunities for brand managers to facilitate individual and social engagements with brands. However, while widely referenced, the concept has not been significantly developed since its inception in the servicescape literature and has over time become an essential element of brand community conceptualizations (e.g. Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre 2009; Marzocchi et al. 2013). In this article, we revisit the notion of the brandfest, and argue for a conceptual broadening that can address contemporary questions around multi-stakeholder creation of brand meaning and value.

More specifically, we draw on servicescape literature (Sherry 1998), particularly with an emphasis on play and ludic agency (Kozinets et al. 2004): from a play theory perspective, we highlight the playful relations between the actors, their roles, their interactions and brand relationships. Secondly, we connect this with advances on ritual mechanisms (Bradford and Sherry 2015) and utopian marqueplaces (MacLaren and Brown 2005).

We conceptualize a type of brandfest where brand meanings become actualized through ludic interagency, that is, through play among multiple enactors. We develop this conceptualization on the basis of a longitudinal ethnographic study of J-dag— a ritualized annual commercial fest on the day on which all breweries in Denmark release their special Christmas brew, or juleøl. J-dag occurs on the first Friday of November.

Revisiting the Brandfest

A brandfest was originally understood as a marketer-staged social event, which involves a group
of consumers who engage in a unique way with the brand and the product based on ownership (McAlexander and Schouten 1998). Through social events, brandfests have the capacity to animate the brand (Sherry 1998b), endow the brand with a distinctive mystique, and create special experiences around the brand (Sherry 1998a). Brand consumers can meet each other, share their experiences, exchange knowledge, learn from brand experts, demonstrate their own brand insights, and enjoy brand celebrations such as brand-themed food decorations. Therefore, the brandfest offers marketers a unique opportunity to create a deepened sense of brand symbolism, values, heritage, and history (McAlexander and Schouten 1998).

Brandfests were originally understood as involving sociality among consumers, with social ties among brand owners fostering extraordinary experiences (McAlexander and Schouten 1998). However, this characterization led to the brandfest becoming a fundamental element of the brand community concept (e.g., Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007; Cova and Pace 2006), altering the role of brandfests from enabling brand communities to being a sub-element or variation of brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre 2009).

In addition to providing unique experiences, the communicative staging (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998) of the brandfest is both spatial and temporal. Notably, the brandfest differs from a convention or trade show in its unconventional spatial framing (Sherry 1998b): a brandfest takes place at a site that is not the common site for the marketer-initiated brand activities. Temporally, the brandfest occurs outside of everyday marketplace interaction. A brandfest has long-term goals of strengthening brand equity through special experiences for brand owners.

In this paper we respond to the call for widening the research on brandfests, especially by
including more mundane products and brands (McAlexander and Schouten 1998). Furthermore, we see opportunities for expanding the brandfest concept as it holds explanatory and strategic potential. We revisit the brandfest concept in terms of the role of the brand, extension of the types of actors and roles potentially involved, and broadening the perspective on the kinds of brandfest experiences. The study of brandfests may contribute to calls for the study of utopian marketplace contexts that involves ludic elements (MacLaren and Brown 2005), that are not mainly organized around the material spatial frames of retail sites. Furthermore, brandfests may contribute to our understanding of public festivals and further scrutiny of contexts in which a variety of ritual mechanism blend in one social form (Bradford & Sherry 2015).

In advancing the conceptual space of brandfests, we emphasize the theoretical element of play, which was part of the initial conceptualization of brandfests (Sherry 1998a). This element has received little attention since the integration of brandfests into the brand community discussion, and we refer back to the original framing of the brandfest, where “being-in-the-marketplace” inevitably means multiple experiences, blurring the rational and the ludic (Sherry 1998a). The concept of the ludic, which is relatively underexamined in existing brandfest research, refers to a temporal engagement that can have the most mundane objects as props and that creates unique experiences without necessarily being based on strong relationships with the play object.

To further explore the concept of play and its potentialities with respect to the brandfest, we provide a short overview of previous conceptualizations and provide a synthetic perspective for the analysis of our case based on recent suggestions from anthropological theories of play.

**Theorizing Brandfests as Play**

Play is hard to define. This has led to a multitude of definitions, typologies and categorizations
(Sutton-Smith 1997). A common definition of play is voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is different from “ordinary life” (Huizinga 1949, p. 28).

In the marketing literature, a consensus has emerged to approach play as an autotelic, fun-based, rule-governed activity separate from work and production. We find this distinction problematic in a brandfest context, especially in light of recent anthropological research. Play cannot be defined exclusively as the opposite of work, as the experience of fun, or as a ritual for negotiating social issues. With reference to prior research (Malaby 2007, 2009), to understand play we differentiate among four theoretical access points, each with its specific advantages and disadvantages, to end with a refined conceptualization of play to be used in the brandfest context. While we present these play conceptualizations in ideal form, they can be in modified versions.

**Play as a Specific Activity**

Play has been defined as the opposite of work and ordinary life (Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1949). The activity frame is used in the work–play dialectic (Kozinets et al. 2004) or where the fun of play is based on being an interlude from work (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Play in this sense is exceptional and “an occasion of pure waste” (Caillois 1961, p. 5), whereas work is characterized by efficiency, productivity, and goal orientation. In a brandfest context, this aligns with the understanding of the brandfest as an event separate from the normal temporal and spatial frame for consumer and marketer interaction and exchange.

This conceptualization focuses on formal characteristics of the exceptional activity leading to typologies of play forms. As important as these typologies are in a heuristic sense,
they risk confusing the act of playing with the experience of playing (Stevens 1980).

Anthropological evidence shows that play is not a separate category from work (Laney, 1980). A specific experiential mode (playing), which is defined by the exclusionary act of being outside of work, is used in the category that is the exact opposite of play, or a notion such as “false play” (Grayson 1999). We argue that rather than having a categorical definition of play based on the inherent quality of an activity, a more emic and socio-cultural perspective that recognizes the experiences of the involved playing actors might be more appropriate to acknowledge the historical, social, and cultural varieties of play (Malaby 2009).

**Play as Experience**

Rather than focusing on play as a certain type of activity, this conceptualization focuses on the experiential qualities of play and playing related to the experiences of flow (Holbrook 1999; Csikszentmihalyi 1975). In a brandfest context, the focus would be on the extraordinary and peak experiences that brand owners have during a brandfest. The experiential frame is firmly established in the marketing literature. Play is defined not by inherent formal features but by a certain experiential mode that includes feelings like “fun,” “pleasure,” and “enjoyment” (Holbrook et al. 1984). Anyone observing people playing video games, chess, *boules* in France, or *skat* in Germany might see people who are engaged in compelling experiences, where fun and pleasure are only a subset of experiences that can also include emotions like grief, anxiety, anger, or desperation. Thus while fun can be an empirically observed emotion, it should not be a normative *a priori* assumption to define play with certain inherent experiential features.

**Play as Representation and Ritual**

From a more socio-cultural perspective, play is conceptualized as a representational form (Geertz 1973; Grayson 1999). The focus is on play as a symbolic medium for negotiating social issues
like status, hierarchy, shared sociality, and communing (Holt 1995). In a brandfest context, this negotiation would include, for example, how brand meanings are creatively co-produced and brand communities formed, negotiated, and sustained. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, play may involve role conflicts, interpretations, and possible tensions between the players (Deighton and Grayson 1995; Grayson 1999). Play and ludic interagency have also been discussed in relation to the broader issues of social empowerment and submission (Kozinets et al. 2004).

Play is often ritualized, and the playful dimensions of ritual are organized by rules and myths (Fox 1980), operating as performative acts that come to be forms of cultural representation. This perspective is echoed in the diverse references to the concept of the liminoid (e.g., Grayson 1999; Kozinets et al. 2004; Molesworth Denegri-Knott 2007; Tumbat and Belk 2012). The liminoid encapsulates the subjunctive mode of potential change—a transformative or even liberating experience that can be used in the social sphere (Turner 1982, 1986). While a representational frame is vital to understanding play, it can overemphasize the symbolic dimensions of play at the expense of dynamic and material elements of the lived experience and practices of the playing acts (Malaby 2007).

**Play as Rules and (dis)Order**

From micro-sociological perspectives, play has been theorized in a frame analysis perspective (Goffman 1974). Play is a physical or conventionally based frame that facilitates social interaction, where behavior follows special rules (Deighton and Grayson 1995). The rule-based view emphasizes rule-breaking and rule-following behavior (both of which can produce a play value for the consumers) and possible responses by the marketer (Grayson 1999; Askegaard 2010). One extreme play type, *ludus*, is a form of play defined by its rule-following
characteristic, such as in soccer not using the hands to score a goal or in chess following the specified moves for each piece. At the other extreme, *paida* is a childlike form of spontaneous improvisation and carefree gaiety, which as an “elementary need for disturbance and tumult” shows tendencies for rulifications (Caillou 1961, p. 28).

The typology of play based on rules relates to the concept of agency, where structural dominations by producers involve creative consumer capacities. In the tension between seduction and subversion in the play concept, consumer–marketer relationships are “complex and dialectical processes of tactical moves and countermoves” (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 659) and conceptualized as “interagency.” Hence, consumers not only follow or break rules but also create new rules. We see this open-endedness as a more general quality of playing, with play always a process of becoming. Interpretations of the role and the act of playing also relate to the formality, informality, exegesis, rigidity, or malleability of rules.

The advantages and disadvantages of former conceptualizations of play in the marketing literature lead us to propose the following approach for the analysis of play in the brandfest case of J-dag.

- Play is not merely an activity defined by inherent characteristics. Rather, play is a particular disposition to experience. The defining element of play is a certain way of engaging the world (Malaby 2007), which includes acceptance of the uncertainty of the outcome. Play activities have a form of unpredictability and open-endedness. They happen in a temporally and spatially defined context with constraints that generate contingent outcomes. The playing actor tries to affect the events, becoming an agent within social processes, but the outcome cannot be known in advance (Malaby 2009).
- Play is not related solely to games. The disposition of engaging the world in a playful
mode can be observed in all domains of experience—in consuming, working, or leisure activities.

- Play is not only concerned with fun and pleasure. Play as a disposition can include a wide variety of experiences that are empirical forms in relation to certain contexts and not a priori definitional categories.

- Play is not just about rules, as a playful disposition always includes an element of improvisation. In playing, rules are materialized, formed, changed, extended, or abolished (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007).

Brandfests in such a perspective unfold in the tension between free creative action and restrictions of rules and structures. Our main contention is that all actors engaged in the public brandfest actualize brand meaning in this tension. This type of brandfest is hence conceptualized as a marketer-initiated, spatially and temporally unique event in which actors interact with each other and with the material–symbolic brand environment in a playful disposition. That is, all actors are both facilitators of play through the offering of ludic resources (Arnould 2005) as well as constraints on other actors’ play practices.

In the following, we use such a conceptualization of the playful brandfest type in the empirical context of J-dag to explore types of roles and actors involved, the dynamics of interagency, and how brand meaning potentialities become articulated and actualized in post-dyadic ludic interagency.

**Context and Method: Studying Brandfests as Play**

The empirical case is based on a longitudinal ethnographic study of a national, brand-initiated, and sustained marketplace ritual structured around a particular time and particular places: the release of Christmas beers in the Danish market on the first Friday of November at 20:59, a day
known as *J-dag* (J being the first letter in the Danish word for Christmas—*jul*—and *dag* meaning “day”). J-dag is to a large extent marketer-initiated and dominated by the Carlsberg group’s brand Tuborg (Carlsberg has a 62% share of the Danish beer market). J-dag occurs in particular spatio-temporal stages involving particular experiences in social interaction of consumers, marketers and other market-facing actors. Our approach aligns with the key tenets of *Extended Case Method* in that we use our context to reconstruct theory on the basis of other or new empirical observation (Kates 2006).

With the goal of understanding the elements of the brandfest, we collected ethnographic and netnographic (Kozinets 2002) data longitudinally over seven years (2007–2013) in Odense, Denmark, a regional university city. Specific questions included the following: Which actors are participating? What roles are involved (participating, observing) in their interactions? What are the participants’ emic cultural understandings (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) of the brandfest? What are the experiential aspects of J-dag in relation to a playful disposition? What is the role of brands and branding in the staging of the brandfest?

Given the temporary nature of the J-Dag the limitation to data collection once a year meant that there was an ongoing process of interpretation and theorization using principles of part-to-whole meaning generation (Thompson 1997). One year’s interpretation guided the following year’s fieldwork and data collection.

Throughout the period we used observation studies with a bi-cultural team (in some years joined by colleagues from various nationalities) and conducted interviews in bars, in the street, and at various public venues during the day. Initially we interpreted J-dag as a consumption ritual and to that end recorded 28 semi-structured short interviews with consumers (age range, 17–65) from a bicultural sample (24 Danish informants and four other nationalities) on J-Dag
and 10 consumer interviews post-J-dag. Many of these interviews with consumers contained perspectives on production, as several informants who volunteered for the essay were also involved as staff in bars on J-dag. We additionally collected essays on “your experience of J-dag” from 13 informants recruited through a J-dag Facebook group.

To explore the staging and experience of the J-dag brandfest from a managerial perspective, we conducted four formal interviews with bartenders, three interviews with brand managers (one key informant from the Carlsberg Group prior to J-dag in 2008 and two brand management informants from a competing, smaller, brewing group in 2009). To understand the event from an intra-organizational perspective a research assistant was embedded with the Tuborg company in the Copenhagen area on J-dag in 2009 and conducted eight short interviews with a variety of participating Tuborg staff.

Over the years the presence of other market-facing actors engaged in J-dag (political and voluntary organizations, public transport) appeared to be a systematically present group of enactors. To understand their experiences, self-perceived role and motivation for engagement in the brandfest, we interviewed one informant from each of two regional transportation companies (one a regional bus company the other manager of the Copenhagen light railway company) and two voluntary organizations active in the J-dag brandfest: Natteravnene (The Night Ravens), an organization that patrols streets and bars on weekends to assist people who have had too much to drink or to calm down agitated consumers, and Sex og Samfund (Sex and Society), an organization that promotes safe sex and informs about sexually transmitted diseases.

Additionally, we collected offline and online visual and textual data from a variety of other sources, including newspapers, press releases, and material artifacts over the years. 2012 and 2013 was used primarily to confirm that we had reached a saturation of the types of actors
involved, the forms of interaction and salient cultural meanings.

Findings

In the following, we analyze J-dag by looking at how the event is staged, planned, and scripted, what kinds of roles are involved and the nature of the roles, and finally the playing out of the roles during the brandfest and evaluation of the performances. We then present values emerging from participation and play understood as brand meaning actualization. First, however, we present a more detailed description of the J-dag context, based on our field immersion over the seven years.

Ritualizing a Product Category

J-dag is a brandfest reminiscent of a public festival. Mainly young people await the release of the beers at 20:59 in bars around the country, followed by general partying in bars and in the streets. The ritual has its roots in a highly successful Tuborg advertising campaign for Christmas in 1980. In 1990 Tuborg began to release the beer on a specific date and time in bars, where customers could have a free sample.

Today, the event is surrounded by print advertisements, TV and cinema commercials, and billboard ads that announce the arrival of the beers as well as general media announcements about where to celebrate, reviews of tastings of the different beer brands, and so on. While numerous competing brands exist, the Tuborg Christmas beer brand holds a dominant market share as well as a defining cultural role for brand competition within this product category. This dominance has emerged from the strategic staging of the brand that involves consumers, retailers, bars, distribution systems, charity organizations, and advertising, as well as the
voluntary mobilization of employees. Although the Tuborg Christmas beer is on the market for only ten weeks, it is the fourth best selling beer in Denmark (Tuborg Christmas Brew Press Kit).

The play script involves both back-stage and front-stage activities that frame the event (Goffman 1956). On the producer side, the planning of the event begins in March and includes an evaluation of the previous year’s J-dag and co-ordination of the main breweries.

Back-stage preparation involves activities such as media planning, development of POS material, and space management in retail. Front-stage activity involves announcing the approaching event through advertising and general media coverage as well as notice board announcements at educational institutions, Facebook, and word-of-mouth to reach young consumers. In June 2012, Tuborg used the Facebook page for a vote on a special design of the bottle label (anchored in the traditional blue and white color scheme that has been in use since the 1980 Tuborg commercial).

The day itself involves preparation among various actors in the form of private warm-up parties, grooming rituals such as dressing up in brand-related merchandise, and advertising and brand-related activities in e.g. student bars and in the main streets of the major cities (e.g., a Tuborg Santa train operated in the pedestrian zones of major cities in 2008). In the evening, consumers begin to gather in bars, and at 20:59 typically the music changes to Christmas music, the noise and talk increase, and the bars distribute free beer.

The momentum of the event increases slowly as crews from the breweries dressed as “Santa helpers” give away more free beer, hand out various branded goods such as hats and flashing pins, and generally try to encourage a more intense party experience, occasionally taking to the dance floor. Often the crews are transported in the back of decorated beer trucks, further adding to the cultural role of the brands as bringing in the Christmas season through its
distribution system. In the major cities, a considerable number of consumers will move about, following the beer crews and testing the atmosphere of other bars, with the effect of the party spatially dispersing from the confines of bars into public space. Service providers (bars) that in everyday life are separate competing entities become connected through the passage of consumers and other actors of the brandfest (Stevens 2007). The city becomes an interconnected ephemeral party zone, dissolving to some extent the individual brand identities of service providers.

After J-dag, the Christmas beers are part of the general public and private Christmas celebrations. Media often include pictures and video footage from the festivities in their reports.

As is evident, the J-dag brandfest phenomenon exists as the result of the practices of multiple enactors. J-dag relies on company branding activities, such as the development of the scripts, the use of props, and the setting of the stage, and serves as a frame for multiple performances, employing frames that are themselves altered and reconfigured in the liminoid zone of the brandfest

*Roles, Acting, and Evaluating*

On J-dag, participants involved in formal and informal enactment include brand management, non-management brand staff, bars and bartenders, retailers, media/journalists, truck drivers, shipping lines, public authorities such as the police, volunteer and political organizations, student associations, and of course consumers. Other actors include, for example, sports clubs, retail planners, retail staff, media buyers and planners, and advertising agencies.

Actors are not only defined by institutional affiliation but by the roles that they occupy and enact from (Edvardsson et al, 2011, p. 331). We look at what roles the actor plays and how actors can shift between roles. Within such a conceptual frame, we prefer the concept of
“enactor” to the more commonly used term of “actor.” Enactment emphasizes the performative qualities of manifestations and (re)creations of the performed role (Cornelissen 2004). In the following, we discuss briefly how various enactors undergo transformation from their everyday roles to the roles they engage in at J-dag.

Role transition—planning play. Through the preparation, planning, strategizing, and warming up, the enactors are both preparing the stages at which playing will take place as well as preparing themselves for a shift in mood.

Getting ready for the event can involve a number of preparation and consumption practices, such as ordering branded merchandise, planning and participating in warm-up parties, dressing up, or listening to Christmas music. Says one consumer participant:

Finally the day was approaching, J-dag, yippee, the peak of the year. We were girls going out to celebrate. We had bought Tuborg Christmas uniforms that we ordered over the internet, a skirt with plush, smart high-heeled shoes, also with plush of course 😊 and of course the elf hat that goes along with this fantastic day. Tuborg is obviously the brand we drink since they do all the funny Christmas objects that we can buy in the shops all over the country, so of course we support them. My J-day (woman, 23 years old, consumer essay).

This quotation shows that the consumer is motivated to engage with the brand through the branded props available from the producer. Consumers positively valorize marketer-generated resources, increasing the performance potential of the consumers much in the sense of ludic resources (Arnould 2005). Staff from Carlsberg, preparing to join the crews of Santa helpers, also explained how dressing up facilitated a change in mood toward looser, less controlled behavior. Some of our bartender informants told us they looked forward to working
on J-dag, and several gave accounts of workplace rituals with food, music, and pre-tasting of Christmas beers.

The breweries also prepare their physical, embodied participation in the event. Says a product manager from Carlsberg:

We gather at Carlsberg’s museum every year on J-dag at 18.00 and then all the employees who have signed up to be Santa’s helpers will be there. . . . I get up and tell them about the rules and that everybody should drink with modesty and then people go and change to their J-dag Santa outfit. . . .

The research assistant embedded with the Tuborg company noticed that the atmosphere changed considerably as people got dressed up and into their J-dag roles. Also, producers were quite aware of the scope of their role:

We produce a lot of (promotional) material for this evening, that gives a nice decoration. So we stage it, we make the frames, the overall frames and put a little content into it, but it is the bar keepers that really do a lot. (Brand manager, age 35, regional brewery)

Playing and shifting roles. Bartenders embrace their role in making that night something out of the ordinary, not just by wearing Christmas outfits but also through more direct, informal interaction with the customers. One bartender described how we might have ice-cube fights with each other [bar employees] to entertain the guests and make them feel part of the show ... and this year we did a chain dance to house music around the bar and [customers] wanted to be part of it. . . and we talk to the customers and if I can hear that [one is] talking about a girl I will tell him to go and give her a kiss on the cheek—these things are allowed on a Christmas day like this (female, age 24).

The bar setting offers a complex of play. The bar workers play (through ice-cube fights)
to entice patrons to play. This activity reflects an intricate playing–observing dynamic, in that producers perform on the basis of their observations of consumers’ mood. Consumers in turn modify *their* performances, which then are observed by the bar staff. Such production by consumers for producers and producers’ consumption of consumers’ performance exemplifies our approach to play: not as rule-following or rule-breaking behavior, but as a process of becoming.

A further element in acting out the roles is the awareness of the overall performance one is participating in. Says one enactor:

I guess we contribute to a kind of system. Not for the city but for all those who come from the surrounding area and have to come in to the city to go out. So it means something that there is public transportation that removes that uncertainty of how people can get home. *(Communications Director, regional bus company, male, age 40)*

Even if the bus company itself is not a central enactor in beer production and consumption, there is participation and an understanding of being part of an overall play—“a kind of system,” as he puts it.

Participants in the event, however, not only pursue enactment of roles expected of them from their everyday institutional affiliation (as consumer, producer, intermediary, etc.), but also play other roles. One informant (female, age 24) told us that, since the breweries’ crews only operate in urban settings, the owner of the local inn in a small town would dress up in his own Santa costume and distribute Christmas beers to village customers at 20:59. In 2011, a brief news item informed that the owners of a small village grocery would break traditional opening hours by closing at 17:30 p.m. as usual and then re-open at 20:59 since they thought that in the absence of a bar, local villagers should be given the opportunity to celebrate the release of the beer. Also,
more well known brands play with J-dag, as when Scandinavian Airlines Systems one year organized J-dag for passengers on a Friday afternoon on the 25-minute flight from Copenhagen to Aalborg. In 2011, we observed a group of young men dressed in traditional red and white Santa outfits pulling a small children’s cart with beer tailing the Tuborg crew, performing songs and dances to the amusement of spectators. This was clearly amateur mimicking, a key play practice of playing around with the rules of the producer role of physically distributing beers in crews. Consumers also engaged in producer-related practices. One female consumer we encountered in 2009 had made her own earrings from Tuborg bottle caps. Marketers’ strategically used such practices for further development of merchandise. These activities bear witness to practices and the potential of marketers’ embracing consumer playfulness as a source of innovation (Grayson 1999).

**Inter-acting and playful interaction.** As noted earlier, although J-dag is dominated by the Tuborg brand, it encompasses the release of several other Christmas beer brands, and each year the Danish Brewery Association discusses and agrees on the date and other practicalities. While the managers we interviewed acknowledged friendly competition, they also noted that competition increased the scale and intensity of the event, as regional brands also release their own Christmas beer at J-dag. The manager of a regional brewery described the relationship with competitors as follows:

> If we didn’t have competition we wouldn’t be doing this on this scale, but it’s more like a game on fair terms. It’s like a football match where you don’t kick each others’ legs, but a little push with the shoulder is ok. . . . So if we can do something to tease them [Tuborg], like think of a new event, or pay a visit to a bar before them, we do it. Competitors understand they each hold shared, yet specific, roles in the J-dag brandfest.
These roles define each firm’s organizational and brand identity by distinguishing the firm from competitors, but the competitors all share the responsibility of making the performance more playful, including interpreting competition from a perspective of playfulness (“a little push with the shoulder,” “tease them”). The product manager from Carlsberg explained that amid market competition, Carlsberg depends on competitors’ engagement in J-dag to “make it as big as possible.” Carlsberg does not see participation by multiple breweries as a problem as long as the majority of consumers associate J-dag primarily with the Tuborg brand.

Another example of inter-acting is the offer of free train rides on the state-owned light rail system in Copenhagen:

J-dag had become a bit too … wet. So we started cooperating with The Night Ravens and Carlsberg to see if we could help execute this [J-dag] in a way so that everybody behaves and gets home safely. (Sales Director, DSB S Tog)

DSB, the railway company, not only offers the free train ride as an independent marketing initiative, but is coordinating this action with The Night Ravens and the Carlsberg corporation. Likewise, The Night Ravens’ participation is coordinated with the Carlsberg company.

Further evaluation post-J-dag occurs publicly and privately. Publicly, news reports will describe how the festivities evolved and report hospitalizations and DUIs, and social media will see the posting of pictures and stories by consumers, as well as reflections on the vitality of the ritual and ritual script compliance.

**Actualization of Brand Value through Play**

In the following, we describe the types of meanings that emerged in our data. Rather than regarding the play performances as effects of antecedent meanings, we see them as outcomes of
play (Malaby 2009; Grayson 1999). The multiple enactors’ participation, acting, and coordination of acting actualize meanings, i.e. values (Edvardsson et al, 2011, pg. 329; Grönroos and Voima, 2013, Fournier et al. 2008). In our data we found two dominant types of meaning, here termed values: ludic value and identity value.

**Ludic value.** Informants offered “fun” as one of the predominant defining aspects of the overall J-dag performance. One consumer informant (female, age 18) offered her associations to J-dag: “Christmas and beer and Santa girls running around giving away beer in Santa costumes—happy people, people having a good time.” Another defining aspect was *hygge*, a ubiquitous Danish cultural construct signifying a nice time in a warm, egalitarian atmosphere (Linnet 2011): “having a nice time with my friends,” “a warm atmosphere.” Atmosphere, warmth, and companionship are all derivative of an experience of ecstasy. Witness the following account:

After a Friday night that had already lasted long we decided that pizza and a train home is the best thing to do…. Going towards the train station there are lots who have been out celebrating J-dag. Several places there are dropped X-mas beer hats, banners and other good stuff. All things that indicate most people had a great time. Myself, I am totally in a Christmas mood and am happily humming “Jingle Bells” [used for the iconic Tuborg Christmas commercial]. I even get so happy that I become like a child again and I make a “leaf angel” in the middle of a gigantic heap of leaves, like you make snow angels. It was a fantastic night, in good company and a city that peaked with an atmosphere beyond what could be expected. (*Female informant, 20s, consumer essay*)

Participants discursively marked J-dag as an extraordinary time compared to everyday life and ordinary nightlife. Hence, the spatial-temporal uniqueness of a brandfest can positively
resonate with socially shared construction of play as the everyday otherness. The otherness is often expressed materially by wearing Christmas outfits in the colors of the main brands: “I think it’s fun because you get to dress up, and I think it’s cool that you get to wear a different costume than everyday clothes all the time” (female, age 21, referring to her role as bartender). “Getting really drunk” and similar uninhibited practices were additional associations to J-dag. Sometimes disinhibition was achieved through marketer-induced practices, such as getting kisses, a cookie, and a Santa hat from corporate Santa girls in the streets. Some J-dag activities have sexual connotations, such as the selling of branded lingerie, use of scantily clad Santa helpers, and distribution of free condoms. The ludic value most clearly resembles elements of carnival (Bakhtin 1984; O’Sullivan 2016).

Many informants stressed that despite the general rowdiness on J-dag, they were “happy.” Informants related this happiness to both the products and the “Christmas atmosphere.” This festive mood translated into a number of consumer practices, such as posing for the researchers, singing in the streets, and dressing up, all of which were consciously framed as playing for an audience.

Participation in the brandfest allows for agency that actualizes one central meaning of the event, ludic value. However, the data made evident that ludic value through brandfest participation was co-produced and consumed across roles, not only in and for the consumer domain:

Yes, it’s fun to get out and party with the customers. *(Carlsberg employee, male age 50s, warehouse worker)*

Because we are also part of the action that day. We are active, and helped ensure that it will be a fun night...we are actually part of the party. And that’s always nice. *(Head of*
The Night Ravens, male age 65)

So it’s like helping to show that this is such a big day that everybody wants to be part of in some way. (Local manager, Sex and Society, male age 33)

These quotes demonstrate that the ludic aspects reside in the hedonistic and carnivalesque character of the performance and the value this atmosphere provides for participants. While participation itself appears to become a value, akin to the notion of the consumption practice of play (Holt 1995), such practices can go well beyond the consumption domain in the brandfest. The enactors emphasize the opportunity of being part of something bigger, stressing the *communitas* (Turner 1982) emerging from participation.

Through the active participation and acting out in a hedonic and carnivalesque style, the ludic value is co-constructed from the playing of a multiplicity of marketplace roles. It seems critical for the success of the event that enactors engage in this process. That is, the producers and other non-consumer enactors are suspending their everyday roles of being remote from the consumption act and acting in a strategic mode. The stepping out of the everyday roles of the marketplace becomes both a result of and condition for the construction of ludic value. We extend the notion of ludic agency, since it is not merely a matter of the performance providing this value but that the value is co-created in the process of play with the brand not as the focus but as a facilitator.

*Identity value.* As the tenets of much socio-cultural branding literature suggest, J-dag also provides a frame for actualizing meanings around identity, or what has been termed identity value (Holt 2004). In the following, we discuss a number of domains of identity value.

Family identity was one of the meanings actualized for consumers participating in J-dag. One female informant from a small island described in her Facebook essay how she and her
sister were “back home” at their parents’ house for the weekend. Going out together on J-dag was a way for them to affirm their bond by re-engaging with the local village community of their teenage years. Another informant, still living with his parents, usually celebrated J-dag with his father and brother since “my brother always comes home that day.”

Friendship was a prevalent identity value. Many informants stressed the friendship aspect: “It is the feast of the hearts and it’s the beginning of something good arriving… and it means a lot to me that I am with friends and people that I care about” (female, age 21). In some cases, J-dag is used to renew old friendships by ritually meeting with friends that the participants celebrated J-dag with when they were younger. Some informants studying at university described how they would celebrate J-dag in their home towns with old friends who were also studying but in other parts of the country. A female informant, age 24, celebrated J-dag in a café in her home town and commented that “almost all of my friends will come from the cities all over Denmark where they are studying, come home to this café, so it’s very special, all these old friends meet… [it] became a tradition that you just know that you meet that day in this café.”

Cultural identity was also achieved through J-dag participation and enactment. A Danish expatriate community in Japan celebrates J-dag every year and corresponds with the Carlsberg company, which sends beers and brand merchandise to Japan. Another informant gave this example of expatriate affirmation of Danish identity:

In 2004 when I was stationed in ex-Yugoslavia [as a soldier in a UN peace-keeping mission] we were all dressed up [presumably wearing different forms of Christmas ornamentation such as Santa’s hats, merchandise from breweries, etc.]. The Christmas brew was escorted by MPs from Pristina all the way to our camp, where it was released at 20:59 and everybody was allowed to drink one beer.
Corporate identity value was actualized along a number of enactors and enactments of the brandfest (Hatch and Schultz 2003). Key participants in J-dag are the Santa helpers, who in groups of six to 10 move around in the major cities in beer trucks and visit various bars dressed in branded Christmas outfits. In a few cases, Santa helpers are hired from an event company, but the majority are volunteers from the brewery companies, particularly Carlsberg. Internally at the Carlsberg Group, J-dag has come to serve a critical ritual role in terms of affirming organization identity. A Carlsberg product manager described the importance of the J-dag Santa helpers, saying:

It’s something all employees really, really look forward to, J-dag. And it is also something that is in focus with management—that J-dag is a tradition that is so rooted in consumers’ minds that it something we have to keep on doing.

In 2008, the Tuborg-invented term J-dag was incorporated into the official dictionary of the Danish language, and this interaction of internal and external communication has become a source of organizational pride and identification (Press and Arnould, 2011). One Carlsberg employee who participated in J-dag in 2009 said,

J-dag is the biggest party of all in Denmark and a fantastic thing to be part of, to get out there and give something back and party with the consumers so closely and observe them and enjoy it, because it is a kind of sacred time and the best day of the year.

J-dag serves intra-organizational purposes not only at Carlsberg but also at one of the competing regional breweries, where a manager noted that to get the “experience together” is a type of “team building”. Likewise, at Sex & Society, a more peripheral actor, the manager explains that it is an event that “strengthens the social aspect of being a volunteer in the house” (Local manager, Sex and Society)
Identity value is co-created in a dialectic between the openness and potential for emergent enactors in the script and the participation through play. This aspect refers back to the play potential as a ritualistic medium for negotiating social issues, which cannot be reduced to the question of empowerment or submission in terms of rule-breaking or rule-following. A prerequisite for such a playful brandfest to enable identity values is not the actual or potential power of a central brand, but the ability to link the brandfest activities to wider socio-cultural resonant themes.

The actualization of both ludic and identity values through participation in J-dag also facilitates the achievement of particular goals and interests of the individual actor. These were not only the obvious values of increasing or maintaining market shares, strengthening brand equity, or harnessing corporate brand identification, but were additional forms of instrumental value often actualized by enactors from outside the producer–consumer dyad such as politicians that used J-dag as a communication platform. In the traditional literature on play, the instrumental value would be excluded by definition as not fulfilling the criterion of play as “pure waste” and autotelic, or as “false” play. In line with our conception of play as a disposition, we can also detect play elements that can produce instrumental value. In the J-dag brandfest these elements are manifested in the playfulness of role execution and performances that contributes to the brand engagement.

Discussion

The research case of the J-dag brandfest exemplifies the defining elements of the brandfest with the purpose of animating the brand through social experiences. However, J-dag is an example of a brandfest type that was laid out as a potential research continuation suggested by McAlexander and Schouten (1998), but has not been conceptualized and empirically analyzed so far. The J-dag
brandfest type extends the current literature in a number of ways. In the following, we discuss our findings in relation to the spatio-temporal staging, brand meaning actualization and the heteroagentic nature of play.

**Spatio-temporal Staging**

We have defined the brandfest as a temporally and spatially unique configuration. Temporally, J-dag resembles other types of brand-initiated celebrations in that it takes place at a fixed date and time. However, it is also distinctly linked to seasonal temporality of consumer culture by being part of the overall Christmas season. Indeed, emically, informants talk about J-dag as “the beginning of Christmas” and particularly the part of Christmas involving partying and letting go of everyday cares—in short, the hedonic and ludic dimension of the season. This dimension gives the brandfest a strong culturally resonant quality (Fournier et al. 2008), which strengthens the J-dag brandfest in terms of continuity over time and its vitality.

Compared to other brandfests, J-dag is also framed along specific extraordinary spatial dimensions. Some dimensions are part of the ordinary spatial location of the product, such as restaurants, bars and retail facilities, which undergo material transformation through the presence of merchandise, dressed up staff, acoustic framing, and the like. However, another element of the extraordinary spatial framing is the transformation of locations in which the product is not normally exchanged or consumed, including public space—for example, the extraordinary lighting of Christmas decorations in the city centers for just this evening, the presence of billboards and merchandise in the streets, posters announcing J-dag parties, and so forth. During the celebration, a significant spatial dimension is celebration in the public space as consumers, political groups, charity organization, politicians and producers’ representatives spill out into the streets, celebrating and cruising bars. Furthermore, while many of these spatial dimensions are
marketer-initiated, enactors also undertake spatial transformation themselves. For example, student bars and village inns decorate for DIY J-dag celebrations. These are often characterized in ludic terms as being fun and “tongue-in-cheek,” and while the overall temporal staging is relatively fixed (the date and time), in some brief moments enactors’ ludic activities restructure shared spaces (e.g., interactions in bars, in the streets).

The spatial dimension of this brandfest is more dispersed and contingent than in existing conceptualizations of brandfests. In the J-dag context, the spatial and temporal staging of the fest is more a matter of initiation and facilitation of further ludic enactments of spatial and temporal dimensions than about marketer-controlled dimensions for extraordinary experiences. This staging serves to provide a spatio-temporal core to the fest, but it also fosters staging by other enactors, fostering a dynamic emplacement (Sherry 1998a) process. What the J-dag brandfest therefore displays is a mix of marketer-provided stages with openness for social spaces that can be co-opted by the full range of stakeholders and in a temporal range from a brief moment to several weeks.

The brandfest we have discussed here hence contributes to recent literature on marketplace rituals in a number of ways. J-dag bears resemblance of a number of the types of ritual engagement discussed by Bradford and Sherry (2015): J-dag, and brandfests more generally, can be characterized as a *festival* as it is a matter of communal celebration of seasonality and the approaching holidays through public celebration. However, J-dag may also be considered a *spectacle*, in the sense of a spectacularization of the release of a product type. The spectacle, according to Bradford and Sherry, expects stakeholders to be minimally agentic. The central narrative of J-Dag is one of consumers’ observing and celebrating producers’ release of products onto the market in ritualized form. In our case, consumers indeed observe the staging of
the spectacle by producers, but also playfully engage in staging their own spectacles to be observed by other stakeholders, including producers. This leads to a third type, namely that of *carnival*. In J-dag, we witness the inversion of roles as consumers and others playfully enact producer roles and other types of roles. Indeed the experience of J-dag is filled with carnivalesque transgressions of inverting high and low, reversing roles and the transgression of everyday norms (Bakhtin 1984; O’Sullivan 2016). This leaves us with the question of whether the J-dag brandfest bears characteristics of the fourth type of public space ritual outlined by Bradford and Sherry, the *vestaval*. To the extent that consumers and other market-facing enactors engage in the material and spatial dynamics outlined above, J-dag as a temporary public space is domesticated through consumers’ dwelling in playful enactments and experiences. Our study hence begins to address the call for further research into phenomena where these different ritual mechanisms co-occur and interrelate (Bradford and Sherry 2015; 148).

The co-occurrence and interrelation of these ritual mechanisms also extend how play and ludic engagement have been theorized to relate to space and emplacement. MacLaren and Brown (2005), point out that consumers may perform and enact ludic and imaginative experiences, what they call “the performance of artscapes”, in marketer-controlled spatial frames – who “create playspace”. Unlike their study, the dynamics and active enactment of a diverse set of ritual mechanisms discussed above, by consumers and other enactors, co-constitute a playspace that is temporally ephemeral and spatially underdetermined. We can hence begin to expand our understanding of utopian marketplaces beyond the confines of spatially determined spaces. The indeterminancy and public nature of the J-dag ritual, enables a more open co-constitution of the performance of artscapes and the creation of playspaces.

*From Interagentic to Heteroagentic Brand Meanings in Brandfests*
Our findings confirm the existence of consumer-brand or consumer-consumer relations and experiences (McAlexander, Schouten and König 2002; Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007). In previous research there was also empirical evidence of an enrolment of a range of other market-facing enactors but this went relatively undertheorized. In our analysis we pick up on this: the J-dag brandfest was characterized by the actualization of a range of meanings or values through interagentic play, in our case ludic value and identity value. That is, the brandfest is based on definitions of roles, subjects acting out the roles, working along a script, and so on, and the participation in such play-based marketing activities is considered valuable in and of itself. The actualized meanings of the brandfest as facilitation foster the generation of potential brand meaning.

Existing consumer research and servicescape literature have made significant advances in demonstrating how consumers engage with the marketplace in ludic and experiential ways. Typically, the literature assigns ludic agency to the consumption domain and scripting, framing, and strategizing to the production domain. For example, retailing provides ludic resources that “facilitate consumers’ pursuit of play” (Arnould 2005, p. 92). However, little has been done to explore the playful dimension of the producer side of the dyad (Grayson 1999), or indeed other market-facing enactors. Here we explore how the playful disposition and situationally adjusted roles can be performed by a multitude of enactors. Conceivably, the producer and consumer domains form interagency in such a way that “consumers produce producers’ products at the same time and as much as producers consume consumers’ consumption” (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 671). That is, consumers are engaged in productive activities and producers are engaged in consumptive activities (Grönroos and Voima, 2013, p. 141). While this characterization blurs the enactors and processes, it still reflects an exclusionary
frame for play, perceiving work and production as serious and productive but play as unserious
and wasteful (Malaby 2009). Building of off existing brandfest theory, our study demonstrate
how brand meanings can be actualized through the ludic interagency of a host of enactors
engaged in the brandfest.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1 visualizes existing conceptualizations of brandfests and elements of a broadened
perspective based on our case and theoretical approach. Play occur across multiple marketplace
roles in a more complex form of interagency than merely the producer and the consumer and can
therefore ultimately be considered heteroagentic. In the end, this results in generating the
potentialities of ludic and identity values.

As a final remark, J-dag can be considered an iconic brand event among its participants
and seems to link personal, communal and corporate experiences with senses of regional and
national cultural identity. We did not find that J-dag address specific ideological tensions
(although it might do so) (Holt 2004). While exploring iconicity is not the main aim of this
article we might speculate that J-Dag’s iconic status was achieved from a route of enrollment of
a range of enactors in a participatory event. One may argue that our study opens up for the
identification of different routes to iconicity, as well as locations of iconicity in other brand-
related entities than brands themselves. J-dag is iconic and heavily associated with the Tuborg
brand, but not entirely so. One might argue that the brand’s staging activities of ludic interaction
facilitates iconicity of the event, not so much the brand itself.

Implications

Our research opened up the concept of brandfests and showed consequences for the relevant
product categories, the role of the brand, the involved enactors, and the aspired consumer
experiences. In the following, we offer four propositions for wider brandfest types.

**Brandfests Can be Developed for High- and Low-Involvement Product Categories**

Research on involvement emphasizes a relational rather than inherent product involvement categorization (Laurent and Kapferer 1985). Product involvement is a relationship between product, person, and situation. It is dynamic and can potentially be shaped by marketers. A classic example is the low-involvement category of the dayplanner, where Filofax was able to create a high-involvement category for its products. Brand community research has shown that socially shared, unique experiences can be co-constructed into product categories that are outside the assumption of high involvement, as with the microprocessor and PC video-card brand communities (Thompson and Sinha 2008) or FMCG brand communities (Cova and Pace 2006).

In our case, we focus on the product category of alcoholic beverages, which according to the traditional criteria of involvement such as price, risk, and the like falls typically into the low-involvement category. Our case demonstrated that it is possible to initiate and foster value around a low-involvement product by narrativizing elements of the value chain and connecting the product to salient temporal rhythms that create resonance. The managerial implication is that the brandfest may be constructed from any of a range of culturally central products and brands. As a consequence, low product involvement does not have to be interpreted as a negative situation that must be corrected before or during the brandfest. From a psychological perspective, low involvement can even have advantages when persuasive processes are adjusted to that condition (Carpenter et al. 1994). Our case suggests a strategic option for low involvement products in that a less devoted and committed consumer relationship allows fostering a more playful situation (Mikkonen and Bajde 2013). As long as a broader cultural resonance exists with the product category, the playful option can produce relevant consumer meanings. It furthermore
avoids antagonistic and moral intensifications between category supporters and critics, as in the case of the energy-inefficient SUV (Luedicke Thompson and Giesler 2010).

*The Role of a Brand Can Range from Central Focus to Supporting Facilitator*

The role of the brand in a brandfest has been clearly defined as being the focal center of all activities. A brandfest may have an element of brand ubiquity that borders on being excessive, but it has the effect of “firmly positioning the brand in the consumer’s mind”, strengthening relationships with the brand.

In our case, the brand plays a less central role in the brandfest. However, the literature suggests that a less central role can have advantages in responding to a variety of consumer relationships with brands and still have positive effects on the perception of the brand (O’Guinn and Muñiz (2009, p. 178).

Furthermore, the brand-related discussion of co-creation has shown a plethora of consumer activities beyond a stronger or weaker brand relationship. Consumers are showing signs of more brand skepticism and criticism. They engage in anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2010) or “hijack” brands (Wipperfürth 2005), or they demonstrate “playful silliness” in brand spoofs and parodies (Fournier and Avery 2011, p. 202).

Together with our case this discussion leads to two strategic implications. First, the traditional brandfest guidelines of strengthening the brand relationship only as a type-specific recommendation. For a long time, the managerial focus has been on a one-dimensional quality axis of brand relationships. Despite existing research on the complexity of relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998), the goal has been to intensify relationships between brands and consumers with concepts like love marks or brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra et al. 2012). However, moments like “playful silliness” in brand relationships are not hindrances to overcome,
potentially endangering a stronger brand relationship. Rather, our case suggests a brandfest type that can revel in these situations by accepting a less-developed brand love and a stronger active engagement in developing and sustaining a strong brand. The real resonance of the brandfest emerges as multiple enactors use these elements as open ludic resources for value and meaning actualization. This approach requires acceptance of ambiguity and tensions as well as playful brand performances and parodies.

**A Brandfest Can be Managed as a Multi-agentic Market Phenomenon**

The brandfest enables interaction between brands, company representatives, and consumers. We link to a wide range of calls for analyzing brand and market processes beyond a dyadic perspective (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould 2009; Diamond et al. 2009). If brands are co-created and are semi-autonomous entities, than we assume that participating brandfest enactors, who are not exclusively marketer or consumer representatives, are part of a brand habitat in which experiences with the brand are shared. Especially with brands as facilitators, we assume that multiple enactors with diverse brand relationships should be strategically managed in a brandfest. To maximize vitality and resonance of the brandfest, managers should involve multiple enactors in market-facing activities. In our case, the collaboration between the Carlsberg Group, the Night Ravens, and the national railway company in a joint CSR effort exemplified this kind of managerially initiated interagency.

The strategic focus in this brandfest type is therefore not exclusively on managing consumers and their relationships. It acknowledges the potential of company employees to enable co-created brand values (Hatch and Schultz 2003), as well as the potential of other stakeholders. This acknowledgement connects our brandfest research with an ongoing discussion of a wider organization of brand-related enactors. A wider range of actors increases the visibility
and cultural resonance of the brandfest.

*From Transcendent Experiences to Multiple Layered, Shifting, and Playful Experiences*

A traditional brandfest is a servicescape where consumers can engage in extraordinary experiences. These experiences are understood as the defining glue of the brandfest in that they work as a strong motivator for consumer participation and link the consumer to the product and the brand. Further, they help to achieve the strategic goal of increased brand loyalty, as they can be “transcendent customer experiences” (Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007, p. 358).

Marketers should acknowledge that experiences can be layered, situational, and dynamic, and hence marketers should work to include a broad range of experiential options at a brandfest. For example, in our case while breweries sought to enhance experiences by helping to invigorate the party atmosphere in bars, they also provided branded merchandise prior to and during the brandfest to facilitate consumer planning of the participation and role playing.

In this brandfest type, play is not a subtle side mechanism to involve consumers more with the brand. Rather, play as a disposition is the final and central relationship mode with the brand, and thus playfulness can in itself constitute an experience of brandfest participation.

These four propositions together invite managers to consider how to compose a brandfest that can range from high- to low-involvement products, from the brand being a central focal object of celebration to being purely a facilitator, from merely involving consumers in play to engaging multiple enactors in ludic interagency, and also to consider the range of experiential options that could be fostered.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

The J-dag case developed here involves a complex set of enactors and roles, a multiplicity of
performances, and an intricate set of meanings for the brand. However, other products and brands will find the framework useful and perhaps less complicated than in the case described in this study. Studies of multi-actor and multi-experiential perspectives should explore other types of combinations based on the four propositions laid out here.

As current market conditions require brand managers to deal with multiple actors, more agentic consumers, and less stable brand meanings, significant potential exists for utilizing wider brandfest types. Brand managers can create engagement with the brand through the power of open-endedness and uncertainty—qualities that so far have been seen as challenges to overcome, but that are in actuality integral to the world of play.
References


Mikkonen, I., & Bajde, D. (2013), ”Happy festivus! Parody as playful consumer resistance”, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 16(4), 311-337.


Figure 1: The broadened brandfest model