

# Anti-consumption Choices Performed in a Drinking Culture: Normative Struggles and Repairs

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## Abstract

This paper explores the normative barriers to anti-consumption practices and highlights that not-for-profit organisations have an important role to play in facilitating the rejection of consumption. The study is based on thirteen phenomenological interviews with individuals who engaged in one month of alcohol abstinence and illustrates three cultural barriers to rejecting alcohol consumption, namely: the collective obligation to participate in entrenched sharing practices, the collective expectation to reciprocate in gift-giving practices of alcoholic commodities and the identification of abstinence as deviant nonconformity. The study also discusses the role of non-profits as change agents within society, emphasizing their ability to mobilise disenfranchised groups, give voice to unpopular causes and facilitate community building that breeds trust and cooperation.

## Keywords

Anti-consumption ; choice ; alcohol abstinence; norms; non-profit organisations

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**Carrie:** I know about blood pressure and the red nose and the fat stomach and the liver disease and all of that, especially because it runs in my family. So I know about all of that stuff, but I don't have that - I still enjoy it [alcohol consumption] to be completely honest. I like the taste. I like some of the socialising that goes along with it. I like to have a beer when I watch a band. I like to talk to my friends. I like to have a glass of wine with dinner. I still really like all that stuff. So would I be willing to give it up just because somebody else or I think that I should? No.

Carrie's excerpt illustrates one of the most poignant issues in consumption – that “people who are aware of the risks still continue to engage in detrimental health behaviour” (Berger and Rand 2008, p. 508). As Carrie doesn't “really like being told what to do,” she resists alcohol consumption guidelines and justifies her participation in detrimental alcohol consumption, referring to its symbolic “socialising” role and the social imperative of not “letting people down.” This stands in sharp contrast to her recent voluntary engagement in one month of alcohol abstinence. For a registration fee of \$25, Carrie signed up to participate in a program run by the non-profit organisation FebFast to remain alcohol free for the month of February and raise funds to support alcohol-risk prevention programs. Participating in Febfast provided an opportunity to not only break away from a drinking culture (Hackley et al. 2008; Measham 2005; Wilson 2005), but also offered Carrie, and all of our informants, a personal space for reflexivity on the broader cultural ramifications of alcohol consumption and how “cultural norms of drinking” (Hackley et al. 2008, p. 68) can constrain anti-consumption choices. The purpose of this paper is to investigate anti-consumption choices embedded in markets of symbolic

consumption and to explore how a not-for-profit organisation facilitates consumption rejection in a dominant consumer culture.

This study refers to three interrelated fields. The first discipline relates to anti-consumption research and the growing need to understand how anti-consumption choices operate within markets of consumption (Hogg et al. 2009; Piacentini and Banister 2009). The burgeoning literature on anti-consumption classifies its practices as collective/personal and specific/general (Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee 2010). Anti-consumers navigating these spaces are faced with various challenges and undergo numerous struggles when choosing to not consume (e.g. Cherrier 2009; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004) because their agendas run counter to the dominant consumption paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). Compounding this is a dearth of practical solutions that guide anti-consumers in the management and negotiation of their consumption choices within the marketplace. Peattie and Peattie (2009) contend that an integral step in making anti-consumption choices more widely appealing within society lies in their normalisation, citing the success of anti-smoking campaigns that have repositioned smoking from a social norm to a socially unacceptable and unfashionable act. Supporting this idea of “change from the inside” is a growing body of research that challenges the notion of emancipation from the marketplace through resistance and subversion exercised outside of the market (e.g. Holt 2002; Thompson and Troester 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004), instead arguing for anti-consumption practices to be conceived as relational market interactions (Shaw and Riach 2011). To consider how anti-consumption choices can become normalised within the market system, an understanding of individuals’ experiences of rejecting a symbolic act of consumption within the market is imperative. Consumers’ decisions to temporally reject alcohol consumption in a culture socially recognized as a drinking culture

(Hackley et al. 2008; Measham, 2005; Wilson 2005) offers the ideal site to analyse the struggles and negotiations individuals undergo when choosing to forgo the symbolic act of alcohol consumption.

The second disciplinary backdrop concerns social marketing inquiry on the development of practical solutions to navigate restricted/revised consumption choices within a dominant culture of consumption. In the context of alcohol, most intervention models locate the responsibility of alcohol consumption on the shoulders of individuals who are expected to be “free choosers” bearing the consequences of their decisions. As a result, intervention programs, government discourses and policies about alcohol tend to conceive its consumption as manifesting from rational, cognitive decisions, such as information processing, awareness and choice. For instance, industry initiatives such as “DrinkWiseAustralia” convey information about the consequences associated with drinking and driving, binge drinking and alcohol-induced sexual assaults (Rimal and Real 2003). Likewise, the “Hero to Zero” UK campaign promotes the shameful consequences of drunkenness to communicate alcohol as a problematic substance (Szmigin et al. 2011). By urging consumers to drink “wisely” and comply with recommended alcohol intake prescriptions, these interventions attempt to solve alcohol related issues through the rational decision making processes of individual consumers. Yet, research notes the existence of a gap between providing information on risk-related consumption practices and behavioural change (Griffin et al. 2009a; Griffin et al. 2009b; Szmigin et al. 2008; Verplanken and Wood 2006). In this study, we argue that intervention models need to extend beyond governmental regulation, consumer responsibility, product information disclosure as well as local community interventions to address the cultural template that normalizes drinking and

delineates alcohol consumption as a cultural imperative. Specifically, we consider how a not-for-profit organization can facilitate alcohol rejection and become a precursor to social change.

The last related field is macromarketing and its call for “an understanding of social embeddedness, norms and the nature of community ties” (Varman and Costa 2008, p. 142). In analysing the social embeddedness of markets, macromarketing scholars note the influential impact of social norms on the market behaviour of actors (Assadourian 2010; Chaganti 1981; Chance 2009; Varman and Costa 2008). Because social embeddedness and norms are “core constructs inherent to any social formation” (Varman and Costa 2008, p. 141), influencing a market requires an understanding of it as part of a system of wider societal relationships. For example, Assadourian (2010) argues that examining the values, norms and behaviors that guide consumerism are vital steps in guiding the transformation of culture toward sustainability. Similarly, when analysing the social construction of a marketplace located in the Bijoygarh Indian region, Varman and Costa (2008) note the influential impact of social norms of relationship, reciprocity, commitment, honesty, trust, and fairness in the working of the social system. In their analysis, social norms are understood in terms of subsystems influencing the market behaviour of actors. Together, macromarketing scholars emphasize the need to examine the process by which norms operate in order to gain a broader perspective on how major societal shifts, such as adopting sustainability in consumerist societies (Assadourian 2010) or treating HIV in developing countries (Chance 2009), might become normalized practices. In this study, we focus on the role of norms in constraining as well as facilitating anti-consumption choices. In focusing on norms and the embeddedness of markets, we emphasise the social encapsulation of anti-consumption choices (Firat 1982; Varman 2008).

In the following discussion, we discuss the notion of norms through an elaboration of Gibb's (2001) three generic aspects of norms. The analysis of thirteen phenomenological interviews with individuals who voluntarily opt to disengage from alcohol consumption for one month is then offered to inform understandings of anti-consumption choices in a normalised "drinking culture" (Hackley et al. 2008). Our findings subsequently outline three constraining cultural forces to choosing not to consume alcohol in a dominant culture of consumption, namely: the norms of sharing, reciprocity and conformity. Finally, we clarify the role of a not-for-profit organization in facilitating anti-consumption choices. Our conclusion informs anti-consumption, social marketing and macromarketing scholars that norms are embedded not only in market domains but also in non-market domains.

### **Norms**

The nature and functioning of norms in consumption practices has been highlighted in a number of studies (Kozinets 2002; Rimal and Real 2003; Strahan et al. 2006). For example, female consumption responds to cultural norms for thinness and beauty (Strahan et al. 2006) and men often prescribe to normative standards of physical attractiveness and masculinity (Holt 1995, 1998, 2004). In discussing cultural norms in the context of gendered consumption, these studies emphasize conventional ways of doing things, which individuals often observe without even being aware of them. Cultural norms generally represent acceptable standards of behavior. In themselves, norms are neither true nor false. Rather, norms define a social, inter-subjective pattern or standard of behaviour (Katzenstein 1996). They "specify what should and should not be done by various kinds of social actors in various kinds of situations" (William 1960, p. 24). According to William, the term cultural norm "refers to a specific prescription of the course that action should (is supposed to) follow in a given situation" (William 1960, p. 25). The content of

a norm is a notion that informs individual members of a group, community or society of how one ought to behave and of what is “proper” or “correct.” The community or group establishes what is correct. This implies that among the array of possible options a particular course of action is more or less strongly preferred because the community has agreed to accept it as “appropriate” (Sumner 1906). The shared knowledge amongst group members of what is correct constitutes the content of a norm. For example, attending the pub to drink beer amongst male friends is perceived as an appropriate behavior amongst most Australian consumers (Pettigrew 2002), and thus can be understood as a cultural norm.

Since norms provide a pattern of expectations and code of conduct, they imply a degree of constraint on the individual’s behavior by foreclosing certain options (Ullmann-Margalit 1977). To guide this important understanding, we draw on Gibb’s (2001) normative conceptual framework, which emphasises that norms have a directive character and can help us understand how cultural norms may influence anti-consumption.

Based on a review of sociology literature, Gibbs (2001) identifies three generic aspects of norms: (1) a collective evaluation, (2) a collective expectation, and (3) particular reactions. Collective evaluations are the “shared belief that persons ought or ought not to act in a certain way” (Gibbs 2001, p. 589). This aspect implies the existence of shared values amongst the group or the community. For Gibbs (2001, p. 593), a collective evaluation is the same as a convention, which he defines as the “collective beliefs as to how persons ought to behave.” In contrast to collective evaluations, which relate to how one ought to behave, collective expectations refer to the predictions as to what individuals will do. To illustrate the difference between these two aspects of norms, we can use the legal minimum drinking age. On the one hand, the collective evaluation may be that people under the age of drinking ought to not drink.

Yet, at the same time, the collective expectation is likely to be that most individuals drink alcohol prior to reaching the legal age, while persisting in the belief that they ought not to do so. When the collective evaluation conflicts with the collective expectation, Gibbs (2001) speaks of problematic convention; when evaluation and expectation are similar, Gibbs refers to the notion of collective convention. Finally, reactions to behavior include the attempts to apply sanctions or otherwise induce a particular kind of conduct. This third generic aspect of norms signifies that members engage in normative behavior attempts to make deviants conform (Marques and Abrams 2001). Reactions to behavior may include the application of penalties but also attempts, even friendly admonitions, to influence individuals to conform. Importantly, depending on the degrees of legitimacy, mutual expectation and enforcement, norms have can render particular types of consumption behavior obligatory, prohibited, tolerated or permitted (Ullmann-Margalit 1977).

Informed by the three generic aspects of norms defined by Gibbs (2001), we analyze (1) whether alcohol consumption practices respond to normative guidelines, which derive from the legitimacy of shared knowledge, a pattern of mutual expectation and acceptance and the implementation of conformity and (2) how the not-for-profit Febfast facilitates the choice to not drink against “cultural norms of drinking” (Hackley et al. 2008).

### **The Study**

In order to identify the norms of drinking that constrain anti-consumption choices and how a not-for-profit organization operates against these norms, this study was conducted amongst individuals who are familiar with participating in a drinking culture and have, for a period of one month, opted to partake in a fund-raising program and abstain from alcohol consumption. The rationale for this selection is threefold. First, we selected informants who are familiar with the



Australian drinking culture. Australia is a country where alcohol is widely available, affordable, and legally accessible to individuals over 18 years old. The drinking culture in Australia is similar to that of the United Kingdom or New Zealand where socialization and drinking are strongly intertwined (Lindsay 2009). In fact, drinking alcohol is considered a symbolic consumption, which communicates positional status, social identification, rites of passage, and the celebration of rituals and festivities (Heath 2000; Piacentini and Banister 2009; Szmigin et al. 2011; Szmigin et al. 2008). The social pressure to consume alcohol has been said to create an Australian “culture of intoxication,” where drunkenness and binge drinking are normalized (Szmigin et al. 2011). This context is ideal for analysing the social embeddedness and norms of drinking. Second, we selected informants who participated in a month of alcohol abstinence. Drawing on anti-consumption research, we note that consumers who reject consuming a brand (Lee, Motin, and Conroy 2009), a practice (Piacentini and Banister 2009), or consumption in general (Cherrier and Murray 2007) tend to be highly reflective on the symbolic meanings of the rejected consumption (Cherrier 2009). Participating in an alcohol-free month offered our informants a personal space for reflexivity on the symbolic meanings of alcohol consumption and its cultural ramifications. Their “outsider status” thus prompted them to contemplate the constraining forces to anti-consumption choices. Third, our informants’ participation in an alcohol-free month demanded them to repeatedly make anti-consumption choices and affirm their commitment to a temporal anti-consumption practice within a drinking culture. This context allowed us to analyse the lived experience of individuals who temporarily step outside of the social embeddedness and norms inherent to mainstream symbolic acts of consumption.

The selection of informants started with contacting the Australian not-for-profit organisation FebFast. FebFast aims to reduce the impact of alcohol and other drugs through

education, awareness, and fundraising initiatives that support organisations working in alcohol and drug research, prevention, and service delivery. FebFast conducts a national cause campaign that invites people to sacrifice their alcohol consumption alongside fundraising activities during February at a cost of \$25 per person. FebFast provides participants with communication support during the month of February to bolster their anti-consumption efforts. In its first three years, FebFast has seen more than 10,700 people take up the FebFast challenge. Collectively these people have raised more than \$1,700,000. Drawing on the participant database of FebFast, we conducted phenomenological interviews with thirteen individuals who had participated in the FebFast initiative for the past one or more years. Phenomenological interviews are largely unstructured and conversational in nature, allowing both parties to freely interact and gives prominence to the subjective meanings of the life worlds of the informants (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The aim is to describe a phenomenon in depth rather than develop causal relationships and generalizability (Thompson et al. 1989). In our interviews, direct prompts or lines of questioning related to theoretical concepts of norms, community and social obligations were avoided in order to privilege the subjective experiences of the participants. The interviews also drew on the life story approach (Thompson 2004), in which the subjective understandings of the participants as it related to their personal histories were explored throughout the conversation.

Multiple informants were interviewed to generate different perspectives on alcohol consumption and anti-consumption that sought diversity across gender, age, socioeconomic status and cultural background (see Table 1). The interviews averaged 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis using NVivo. First, each interview transcript was reviewed to generate an understanding about how the participants' life stories and experiences influenced

their anti-consumption of alcohol. Second, constant comparative coding and comparisons across participants were conducted to establish patterns. Third, these codes were inductively modified based on the theoretical underpinnings of the research as the analysis progressed. Finally, the process of writing up was used as a sense making strategy that enabled us to understand how the phenomena hung together. This provided the groundwork that facilitated our research findings, namely an evidence base for a normative culture of alcohol consumption and the identification of three cultural barriers to alcohol abstinence – sharing, reciprocity and conformity.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### **Unpacking the Cultural Norms of Drinking**

Our analysis of the cultural norms of alcohol consumption illustrates how deeply alcohol is embedded in a normative system of collective evaluations, expectations and reactions that connect with the everyday concerns and interests of individuals. These cultural norms of drinking quite literally play out as constraining forces to anti-consumption choices. In the following section, we highlight how cultural norms of sharing, reciprocity, and conformity are embedded in alcohol consumption practices and emphasize how this normative system constrains our informants' anti-consumption choices. We illustrate these normative constraints to alcohol abstinence through our informants' stories of struggle and stigmatization during their month of anti-consumption.

#### *Collective Evaluations of Drinking and the Norm of Sharing*

Empirical studies highlight that alcohol consumption is essentially a symbolic and social practice (De Visser and Smith 2007; Heath 2000; Lyons and Willott 2008; Montemurro and McClure 2005). Our analysis highlights the sociality of drinking and emphasizes that individuals evaluate drinking as a necessary symbolic practice to participate in moments, events, circumstances,

experiences and life in general. As Sabina explains, alcohol consumption takes place “when you go out with friends or you get together for celebrations.” It is about sharing with friends, colleagues and loved ones. Its consumption symbolizes the celebration of life events such as weddings or birthdays and helps nurture personal relationships. As Jackie emphasizes, alcohol consumption is a collaborative consumption, a practice of “joining in” and she finds “it hard not drinking if people are drinking around me. Just sort of not joining in.” Sharing alcohol consumption symbolizes sharing special times together and the simple enjoyment of being together. Expressions such as “cheers” in English, “santé” in French, or “salute” in Spanish are clear evocations of the cultural enjoyment associated with alcohol consumption. Here, alcohol consumption is analogous to the practice of sharing noted by Belk (2010), as a social act that creates feelings of solidarity and bonding. The notion of creating solidarity via alcohol consumption as a shared practice includes shared enjoyment as well as shared pain. In the excerpt below, Laura explains having to break her one month of alcohol abstinence to support her friend during a difficult time.

**Laura:** I drank one day and paid the penalty. I had to fly to Cairns at short notice for my best friend – her father's funeral – and I knew that there was an option to pay the penalty and drink on that day and I thought I will just see how it goes. I didn't really need a drink as such. But she was drinking. She was like oh, have some wine. I was like well, I feel bad if I don't.

**Facilitator:** Why?

**Laura:** Because she was drinking it and she wanted someone else to drink as well.

**Facilitator:** What about taking another drink, a non-alcoholic?

**Laura:** It is not the same. Well, I guess if you're drunk together then it is fine. But if one person is drunk and the other one is not, then you don't see the world in quite the same way. I guess it was more of a supportive thing, like being supportive.

For Laura and her friend, consuming alcohol together symbolised sharing the pain of grieving. Laura's narrative clearly supports the adage "sharing is caring." In addition to sharing with friends, colleagues or loved ones during difficult or joyful moments, alcohol consumption also represents the sharing of personal stories. When consumed in social settings, sharing alcohol is deemed perfectly normal and even necessary to cope with painful memories or experiences. As the notion of sharing indicates, the collective evaluation of drinking involves others. As Laura explains, "if you are drinking on your own it would be a bit sad really, because you would have no-one to have fun with and to enjoy the feelings with." People who do not share with others are perceived as "problematic" – "alcoholics they don't share it. They drink it on their own" (Laura).

The notion of sharing with others is central to the collective evaluation of drinking alcohol and its practice fulfils vital existential roles. As Belk (2010) notes, sharing has the potential to expand and open the extended self to others. In our study, alcohol consumption helps individuals extend to others and, in the context of close relationships, creates a mutual extended self. For example, many of our informants remember their first alcoholic drink shared with others. In their narratives, the time, place and the bonding associated with sharing alcohol with parents or close family members are still vivid and filled with emotion. Considering alcohol consumption as ascribed to the norm of sharing is important especially when we acknowledge that most cultures and religious scriptures teach the righteousness of sharing and often situate sharing practices as socially and morally necessary for community or group

acceptance. In light of the postmodern claim that traditional communities and deep social ties have become eroded (Giddens 1991), it is not surprising to witness individuals searching for belonging through the socially situated practice of the sharing of alcohol consumption.

This first theme situates the collective evaluation of drinking embedded in the dominant ideas and rhetoric of sharing. Such a finding points to the extent to which alcohol consumption is grounded within a context of cultural obligations to share moments, events, emotions, and life with others. Understanding alcohol consumption as a communal act that links us to others outlines the networked exclusion associated to anti-consumption. In studying the cultural norms of drinking, we also note the existence of a collective expectation to reciprocate, to which we now turn.

#### *Collective Expectations to Drink and the Norm of Reciprocity*

During the interviews, our informants elaborated how their friends, family members and colleagues expected them to breach their one month alcohol-free commitment. This social expectation was grounded in the cultural norm of reciprocity. For example, Caroline explains that although she has steadfastly committed to one month of alcohol abstinence for the last three years, she always purchases a “time out” enabling her to drink alcohol with her friends and family on her birthday:

**Caroline:** I always have it off for either the day of my birthday or the night we’re going out to celebrate my birthday, which I think in a way makes it a little bit easier. My birthday’s on the tenth, so I’ve sort of got that to look forward to. But I think having the time out legitimises it, so it’s not like I just went I’m going to have a drink. I said I’m going to do FebFast, but I’m having that night off. I’m okay with that. I’m comfortable with that. I have got another friend of mine, her birthday’s in February and she says well

I can't do it 'cause that's my birthday. I said well it's my birthday too and I just make the decision that's the night I'm going to have off.

**Facilitator:** Would you ever contemplate do you think not taking the "time out" and not drinking on your birthday for one year?

**Caroline:** I don't think so. I've thought about it, but I'm comfortable that I choose that night and I'm going to have a drink on that night, which we do. The first year I was a bit worried about it 'cause I thought I'm just going to - 'cause I think I gave up early as well. I think I did a bit of a warm up to it then I thought if I have a few drinks I'm going to be really drunk, but I seemed okay. I didn't go overboard. I don't think I would. I think I'm quite happy that I'm having one day off. I think that's the good thing about the time out, it actually legitimises it.

The excerpt above highlights the imperative to consume alcohol during one's birthday (Neighbors et al. 2009) and emphasizes that consuming alcohol responds to a system of social solidarity based on structured social relationships and norms of reciprocity. According to the narrative, Caroline and her friend are familiar with the social imperative to drink alcohol during birthday celebrations. Embedded in a cultural system of social interactions, drinking during friends' birthdays is described as a social obligation. Such a social obligation leads Caroline to pay \$20 for a "night out" from alcohol abstinence. For Caroline, participating in FebFast is not a sufficient excuse to restrain from drinking during her birthday. Clear to Caroline's decision to drink during her birthday is that alcohol consumption is more than a rational satisfaction of needs and utility maximisation; it is deeply embedded in a system of collective expectation based on the norms of reciprocity.

Mauss (1950) introduced the existence of reciprocity in gift-giving based on three obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay. Norms of reciprocity represent a set of “rules and obligations that builds the complex pattern of give and take and helps establish moral standards of moral solidarity” (Giesler 2006, p. 284). According to Gouldner (1960), the norm of reciprocity is an essential element that provides the stability of any social system. Because the norm of reciprocity is a basis for a social relationship, refusing to accept an alcoholic drink is difficult (Giesler 2006; Gouldner 1960; Mauss 1950). As Jackie explains, “it’s hard to say no. And particularly if someone offers them a drink. And the general perception that it’s a relaxant; it’s a nice end to the day.” Jackie’s anti-consumption struggles resonate with Mauss’ (1950) observation that to give, to receive and to reciprocate is a process of mutual obligation amongst individuals within a social system. Accordingly, the offer of a drink implies an obligation to receive, with refusal causing offense. This mutual obligation is expressed by Erica, who, when providing some wine and yet refusing to reciprocate drinking alcohol, found it difficult – “I find it hard pouring a wine for somebody else and I’m standing there with my soda water.” This obligatory societal expectation to reciprocate alcohol consumption was present in all the informants’ narratives. As Ronald explains below, the norm of reciprocity constructs a relationship of mutual obligation between alcohol consumption and social interactions:

**Ronald:** If we’re out for dinner - for example there was a dinner in a licensed restaurant then yes we would buy a bottle of wine for the table and the other party may or may not. If we were going second, I would usually buy a bottle. So if the other party had bought a bottle of wine for the table first, I would usually reciprocate.

Ronald suggests above that alcohol consumption in Australia, and probably in most Western societies, is culturally and socially constrained by the norm of reciprocity. In a licensed



establishment such as a restaurant, alcohol consumption entails high normative levels of participation. Ronald explains that providing a bottle of wine to a table automatically calls for the other party to reciprocate the gift. Alcohol consumption helps articulate social ties and, as a fundamental symbol of group solidarity, responds to the fundamental norms of reciprocity.

Mauss (1950) indicates that gift-giving is not a disinterested and spontaneous act, but is instead obligatory and interested. Similarly, offering alcohol is an obligatory act with the interested anticipation of reciprocity. For example, when invited to celebratory events, our informants feel obliged to bring with them and offer the host some sort of alcoholic beverage. Such gifts are a response to obligatory societal expectations. Just as the giver feels obliged to provide alcohol, the receiver feels obliged to receive the gift and open the beverage for communal consumption.

The second theme discusses the collective expectation to reciprocate embedded in markets of alcohol consumption. The obligation of reciprocity extends alcohol consumption beyond a self-interested transaction and outlines the barriers to anti-consumption practices. The third theme that emerged from our analysis reflects the existence of reactions to anti-consumption practices embedded in norms of conformity.

#### *Particular Reactions to Non-Drinking and the Norm of Conformity*

Our informants' stories illustrate that participating in an alcohol-free month in an Australian context is difficult at two levels of conformity: group conformity and cultural conformity. First, our analysis notes the existence of peer pressure, which not only fosters alcohol consumption but also condemns its abstinence. For example, Samantha explains: "when you say you're doing FebFast, and definitely more people know about it now, but it's like, 'Ooh', and people would try and say, 'No, just have a drink, just have a drink.'" Although Samantha participated in

FebFast for three consecutive years, her friends insist that she should “have a drink.” Similarly, Sabina states: “When we met up some weekends with these friends and they would say, well, you're really not having any, are you sure you don't want a drink or anything?” Deviating from participating in alcohol consumption was for the informants synonymous to leaving the group culture. Ronald articulates that if “you don’t drink, you’re letting the team down” and Laura explains that not drinking is a visible expression of “not joining in.”

The peer pressure placed on individuals to conform to group norms led our informants to distance themselves from their peers during their month of alcohol abstinence. For example, Kate drastically controlled her social life and reduced her nights out during her alcohol-free month, stating that she “couldn’t have gone out and not have a drink. I would rather have not gone out.” Following Piacentini and Banister’s (2009) study on anti-drinking, Kate’s distancing from her usual group of friends is a form of emotion-focused strategy, drawn on when she envisions a pressure to participate in drinking. The pressures placed on individuals to conform to group norms led some of our informants to forgo their alcohol-free month. For example, Kate asked her friends to purchase a “night out” for her if they wanted her company for the evening.

Second, the normative pressure to conform to drinking exists not only at the group level, but also at the cultural level where individuals, even absent from the group relationship, succumb to the pressure to conform to the culture of drinking. For example, Carrie explains that individuals she barely knew tried to incite her to drink during her alcohol-free month. She explains: “I actually had people come into my office going I will buy you a pass out so you can have a drink.” For Caroline below, the cultural pressure to drink alcohol is due to the fact that alcohol abstinence makes drinkers feel uncomfortable about their own practice.

**Caroline:** The only challenge is socially. People get a bit cranky with you because they want you to drink, which is quite interesting. So they'll ask you something and they'll say you're doing FebFast and I'll go yeah that's okay. But they'll be like no, no just have the night off and I'm like, no.

**Facilitator:** Why do you think people say that?

**Caroline:** I think it makes them feel uncomfortable about their drinking. So I think the culture is that we drink and they want to maintain that culture.

As our informants voluntarily chose abstinence, they struggled to refrain from alcohol due to the cultural norm of conformity. Our informants' stories clearly demonstrate that alcohol consumption is a social practice strongly embedded in Australian culture "because everyone does it, it is so socially acceptable" (Samantha). Consequently, it is culturally inscribed that it is socially unacceptable to restrain from the consumption of alcohol. As Ronald notes, drinking alcohol is "actually normalised drug consumption so there is no stigma attached ... it's very normal behavior," however "the deviation from that is not normal behavior." Participating in alcohol consumption is a normal and appropriate practice whereas abstinence is perceived as inappropriate and culturally unacceptable. As Jackie explains, the non-drinkers "don't quite fit the Australian mold." Diana summarizes the "Australian drinking mold" as "the mateship, I guess, it just builds from sort of generation to generation. Friday night you'd go to the pub after work and have a drink or go to the bar after work" and Caroline further explains that in Australia "people encourage other people to drink, so they actually don't like it when you don't drink. Having done FebFast, I understand how hard it is not to drink." Laura below exemplifies the unspoken cultural obligation and social commitment to drinking alcohol in Australia when in the presence of friends, family members or friends.

**Laura:** Like, everyone who doesn't drink that I know has a reason, like their father was a severe alcoholic or – there is always a reason. So the first thing that people would say if you told them you don't is why, because they don't understand that – or they don't think that you can just not drink for no reason ... it is not normal to not drink for a period of time. It is more normal to drink a lot in consecutive nights or consecutive weekends ... If you are not drinking, especially for a woman of my age who is married, they will say oh, are you pregnant?

Laura expresses a collective reaction against abstinence, which challenges her to find a compelling and explanatory basis for her abstinence. As Samantha further explains, “you’re expected to have a reason why you’re not drinking.” The informants described that good justifications for abstinence were limited to a history of personal or familial alcohol dependence, pregnancy or driving. As social gatherings are bounded by the consumption of alcohol, alcohol abstinence is stigmatized.

This third theme explains the collective reactions to the anti-consumption of alcohol and emphasizes how norms of conformity influence alcohol consumption practices. In the presence of others, our informants expressed the pressure to consume alcohol to belong and feel included, thus the limits to anti-consumption choices. Importantly, whilst we identified norms of sharing, reciprocity and conformity as influences to alcohol consumption and thus challenges to its anti-consumption, our analysis also reveals that the not-for-profit organization, Febfast, was able to counter these normative influences, which empowered our informants to commit to one month of alcohol abstinence in a drinking culture.

### **The Role of Non-Profit Organisations in Facilitating Anti-Consumption Choices**

Our analysis of the cultural norms of drinking offers important insights on anti-consumption choices performed within a dominant drinking culture. In an Australian context, such a culture is constructed and maintained along norms of sharing, reciprocity and conformity. These reflect prior patterns of socialization and provide cultural guidelines that normalize alcohol consumption practices and constrain the rejection of its consumption as culturally inappropriate. By not participating, albeit temporarily, in this drinking culture, our informants behaved against understood cultural norms, thereby experiencing the struggles and challenges of being an anti-consumer. In this section we consider the role of the not-for-profit organization FebFast in facilitating being an anti-consumer of alcohol in a drinking culture.

In the context of Australian drinking culture, FebFast has emerged as a powerful and receptive force in the fight against a normative and excessive culture of alcohol consumption (Hillgrove and Thomson 2012). As previously stated, FebFast organizes an annual health and charity event that encourages people to reject alcohol consumption during the month of February while raising money to support young people experiencing alcohol and other drug related problems. Based on our interviews, the success of FebFast in attracting a growing number of participants and facilitating anti-consumption choices in a drinking culture reflects the organizations' understanding of the Australian drinking culture and the social embeddedness of alcohol consumption. In the excerpt below, Caroline emphasizes the role that FebFast played in facilitating her commitment to anti-consumption choices in a drinking culture:

**Caroline:** So I think by committing – even committing to the FebFast team, I mean they don't know me and I don't know them, but I sort of feel like I'm making a commitment to do it. Plus I can tell people that I'm doing it. So it was actually easier than just trying to do it on your own whenever you decided to do it. And I think it's the signing up, the

making the pledge to do it, telling your friends. I think you get a bit more support by doing it through a program, which probably does make it easier. Makes it more acceptable 'cause people know about it.

Particularly, we noticed that FebFast has been able throughout the years to counter the cultural barriers to rejecting alcohol consumption, namely: the collective obligation to participate in sharing alcohol consumption practices, the collective expectation to reciprocate in gift-giving practices of alcoholic commodities, and the identification of abstinence as deviant nonconformity. How does a not-for-profit organization “make it more acceptable” (Caroline) to counter the socially embedded practice of alcohol consumption in Australia? In analyzing the social embeddedness of market systems, Varman and Cost (2008) explained the role of norms in influencing the market behavior of actors and suggest that norms extend beyond the market to nonmarket domains. In a similar view, our analysis challenges the assumption that norms of sharing, reciprocity and conformity are solely established and maintained through market systems and consumption practices. In its operations, FebFast integrates norms of sharing, reciprocity, and conformity into a nonmarket / non-consumption domain, which in turn facilitates anti-consumption choices and normalizes alcohol abstinence within the market.

*Collective Evaluations of FebFast Participation and the Norm of Sharing*

First, by joining FebFast, our anti-consumers revised their consumption behaviors and sought out ways to culturally navigate the dominant drinking culture – not escaping it but instead remaining within it. In this way, FebFast did not demand participants exit from the marketplace, but rather provided the community support and strength “to withstand the force or affect of” (Penaloza and Price 1993, p. 123) a culture of intoxication. Specifically, FebFast was able to decenter the Australian culture of drinking by offering a supportive and inclusive anti-consumption space that

fostered sharing anti-consumption experiences in a community of likeminded anti-consumers and legitimised the decision not to drink, in much the same manner as activist organizations such as the Media Foundation and Adbusters, which promote “buy nothing day” and “buy nothing Christmas” as moments of abstinence from consumption practices (Lasn 2000). As stated in the FebFast website (FebFast.org.au) “we’re proud of a small but growing FebFast community.” In fostering a community spirit and facilitating the sharing of anti-consumption experiences, FebFast offers participants an online fund-raising page, which they can personalise by adding photos, a blog or video clips. Sabina described the FebFast website as “interactive” and explains her participation as “interesting and makes you feel you're more involved with the organization. Even quite recently I had one fax saying which charities the money had been given to so it was good to get that feedback.” In addition, anonymous participants as well as friends and family members can donate, offer messages of support to participants, and “write a little motivational message for you as well” (Kate). FebFast also stays connected with its participants and provides information on FebFast community events using social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Erica below emphasizes the importance of online communications in keeping her commitment to alcohol abstinence:

**Erica:** Well I think it just kind of keeps you clued in a bit. I think if you did it and didn't have anything during the month like you didn't get any updates, any emails, anything like that, I think it would be easy to just give up and go, it doesn't really matter, I've given my money. So I think just having the communication reminds you that you're still doing it.

The FebFast community-oriented approach to anti-consumption choices is explicit in Ronald’s experience: “I don’t want to sound too melodramatic, but I think the event [FebFast] is important because it shines a light quite brightly on alcohol. It does it in a kind of fun

collaborative or community way.” For example, on the FebFast website participants are able to download free posters, which they can put up around their home or office to show others “what a great time grog’s having whilst on holiday” [Figure 1]. The posters depict alcohol bottles on holiday in Paris, Egypt and by the beach as a way of humorously explaining their anti-consumption behaviors to those around them whilst providing a visual that allows FebFast participants to easily recognise one another. FebFast’s community-oriented approach clearly recognizes that norms of sharing entrenched in alcohol consumption are not removed just because individuals step out of a drinking culture for one month. On the contrary, FebFast enables participants to share their anti-consumption choices and experiences with others through an inclusive anti-consumption space, thus demonstrating the normative order of sharing through which nonmarket interactions can take place.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

#### *Collective Expectations of FebFast Participation and the Norm of Reciprocity*

Second, our FebFast participants were able to perform anti-consumption choices within markets of alcohol consumption by referring to their commitment to a charity event. The FebFast website and newsletter offers information on fund-raising and answers. For example, on the website, participants are able to understand “the bigger picture” by selecting a day in an online calendar which tells the real life story of a person affected by alcohol whose life has been changed for the better through FebFast fundraising [Figure 2]. It also provides a league table of the top fund-raising individuals and company fundraisers. In Australia, fundraising had gained prominence since former Prime Minister John Howard promoted “mutual obligation” and developed policies aimed at growing philanthropy and volunteering (Madden 2006). The Australian drive toward philanthropy legitimizes FebFast and participation in its events. For our



informants, participating in an alcohol-free month extends beyond health benefits or financial savings to incorporate helping others – “You get committed to something and not just to yourself but to somebody else, to a charity or to whatever, to the organisation of FebFast” (Kate). Our FebFast participants expressed they felt part of a relational exchange in which they received support from FebFast and were able to give back to the organisation via fund raising activities and registration fees. Reciprocating offered our informants a means to further justify their commitment to an alcohol-free month – “the money is going to charity” (Erica) and also reinforced their commitment to anti-consumption choices during difficult times, as Kate explains below:

**Kate:** The charity backs that commitment. If I said to you, you’re going to be not drinking in February. There’s no, it’s like well why shouldn’t I? Whereas if you say you’re going to do FebFast you sort of sign up to say you’re going to do it.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Whilst norms of reciprocity are deeply embedded in markets of alcohol consumption, our study shows that norms of reciprocity also manifest in nonmarket domains such as the anti-consumption space created by FebFast. In discussing their fund raising activities, our informants expressed their social obligation toward “the people who donated money. Like if you - I guess they would have been donating under false pretences if I hadn't kept up to it” (Nadia). The operation of normative reciprocity in nonmarket / anti-consumption domains is explicit in Sabina’s excerpt below:

**Sabina:** I've committed myself to FebFast and I know the money is going to charity. I have asked people to sponsor me, although I haven't raised a huge amount of money, but

I think it's that commitment to a public forum and then I'll stick to it then. I feel more committed and I know I would feel more guilty if I stopped.

The social obligation to reciprocate played a significant role in helping Sabina and all of our informants negotiate their anti-consumption choices in a drinking culture and remain committed to an alcohol-free month.

#### *Particular Reactions to FebFast and the Norm of Conformity*

Finally, our findings emphasized norms of conformity as an important constraining force to anti-consumption choices. Although confronted with the social/peer pressure to consume alcohol (Heath 2000; Piacentini and Banister 2009; Szmigin et al. 2008; Szmigin et al. 2011), our informants were nevertheless able to negotiate anti-consumption choices during social gatherings and events. Our analysis reveals that FebFast facilitates resistance against the social pressure to conform to alcohol consumption by creating a positive image of alcohol abstinence during the month of February using mainstream marketing practices. First, FebFast uses celebrity endorsement to promote the event. By drawing on well-known Australian celebrity figures such as Sarah Wilson, the former editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and a well-known television personality, FebFast works to foster positive attitudes toward consumers who do not conform to a drinking culture and find the courage to participate in an alcohol-free month. On the FebFast website, Sarah Wilson states: “My job as patron is to get you on board to abstain from drinking for the month. For your health. For your esteem. For your wallet. For the good of our community. For making a difference.” Most of our informants were familiar with the celebrity and appreciated committing to an event in which Sarah Wilson was also participating. Other celebrities publicly supporting the event include radio presenters, sports stars, musicians and even politicians. This wide range of personalities further helps to promote the cause across a

diversity of age groups, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles. Second, in its effort to reach the overall Australian population and to make the event highly recognisable, FebFast promotes and supports its alcohol-free month using national and local television channels and radio stations, but also social media platforms as well as schools and health organizations. Its integrated marketing communication program provides a clear and consistent message throughout the nation. Third, FebFast provides its participants with pre-made sponsorship cards, remittance forms and tax receipts available to download from their website, generating greater visibility and legitimacy for the organisation within mainstream culture [Figure 3]. Finally, and in contrast with other events such as Hello Sunday Morning, Dry July and October, FebFast takes place during the month of February. In Australia, February follows the December/January months of celebrations and the hot season. Whilst alcohol consumption is highly normalized during December and January, February is often seen as a break away from the festive seasons and celebratory rituals. By selecting the month of February, FebFast is gradually developing norms of alcohol abstinence for this particular period. For example, Erica described February as “the end of summer, like I've sort of got used to okay February is coming up, that's the end of playtime, move into the New Year sort of thing.” Such timing facilitates developing conformity, albeit temporal, to alcohol abstinence. These various tactics enacted by FebFast all work effectively to legitimise anti-consumption choices and contribute to shifting norms of conformity from a market of alcohol consumption to a nonmarket domain.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we analyzed the negotiations individuals underwent when choosing to forgo the symbolic act of alcohol consumption in a drinking culture and how a not-for-profit organisation

facilitates anti-consumption choices using Gibbs' (2001) three generic aspects of norms. First, illustrating the normative orders of sharing, reciprocity and conformity in constraining anti-consumption choices, we support that alcohol is not a consumption choice consumers can freely opt for or against (Lyons and Willott 2008; Pettigrew 2002). Such findings question alcohol intervention models based on the assumption that individuals exercise power over their consumption choices. Second, in discussing the process by which norms operate in markets of alcohol as well as in non-market domain, we highlight the social encapsulation of anti-consumption choices. Third, considering how FebFast opens up dialogue and instigates collective action within the community, we highlight that not-for-profit organisations house the potential to be an important and credible mechanism for the formation of supportive collective evaluations, expectations and reactions to anti-consumption choices. In this way, not-for-profits offer an important path forward in identifying and implementing new approaches to alcohol interventions that better resonate with the social and cultural embeddedness of alcohol and its complex consumption practices whilst still working within the culture of intoxication.

The role of non-profits as change agents within society is attractive, due to their ability to mobilise disenfranchised groups, give voice to important and unpopular causes and social issues and facilitate community building that breeds trust and cooperation (Clemens 2006). An important factor in enabling these actions is the institutional legitimacy of non-profit organisations, gained for not being self-serving as opposed to the motivations of organisations within the private sector. We contend that non-profit organisations offer an underexplored yet important and effective path forward in generating institutional grounding to legitimise anti-consumption choices that may be perceived as outside of extant cultural norms or practices. On this basis, we call for further research in the domain of not-for-profit organisations and their

impact on societal change in terms of anti-consumption practices. Commensurately, we secondly propose that non-profit organisations provide an important institutional grounding for developing practical solutions to navigate restricted/revised consumption choices within a dominant consumer culture and legitimate consumption choices that may be perceived as being outside of extant cultural norms or practices. Finally, we emphasize that anti-consumption spaces that are not located outside of the culture of consumption – but instead help individuals navigate a culture of consumption as an anti-consumer in their everyday experiences – provide an important future direction for social marketers and public policy makers involved in alcohol intervention programs as well as other health related consumption practices. We argue that the success of temporal abstinence programs, such as FebFast, should extend to other unhealthy practices such as fast food or smoking consumption.

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