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The transformation of tequila: From hangover to highbrow

Marie Sarita Gaytán
The University of Utah, USA

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of tequila's reputation – from lowbrow to high class – in Mexico and the United States. Analyzing the content of novels, magazines, newspapers, ads, and song lyrics, it argues that the current cachet associated with tequila was influenced by a range of historical, political, and economic circumstances within and between Mexico and the United States. Specifically, transformations took place in three key phases including tequila's: (1) increasing ties to national identity in Mexico; (2) changing perception – moving from feared to fun – in the United States; and (3) gaining of state-backed support and legislative protection. In explaining the shifting patterns of prestige, the roles of transnational circuits of consumption and production merit closer analysis in understanding the relations that shape cultural fields.

Keywords

National identity, US–Mexico relations, tequila, commodities, consumption, cultural fields

In 2010, La Capilla Hacienda announced the creation of an extra-añejo tequila priced at US$3.5 million. Encrusted with 4000 diamonds totaling 328 carats, the platinum-coated bottle made worldwide headlines as it toured auction showrooms in London, New York, and Dubai. Such extravagance signaled a remarkable turn in tequila's status both internationally and in Mexico. For instance, in the United States, the world's largest consumer of tequila, the drink has long been associated with festive overindulgence and heavy hangovers – a drink to be imbibed quickly, and sometimes, recklessly. In Mexico, tequila symbolizes something different. As the nation's most celebrated alcoholic beverage, tequila has long been allied with the cantina-drinking antics of *charros* (Mexican cowboys) famously portrayed in

Corresponding author:
Marie Sarita Gaytán, Departments of Sociology and Gender Studies, The University of Utah, 380 S 1530 E Room 301, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA.
Email: sarita.gaytan@soc.utah.edu

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Mexican cinema of the 1940s and the 1950s. Today, however, it is heralded as sophisticated – a drink that can commemorate special occasions. What explains the changes in tequila's reputation in both countries?

This article explores the circumstances that helped alter the perception of tequila from a common and unfashionable drink to an exclusive and trendy product. In explaining the shifting patterns of prestige, the roles of transnational circuits of consumption and production merit closer analysis in understanding the conversion of tequila into an upscale good. Not all tequila is considered high class, just as not all food preparation is celebrated as gastronomy (Ferguson, 1998). Nevertheless, the central change is the recognition of the idea that tequila can be highbrow and that it possesses characteristics that support this designation (Baumann, 2007). I argue that tequila's contemporary rejuvenation was influenced by a range of developments within and between Mexico and the United States. Initially, associations regarding tequila advanced separately (but never in total isolation of each other) in both countries. As bi-national relations evolved and consumer linkages expanded – as a result of economic, historical, and political circumstances that I describe here – a wider social context was created that enabled tequila to garner upscale appeal.

The changing meanings associated with tequila instigated and reflected modifications in its status in Mexico and the United States. As I show, the current high esteem associated with tequila within the national and international marketplace developed in three key phases: (1) the evolution of tequila's symbolic ties to Mexican identity. Central to this process is how tequila came to embody attributes of gender and class that became vital to its national iconicity; (2) the fluctuating terms of US–Mexican relations as expressed through media depictions of tequila. Of specific import is how tequila's reputation changed over time, from dangerous to culturally acceptable among Anglo Americans and middle-class tourists; and (3) the creation of a state-backed culture of credibility that legitimized tequila as internationally viable product, codified it as a good worthy of formal protection, and enabled the introduction of internal categories of distinctions. Taken together, these overlapping associations, and the networks of individuals, ideologies, and institutions that sustained them, established a set of conditions in which certain types of tequila could acquire highbrow stature.

Thinking about tequila as a commodity, one whose identity absorbs new meanings as it crisscrosses national borders and enters new markets, builds on our understanding of how transnational relations shape "cultural fields" (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu's model of cultural field recognizes the multiple components that influence meaning making processes within a social universe. Unlike approaches that point to singular events or individual efforts, the cultural field incorporates "diverse modes of cultural participation on the part of a broad range of individuals, institutions, and ideas" (Ferguson, 1998: 598). Because the cultural field encompasses "internal dispositions" in addition to "external relations" (Ferguson, 1998), scholars are encouraged to consider the contributions of an extensive spectrum of actors and ideologies (Bourdieu, 1993). Yet, despite

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this call for diversity, Bourdieu himself relied on a national frame of reference when analyzing field relations and thus privileged ''national boundaries as defining the spatial limits of field processes'' (Savage and Silva, 2013: 121). Using tequila's cross-border social history as a case study, this article takes a different angle by illustrating how transnational transactions can influence cultural fields and contribute to the acquisition of esteem.

While usually attributed to the evolution of art (Becker, 1982), literature (Levine, 1988), or music (Peterson, 1994), I apply the idea of cultural field in relation to the status changes associated with a specific commodity whose reputation is currently undergoing a significant transition. Such an approach responds directly to the call to pay more attention to the intersection of emergent cultural meanings and contemporary global connections within cultural fields (Crane, 2002; Katz-Guerro, 2002; Zurkin and Maguire, 2004). At the same time that I identify the antecedents associated with tequila's current legitimation, I highlight how ideologies of race and gender, in addition to the structuring effects of social class, contribute to the repertoires of distinction applied to tequila in different national settings – relations that are often overlooked in research on the production of prestige.

Following the lead of scholarship that explores the increasing esteem associated with certain food and drink products (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Hirsch and Tene, 2013; Holt, 2006), I consider a broad corpus of qualitative materials as a means of piecing together the gradual emergence of new associations. My analysis incorporates first-hand accounts and secondary reporting, in combination with works of fiction and nonfiction, to illustrate the changes in the representation and popular perception of tequila within different time periods and national settings. Because cultural fields are ''textually constituted'' (Johnston and Baumann, 2007: 171), I examine novels, ads, song lyrics, blog posts, magazines, and newspapers that reference the domestic and later transnational socio-political circumstances in which meanings about tequila were taking shape or being enforced. In some cases, the data directly addressed how ideas about tequila were shifting in the contemporary period. Once gathered, I weaved the often disparate information together, sometimes by way of themes and other times by way of linear events.

Inductive inquiry into everyday or ordinary content provides a glimpse into the pulse of the public's perception of tequila. For example, novels, films, and songs played a significant role in disseminating and reflecting the discourses that contributed to tequila's morphing connotations. Cinematic genres, like the Mexican *comedia ranchera* (western melodrama), portrayed tequila as a symbolically relevant product, one that appealed to a general audience as its actors and storylines celebrated the romantic attributes of a bygone era. On screen, famous actors not only drank tequila, they sang about it, further enhancing its emotional connection to Mexican consumers. In the United States, radio Billboard hits reflected the interpretive momentum of tequila as something no longer representative of Mexican backwardness – tequila could also signify pleasure and excitement. The analysis is organized into separate sections that address tequila's unfolding

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distinction in Mexico (1910–1950s), the growth of tequila consumption in the United States (1890s–1970s), and the formalization of the industry in the global marketplace (1970s–present). Instead of providing an exhaustive history, I highlight those key instances involving both producers and consumers that influenced tequila's evolving associations in Mexico and the United States.

Most of these materials extend beyond tequila's "taste community" of consumers and producers (Ferguson, 1998: 600). That is, many of the texts did not exclusively spotlight tequila nor were they necessarily created by individuals invested in tequila per se. However, indirect (or direct), the diverse range of qualitative content examined throughout this article provide insight into the broader ideological backdrop in which meaning was ascribed to tequila. In short, the various sources put forth ideals and values that frame tequila's exclusionary and inclusionary attributions (Johnston and Baumann, 2007). Although presented in three historical phases, the sentiments, and the language used to communicate them, intersect and never completely disappear – they are part of the collective connections that contribute to the configuration of tequila over time and across national borders.

This article continues as follows. First, I briefly discuss tequila's contemporary and early historic significance in Mexico. Second, I begin to identify 20th-century developments within Mexico that initiated tequila's early links to national identity. Third, I examine tequila's reputation in the United States and describe how it became an increasingly acceptable drink for Anglo-American consumers over the course of the 20th century. Fourth, I explore how the establishment of a culture of credibility, initiated and supported by the Mexican government and tequila industrialists, played a key role in creating an amplified air of importance and legitimacy that elevated tequila as a refined product. Finally, I conclude by considering the broader implications of this study in relation to commodities, cultural fields, and the production of legitimacy.

The origins of tequila

Tequila is a distilled alcoholic drink made from the juices of the *Agave tequilana* Weber, also known as the blue agave plant. The name "tequila" comes from the Náhautl word *tequitl*, which means "work" or "job," and *tlan*, which means "place" (Muría, 1995); it is also the name of the small town in the western state of Jalisco where its production first flourished. Today in Mexico, tequila is widely regarded as nation's preeminent spirit. For instance, Alberto Ruy-Sánchez Lacy (1995), editor of the popular book series, *Artes de Mexico* writes,

> More than a drink for mere consumption, tequila has become an element that allows people to feel inducted into a special practice and made privy to a certain knowledge. Tequila's value as an initiation rite into the cultural world of Mexican traditions only adds to the pleasures of its taste. (p. 81)

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Tequila's unique characteristics are also illuminated by noted cultural critic Carlos Monsivaís (1999: 14–15). In his words,

> What a curious destiny for a drink: the qualities of tequila have now made it a defining characteristic of the nation at play... What other drink eliminates the need for further explanation and imprints 'Mexican-ness' on any scene?

Just above, in addition to acknowledging its current esteem as a valued symbol of "Mexican-ness," Monsivaís (1999) likewise alludes to its "curious" journey in becoming a "defining characteristic" of the nation.

Despite these and other exaltations, tequila was not always considered the nation's most important alcoholic beverage. For centuries before the arrival of Spanish colonizers, native populations consumed a drink known as pulque. Made of fermented agave nectar, pulque, for numerous indigenous groups, was a ritual intoxicant and medicinal drink; it also provided much-needed vitamins and nutrients. The Spanish elite, who were accustomed to drinking imported wine and sherry, avoided pulque and outlawed its sale (Nemser, 2012). Regardless of their restrictive efforts, by the 17th century, pulque production was widespread and profitable. Technological advancements in the process of distillation and the drive for new markets eventually led to the commercial production of mezcal, the generic name that describes all distilled agave spirits.

In the early 18th century, Pedro Sánchez de Tagle, a member of the Spanish elite, opened the first mezcal distillery in Tequila, Jalisco (Luna, 1991). In 1758, Tequila Jose Cuervo was established on the Cuervo-Montaño Hacienda in the town of Tequila. Other smaller distilleries were operating at this time, producing what was then known as "*vino mezcal de Tequila*" (mezcal wine from Tequila). Demand for mezcal wine from Tequila increased when Mexico gained independence in 1821 and Spanish imports were suspended. Pulque's fate, however, was not so fortunate. While some members of the middle and upper classes drank pulque, it remained closely (and negatively) associated with indigenous, poor, and working-class identity. Declining pulque consumption coincided with the opening of European-owned beer breweries in Mexicali, Monterrey, and Mérida at the end of the 19th century (Hibino, 1992). With the support of local elites and politicians, beer was touted as a healthier and modern fermented alternative (Ortega Ridaura, 2005). At the same time, tequila's popularity continued to gradually grow as expanding railroad lines facilitated its transportation to other parts of the country. Location also mattered when it came to garnering attention. The rising prominence of the Jaliscan capital, Guadalajara (40 km from the town of Tequila), as a city ripe for investment, attracted new capital and new interest to the region. By the beginning of the 20th century, tequila was on the cusp of acquiring its own unique reputation.

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Drinking distinctions

The Mexican Revolution (c. 1910–1920) ushered in vast socio-political changes and altered how Mexicans related to each other as co-nationals. State officials rigorously sought to lessen the burdens associated with the post-war transition throughout Mexican society. One such measure involved a sustained focus on cultural continuity and tradition, ''selectively invoked to justify new practices, new allegiances, and new policies'' (Knight, 1994: 388–389). Cultural symbols (original and recycled) became increasingly important in the effort to reconstruct the image and psyche of post-revolutionary period. Indeed, it was considered ''the great moment of Mexican nationalism [...] as many emblems and signals of national identity as possible were sought to parade'' (Monsivaís, 1999: 15). The phrase of ''*lo mexicano*'' (Mexicanness), a notion of self-awareness in which beliefs about racial and class equality were embedded into the foundation of nationalism, became equally popular during this time. More broadly, *lo mexicano* was seen as an ''authentic'' expression of Mexican character that reflected a shared understanding that ''transcend[ed] the nationalistic-cosmopolitan conflict in Mexican history'' (Schmidt, 1978: 165). Novelists were among the many intellectuals that aligned themselves with new literary forms that highlighted Mexico's revitalized nationalism.

One such author was the Jaliscan-born writer and physician Mariano Azuela. In 1915, Azuela published *Los de Abajo* (The Underdogs), a fictional novel that drew on his experiences in the war. Widely regarded as the most accurate literary depiction of the turmoil associated with this period, *Los de Abajo* tracked the travails of Demetrio Macías, a peasant farmer, as he joined the revolutionary struggle and eventually lost sight of his ideals (Parra, 2005). Complex and conflicted, Macías was portrayed as having a preference for Mexican-origin products during a time when foreign goods were considered symbols of power and prestige. For instance, in one chapter, Macías declares his partiality for the fiery flavor of tequila over the bubbly texture of champagne. Later on, Macías' troops boast of the cruelty they inflict as they make their way through the houses and haciendas of the rich, littering their floors with empty bottles of tequila. From this perspective, tequila enabled peasants, like Macías, the opportunity to express anger over pervasive economic inequalities associated with the government's preferential treatment of foreign financial interests.

Initial reviews of the novel were mixed, for instance, some criticized its structure as fragmented and episodic (Murad, 1981), however, by 1929, *Los de Abajo* was widely regarded as a modern-day classic – the public embraced its realistic treatment of the physical and emotional violence of the war, while the famous writer Bernardo Ortiz de Montello declared it, ''our war novel'' (Escalante, 2010: 5). A drink for rugged machos, like Demetrio Macías and his men, tequila was becoming popularly associated with the plight of the working classes and was steadily aligning with an emergent post-war, masculinized national identity. This evolving reputation was solidified during the period of Mexican Golden Age Cinema (c. 1935–1959), an era that played a crucial role in shaping the contours of Mexican identity and codifying the affective attributes associated with *lo mexicano*.

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The period's most prevalent genre, the *comedia ranchera* (western melodrama), frequently featured the adventures of tequila-drinking male protagonists in the idealized world of rural Mexican haciendas. In seeking to recapture many of the traditions associated with the revolutionary period, directors made films with patriotic themes in idyllic locations replete with rustic signifiers, including horses, roosters, peasants, cactus, and agave. Oftentimes, the state of Jalisco was the stated or implied backdrop where handsome and noble *charros* courageously defended the rights of ordinary people. A loyal country gentleman, the *charro* embodied a respectable and nostalgic expression of Mexican masculinity; he became a prototype for ''packaging and representing Mexican culture for public consumption'' (Nájera-Ramírez, 1994: 6). As a romantic and valiant figure, the *charro* appealed to audiences from diverse class backgrounds.

On the big screen, patriotic symbols were created – and importantly – repeated within the *comedia ranchera* genre. The public longed for films steeped in nationalistic themes that featured life in the Mexican countryside (García Riera, 1995). Actors and actresses of the time were idolized by Mexican audiences and were seen as embodying the ''essence of the collective psyche'' (Monsivaís, 1995: 124). Beloved *charros*, like Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, sang *ranchera* songs, rode horses, and protected the less fortunate in classic films including *¡Ay Jalisco no te rajes!* (Oh Jalisco, don't back down!) (1941) and *Los Tres Garcia* (The Three Garcias) (1946) (Figure 1). A regular feature of the *comedia ranchera* storyline was the cantina, a bar that catered to working- and middle-class men. Within the ''permissive atmosphere'' of the cantina, *charros* let their guard down,

Figure 1. Pedro Infante in a cantina in the 1947 film, *Vuelven los Garcia* (The Return of the Garcias).

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plotted with friends, and conspired to win back the affection of lost loves (Palafox, 2001: 170). In these, and the hundreds of other films like them, tequila was the exclusive elixir of choice.

The *ranchera* songs sung by *charros* also highlight tequila's increasing popularity and reputation as an "everyman's" drink. Combining themes of loyalty, regional pride, and patriotism, the emotive soundtracks sonically infused tequila into the evolving repertoire of *lo mexicano* and its deep ties to Mexican masculinity. Performances and lyrics, such as those from the classic song, "*Vamos a echarnos la otra*" (Let's Drink Another) (1952), highlight these connections. As mariachis play a short but quick-tempo, trumpet-led introduction, Pedro Infante cheerfully declares, "*¡salud compadres!*" (cheers friends!) as glasses clink and those around him respond, "*salud!*" The glasses clank once again, Infante lets out a sigh, laughs, releases a satisfied "ahhhh," and begins to sing:

Con tres tragos de tequila	With three drinks of tequila
yo me planto donde quiera	I sit wherever I want
que me importa a mí la vida	what does life matter to me
si nací bien encuerdo y nada	I came into this world naked
tuve como herencia lo que	inheriting nothing and anything
traigo ya es ganancia.	I have now is pure profit.

As these lyrics illustrate, tequila, far from playing an inconsequential role, figured centrally in the creation and layering of symbolic meanings that reinforced an emergent sense of what it meant to be a humble and honorable Mexican man.

Golden Age cinema – its themes, actors, and songs – elevated tequila's reputation as an increasingly valued and vital attribute of Mexican identity. By the mid-20th century, tequila – and not pulque – was the nation's most popular drink. Despite the sacred role it played in the lives of indigenous groups, pulque did not align with the drive toward modernization that was so important to the country's leaders. The Mexican Revolution, and the social changes it prompted, created a cultural context in which new themes, critical to the celebration of a unique and class-inclusive Mexican nationalism, could flourish. Tequila's developing ties to various forms of media played a pivotal part in elevating its place in the national consciousness and cementing its association as an authentic drink. Although considered a popular drink in Mexico, across the border, a different, yet equally complicated set of meanings were concomitantly taking shape with regard to tequila and its ties to Mexican identity.

Tequila in the United States

Tequila's formal entrance into the US marketplace began in the latter part of the 19th century in cities with sizable ethnic Mexican communities. American-based Spanish-language newspapers, in places like Los Angeles and Chicago, were replete with ads from family-run shops announcing the arrival of shipments of tequila

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along with other sought-after Mexican products (*Dos Republicas*, 1892). Businesses, such as the El Paso-based *Salon Palacio* (the Salon Palace), directly appealed to customers accustomed to crossing the border to acquire goods, ''You no longer need to cross the Rio Grande to Ciudad Júarez to drink authentic and magnificent tequila'' (*Progresista*, 1901). Cantinas also capitalized on the drink's popularity – the *Rey de Copas* (King of Cups) in South Texas, described their business as ''specializing in tequila'' (*Democracia*, 1906).

At the same time that ads featuring tequila targeted and reached ethnic Mexicans and other Spanish-speaking consumers, Anglo populations were being introduced to tequila via the accounts of travel writers who began publishing stories about their Mexican excursions. Scientific journalists also circulated reports about the agave plant and its uses. For example, in an article published by the Smithsonian Institute in 1899, botanist Dr J.N. Rose detailed his horseback trip throughout Mexico, his encounters with different indigenous groups, and his observation of the manufacture of pulque and other mezcal drinks, including tequila.[1] Although many interpretations were impartial, some took on a decidedly moralistic and racist tone when describing Mexican life in general and tequila in particular. For example, an 1896 newspaper article (syndicated and published in more than 10 US states) described a local labor delegation's tour of Mexico. The average Mexican worker, the author explained, was ''very content'' living in ''his ten foot square adobe hut with nothing inside and nothing to sleep on'' (*The Free Lance*, 1896). ''Here [in Mexico],'' the piece continued, ''the laborer is cheap'' and has ''no brains to contend with.'' The article later cautioned American men from seeking employment in Mexico, because, in addition to not having many of the luxuries from home, they would likely ''be obliged to subsist on cactus and the sap of the tequila plant'' (*The Free Lance*, 1896). Mexicans were described as idiotic, exploitable, content with living in squalor, and comfortable surviving on alcohol for nourishment. Therefore, on the one hand, for ethnic Mexicans living in the United States, having access to tequila was considered and often promoted as something exclusive or special. On the other, for Anglo readers, tequila was sometimes described as an interesting curiosity and sometimes portrayed as indicative of Mexican backwardness.

Mexico was also regularly depicted as a site of potential danger to upright Americans who could be tempted to travel across the border in search of alcohol and other vices. In 1904, *The Los Angeles Times* reported several instances of Americans in Mexico who drank tequila or its close relative, mezcal (tequila is also a type of mezcal). One report detailed the story of a surveyor who drank so much that ''he suddenly became crazy. He rushed for a tall cactus which was growing near at hand and climbed to the top like a cat. It took almost a day for his men to get him to come down'' (*Los Angeles Times*, 1904). Tequila's negative reputation grew with the initiation of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. In particular, American print media depicted tequila as a central aspect of the war that underscored the barbaric nature of Mexicans and highlighted their tendency toward lawlessness (Anderson, 2000; Rosales, 1999). For example, the famous

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general Pancho Villa was consistently cast as a bandit who imbibed tequila (Gaytán, 2014) and smoked marijuana (Marez, 2004). Mexican soldiers were frequently described as violent, erratic, and unable to control their penchant for alcohol (*Baltimore American*, 1919). In the words of John Reed (1914), the author of the classic book *Insurgent Mexico*, ''You can never tell what a Mexican will do when he's drunk. His temperament is much too complicated'' (p. 161). With a fondness for illicit products and unpredictable violence, Mexicans were portrayed as dangerous to the wellbeing of the United States.

The 1919 passage of the Volstead Act, which outlawed alcohol throughout the United States, drew increased attention to the hazards (and in some cases, the immorality) associated with drinking. Yet, to the dismay of prohibition advocates, this did not stop bootleg smuggling along the US–Mexican border (Díaz, 2011). The manufacture and distribution of drinks like tequila and rum was an important source of employment for poor and working-class Mexicans in both countries (Marez, 2004). Working-class Anglo Americans also participated in contraband rings, helping transport illegal products. Equally disconcerting for temperance supporters was the availability of alcohol in Mexican border towns. American newspapers frequently reported on the ''vast amount of open saloons'' in places like Agua Prieta, a city that was across the border from Douglas, Arizona (*The Sunday Chronicle*, 1919). Ironically, many Mexican saloons and gambling halls were owned by Americans (*The New York Times*, 1920).

From the late 19th century until the mid-1930s, tequila embodied a range of meanings, but for Anglo audiences in particular, it was often portrayed by the media as an index of Mexican criminality and inferiority. Yet, the incarnation of Mexico and Mexicans as primitive and dangerous would slowly undergo a transformation, as American ''political pilgrims'' (artists, journalists, and intellectuals) started to travel to Mexico in greater numbers (Delpar, 1992: 15). According to Helen Delpar, left-leaning political pilgrims were drawn to Mexico because of their interest in learning about the social impact of the revolution and ''their desire to defend Mexico from attack in the United States'' (Delpar, 1992). Mexican leaders likewise set out to nourish positive impressions among these and other influential tourists.

Changing political and policy stances in the United States contributed to the evolving cultural relations. One such change took place as a result of the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933. The ''great social experiment'' (as it was known) resulted in some successes, such as a substantive decline in the number of alcohol-related arrests and hospitalizations (Burnham, 1968). By the early 1930s, however, there was large-scale shift in public opinion, as adopting a system of alcohol taxation was seen as having the potential to provide much-needed resources during the years of the Great Depression (c. 1929–1941). There was also growing concern over the proliferation of organized crime associated with prohibition. Despite some of its achievements, by the time it was dismantled, the Volstead Act was widely considered a failure (Gusfield, 1986).

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No longer officially criminalized, alcohol's immoral and precarious connotations started to diminish (although were never completely eliminated). Similarly, Mexico's standing – especially its threatening reputation publicized by the US media – started to lessen. In particular, there was increased interest in Mexico as a "safe yet unspoiled destination for travelers" who would "enjoy its quaintness, natural beauty, and artistic treasures" (Delpar, 1992: 58). Mexican officials supported this transformation in attitude and eliminated the requirement that American tourists have a passport to enter Mexico (Delpar, 1992). These bureaucratic efforts contributed to Mexico's reputation as a potential destination for holiday seekers and individual travelers. As an article from the US-based *Vogue* (1935) magazine puts it, "The tourist is beginning to discover Mexico, but Mexico, in essence, is still unconscious of the tourists" (p. 66). According to this, and many other journalistic accounts, Mexico was depicted as unaffected by industrialization – a place that was "rarely dull" and Mexicans were portrayed as unmindful of American tourists eager to experience the exotic offerings of their homeland (Wechsberg, 1941: 24). Guadalajara and the town of Tequila, "home to the potent and fiery drink," were often listed as must see stops for visitors (Foster, 1941: 27).

The "vogue of things Mexican" marked a major cultural turn in American attitudes (Delpar, 1992: 55). Favorable diplomatic relations between the two countries would become even more important – for the United States especially – when the country became involved in World War II. To be sure, Mexico became the United States' most prized "good neighbor" of the 1940s. This new cooperative climate was reflected in travel and tourism writing. An article from *The New York Times* titled, "Fun and Adventure under Mexican Skies," boasted that "Mexican hands are out-stretched toward the Good Neighbors from the North in a hearty welcome" (Goodfriend, 1942: 21). Magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, praised Mexico as a society "more authentic and soul-satisfying than the highly industrialized United States" (Delpar, 1992: 62) – adulations that mirror what Edward Said (1979) famously described as orientalism, or the colonially inspired romanticization of "exotic" cultures. Orientalist exaltations heralded by the US media portraying Mexico as a pleasurable getaway created a new, consumption-driven context that depicted Americans as entitled to indulging in the "fun" offerings of Mexico.

Mexican state-sponsored development projects coincided with the rise of tourism interest. New infrastructures and forms of transportation, including the Pan-American Highway, the Southern Pacific of Mexico, and the Mexican National Railways made traveling to Mexico much easier and more affordable for middle-class Americans. After outlining the monthly cost for renting a house and hiring a housekeeper in a "swank suburb" of Cuernavaca, one writer concluded, "With prices like these to give you perspective, it's clear to see that even a hurried wartime visit to Mexico in search of recreation can be had at wonderful bargain rates" (Goodfriend, 1942: 21). Pitched as an easy escape from the challenges associated with wartime troubles, Mexico was lauded as a fantastically inexpensive retreat for

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those Americans who could afford "recreation" during conflict-ridden times. What is more, tourism was touted as nourishing diplomacy and some advertisements proclaimed that it was patriotic to go on holiday to Mexico (Berger, 2010). With a trip to the French Riviera out of the question, the Mexican Riviera became a more viable option.

As American soldiers went to war, Mexican *braceros* were welcomed by American agribusiness to fill the need for manual labor in fields across the western part of the country. Good neighbors supplied a steady workforce during difficult socio-economic periods. They also provided unavailable and inexpensive merchandise: when shipments of European spirits came to a standstill as the global conflict expanded, US consumers looked to Mexico to help fill some of this void. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1943, Mexican distillers were "step[ping] up output" in order to "assuage [...] the great drought that is enveloping the United States" (Reynolds, 1943: 1). New demand subsequently led to the first tequila "boom" – or unexpected increase in sales. Brands such as Jose Cuervo capitalized on the mounting interest and started to invest heavily in magazine and newspaper ads. By the mid-1950s, US-based distributors were spending upward of US$100,000 to promote the "Mexican beverage in cocktails and mixed drinks," which marketers saw as contributing to a 36% rise in US tequila sales (*The New York Times*, 1956). Tequila, like Mexico itself, was becoming less foreign in the eyes of American consumers.

Tequila's popularity and acceptability continued to gain traction in various aspects of US popular culture. For example, in December 1953, Esquire Magazine named the tequila-based cocktail, the margarita, "Drink of the Month," and in 1958, the release of the one-word song, "Tequila," by the group *The Champs*, fronted by Daniel Flores – the son of Mexican fieldworkers – took the Billboard charts by storm. At resorts like Acapulco (dubbed by one writer as "a poor man's paradise"), American tourists could relax on the beach while sipping a tequila-based mixed drink (Bailey, 1958: 37). Indeed, tourism magazines frequently published images of sunbathing Americans enjoying colorful fruit cocktails adorned with paper umbrella garnishes. College students celebrating spring break in Mexico were also among those new tourists who increasingly imbibed a range of tequila-based beverages like the margarita and the tequila sunrise. As a domestic drink, tequila was the most affordable spirit for those young and old vacationing on a budget.

In the United States, the passage of stricter laws against drinking in public, in addition to amendments to the drinking age (from 18 to 21 years) during the 1970s and the 1980s, prompted even greater numbers of revelers to head south of the border. A bevy of new tequila name-dropping songs, such as Shelly West's hit, "Jose Cuervo," reflected tequila's expanding merry-making association, as its lyrics recounted the effects of being "the life of the party" and "drinking too much tequila last night." In 1971, the Dallas-based, Mexican-American restaurateur Mariano Martínez introduced customers to his homemade frozen margarita machine. Pitchers of the slushy concoction were an immediate hit with his regulars.

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Martinez's invention increased output and serendipitously coincided with the growing popularity of Mexican sit-down restaurant chains that attracted patrons with frozen margarita happy hours specials, taco and nacho bar offerings, and disco-spinning DJs (Arellano, 2012).[2] New technologies and cultural trends introduced tequila to fresh sets of consumers who were among the many that contributed to a 300% rise in sales between 1972 and 1974 – a phenomenon welcomed by tequila business owners (*Newsweek*, 1975). Over the course of a century, tequila's image went from feared to fun – a striking but equally problematic – consumption-based transformation. Multinational corporations started to take notice of the dramatic upswing in sales; the Mexican government also began to implement steps to safeguard the industry's development through the institutionalization of protective legislation.

Industry formalization

As global consumption of tequila increased throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the Mexican government started, in a more systematic fashion, to adopt formal measures to protect tequila from international competition. One such state-sponsored initiative took place in 1974, when tequila acquired the Mexican legal designation, ''denomination of origin'' (*denominación de origen*) (DO). Based on the French framework of *terroir*, DO designations hold that a product's unique environment plays a key role in influencing its taste and quality. Joining the ranks of champagne, sherry, and cognac as a good defined by distinct qualities of a geographic area, tequila's DO specified that it could only be produced in select areas of five states (Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas). Tequila was the first Mexican DO, and by law, the name ''tequila'' (and all names of Mexican DO products) is controlled by the Mexican government.

The state's new alignment with tequila laid the contemporary groundwork for the conversion of the drink's reputation in the domestic and international marketplace. In Mexico, the introduction of formal DO protection instigated a sense of ''identificatory power'' of tequila as a product of distinction and worthy of authoritative legislation (Ferguson, 1998: 601). Official recognition, modeled on a European, and hence, modern policy, meant that tequila was a formally endorsed and credible product. While remaining popular among the working and middle classes, tequila's DO designation placed it in the same high-status category as champagne, providing new symbolic momentum in which it could begin to acquire upscale attributes. Outside of Mexico, the state's DO designation leant an air of seriousness and professionalism for potential investors. Because tequila was safeguarded by the state, large companies did not have to worry about foreign competition since all legal matters – especially the illegal production of tequila in other countries – would be handled by the government.

Recognition by the Mexican government elevated its ''symbolic prestige'' and created a formal cultural context for the entry of foreign investment (Overton and Murray, 2012: 702). By 1988, tequila sales in the United States had surpassed those

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in Mexico (Conaway, 1988), and during the 15-year period between 1975 and 1990, US sales increased an astounding 1500% (Butler, 1992). Changes in company ownership and new international distribution alliances started to take shape – both fuelling and reflecting the increases in profit. Foreign capital investment in the tequila-producing region of Jalisco started to increase substantively. For example, beginning in the 1970s, Jose Cuervo Tequila entered a partnership with the global conglomerate Hubelin, and Sauza Tequila was partially acquired by Pedro Domecq (Bowen and Gaytán, 2012). The next three decades saw similar trends – notably, in 2002, Osbourne purchased Herradura Tequila, and Cazadores Tequila was purchased by Barcardi (Bowen and Gaytán, 2012). With multi-million dollar advertising budgets, transnational liquor companies initiated global marketing campaigns, drawing even greater spotlight to their products. Once closely associated with the working class and Mexican masculinity (in Mexico) and Mexican backwardness (in the United States), international advertising sought to broaden its appeal. Glossy magazine ads for brands such as Jose Cuervo began featuring celebrities including Joan Collins, Kirstie Allie, and Anjelica Houston. Published in 1986, one ad featured James Bond actor, Pierce Brosnan, dressed in a tuxedo, "handling the basic necessities [Jose Cuervo margaritas] with style" (Figure 2). No longer solely a drink to "shoot" quickly, the ads offered alternative methods of consumption: tequila could be consumed in elegant cocktails ("dashingly suave, yet disarmingly charming") or enjoyed neat, on its own. By portraying popular actors of the time drinking their brand, Jose Cuervo ad campaigns provided tequila with an even greater degree of sophistication.

Officially endorsed measures amplified tequila's reputation as something other than unrefined, common, or cheap in the domestic and international marketplace. Tequila took the global stage again in 1994, with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Under the guidelines of the agreement, the three nations agreed to recognize Canadian whisky, Bourbon whisky, Tennessee whisky, tequila, and mezcal as products that can only legally be produced in their countries of origin. In that same year, the Tequila Regulatory Council (*Consejo Regulador del Tequila* (CRT), 2007) was established in Mexico to protect "the prestige of tequila by means of investigation and specialized studies, disseminating the many elements that confer value and reinforce its culture." Top among its objectives is the promotion of "the culture and quality of the drink which has earned an important place amongst the symbols of national identity" (CRT, 2007). The combined efforts of the Mexican government and the Tequila Regulatory Council further solidified tequila's standing as worthy of international protection.

Tequila's rapidly increasing popularity provided the Mexican government with the opportunity to publicly demonstrate its uncompromising position when it came to defending tequila. In the late 1990s, American entrepreneur John B. Wagoner purchased land near Temecula, California, and planted *Agave tequilana* Weber (blue agave) plants (the same species used in tequila) which he acquired in Jalisco, Mexico. With a local climate very similar to that of Mexican

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Figure 2. Jose Cuervo ad featuring Pierce Brosnan (1986).

tequila-producing regions, the 5-acre crop flourished. Combining the words Temecula and tequila, Wagoner named his 100% blue agave drink "Temequila." As he explained, he chose the name "because of the area and because my liquor is an ode to tequila made in Mexico" (Minter, 2009).

Despite respectful intentions, in February 2004, Wagoner received a letter from the Tequila Regulatory Council admonishing his use of the name and warning him that he faced prosecution if he continued to manufacture his product. Council president Ramon Gonzáles commented on Wagoner's actions by stating that

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making a spirit like tequila "is impossible to do in any other part of the world except Mexico – not in South Africa, not in Europe, and not in the United States" (Wang, 2005). Claiming that "Temequila" was "phonetically similar" to tequila, he expressed concern that the name would confuse consumers who thought they were purchasing authentic Mexican tequila (Wang, 2005). Matters escalated when other Mexican government representatives entered the debate. Salvador Behar, a trade official at the Mexican embassy in Washington DC explained, "We don't see it as a minor problem... Whoever is trying to mislead the consumer is a threat and we take it seriously... If it's one bottle or 10,000 bottles, the problem is the same" (Wang, 2005). In a different interview, Behar affirmed "It's cultural pride, it's distinctive for Mexico. Worldwide you can talk about tequila and everyone will identify tequila as a Mexican product and a national name" (National Public Radio (NPR), 2005). He also stated that the government would consider filing a complaint with the US Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau in order to halt the product's production.

Initially, John B. Wagoner was not deterred and continued to manufacture Temequila. In 2005, warnings turned into action when Wagoner was denied exhibitor privilege at the first annual Los Angeles Tequila Festival. Organizers claimed that Tequila Regulatory Council did not want Wagoner present because his product was not tequila; however, Council members denied that they had anything to do with the decision. Regardless of the organizers' efforts, Wagoner and his crew set up a tasting stand at a bar in the hotel adjacent to the festival grounds. Later that day, Wagoner returned and confronted festival organizers about the decision, but was eventually escorted off the property by police officers and his registration fee was returned.

The Tequila Regulatory Council's protective actions at the inaugural Los Angeles Tequila Festival served a twofold symbolic purpose, sending an important message to tequila consumers and producers. For the US and Mexican public, the implication was clear: the Mexican government was ready to stand by its word and exercise its authority – even in the United States – to safeguard tequila as an authentic Mexican product. For transnational investors, the message was likewise obvious: the tequila industry was safe from competitors, small or large, who manufactured unauthorized tequila-like products. What is more, it was operating under a new and professional state-sponsored alliance: the tequila industry was ready and safe for investment (Bowen and Gaytán, 2012).

Within-market innovations coincided with the changes initiated by the Mexican government. Top among these additions was the introduction of high-end and ultra-premium tequila, or tequila manufactured from 100% agave, instead of more popular products made of 51% agave and 49% other sugars. By the late 1990s, the new tequila category was gaining popularity within the overall tequila market. In 1997, ultra-premium tequilas comprised approximately 7% of all tequila sales; by 1999, they comprised more than 10% (Morago, 1999) (by 2012, it was 40% of the market) (*Shanken News Daily*, 2013). Large companies, such as Jose Cuervo, began producing batches and marketed them as "limited edition" tequilas.

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For example, in 1998, they introduced their line, 1800 Colección – only 347 bottles were made, each selling for US$1000 (initially, the brand had to be ordered through a liquor retailer or via the Neiman Marcus catalog). That same year, restaurateur Rick Bayless reportedly paid US$1725 for his bottle of 1800 Colección at a fine wine auction (Morago, 1999). The new high-end tequila category was redefining the tequila segment.

The news media reported widely on tequila's shifting image. Headlines proclaimed, "Tequila, now a Beautiful Thing" (LaBan, 2004), "Tequila: It's Not Just for Shooters Anymore" (Pataki, 2006), and "Drink's Hangover Image Dissolves" (Carter, 2007). In the early-2000s, English-language specialty magazines and web sites started to appear, catering to groups of self-proclaimed tequila aficionados throughout the United States. Tequila-themed restaurants and bars began emerging in cities like New York, Tokyo, and London. International tequila festivals in places such as Toronto and Las Vegas likewise followed suit, offering tasting seminars in addition to hosting hundreds of food and alcohol industry exhibitors. Although its origins are unclear, in the United States, 24 July is now celebrated as "National Tequila Day."

Tequila's popularity in the United States ignited changes in its reputation within Mexico. The new air of international prestige bolstered tequila's ties to a revitalized repertoire of Mexicanness, one that emphasized high-end cultural attributes. No longer a drink solely for working-class men, tequila was now widely described by government officials, writers, bloggers, and restaurateurs as worthy for all members of the middle and upper classes. Even heads of state began publicly sharing tequila. During his presidency, Vicente Fox reportedly served Queen Elizabeth II of England a glass of tequila (Dykstra, 2013), and Presidents Felipe Calderon and Barak Obama toasted tequila at a White House dinner (Kelley, 2010).

New accoutrements were soon introduced, further reflecting its shift in status. Most notably, in 2002, with the support of the Tequila Regulatory Council, the famous Austrian-based glass manufacturer Riedel announced the creation of an official tequila glass (tequila is traditionally consumed in elongated shot glasses known as "*caballitos*," or little horses[3]). Commenting on the product launch, one Mexican journalist wrote, "The newly designed glass has elevated tequila's stage presence [...] and highlights its rich properties, aromas, flavors, and other aspects that emphasize its special status as part of our ancestry" (Calderón, 2002). As a result of these formal changes in different national contexts, the consumption of tequila began to absorb an air of high-class affectation once reserved for drinks like cognac. Tequila's improved status in the United States spurred the introduction of new invented traditions associated with its consumption in Mexico.

Conclusion

In characterizing the changes within a cultural field, researchers delve into the historical antecedents that lay the groundwork for status acquisition (Baumann, 2007; Ferguson, 1998; Peterson, 1994). These same scholars emphasize the

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contributions of a diverse range of ideologies, institutions, and actors when analyzing the creation of prestige. Although typically theorized within the space of a specific nation (Bourdieu, 1993), I tracked these transformations from a cross-border perspective, and in doing so, provided a deeper understanding of the uncharted currents associated with the creation of cachet in the global marketplace. Additionally, while often applied to the evolution of artistic genres, in this article, I explored these processes in relation to a particular commodity: how evolving historic, economic, and social circumstances provided the possibility for tequila's legitimation in Mexico and the United States. To explain tequila's valorization, I examined the shifting meanings associated with its consumption and production by analyzing a range of everyday materials that reflect the expressive sentiments of different societies.

Tequila's contemporary significance, as a drink that possesses enough qualities to merit an auction list price of US$3.5 million, emerged as a result of a multifaceted and long-term set of relations within and between Mexico and the United States. In Mexico, tequila developed into a symbol of Mexican identity, one that eventually embodied certain attributes associated with masculinity and the working classes. These connotations were codified and repeated in novels, films, and songs that popularized tequila as an everyman's drink. Across the border, a different set of meanings were emerging in relation to tequila. Initially, tequila was introduced to Anglo audiences as an exotic curiosity, but this association started to change in light of the Mexican Revolution and the passage of the Volstead Act. Attitudes about tequila and Mexico shifted once again as diplomatic relations between the two countries were enhanced during World War II. By the end of the 20th century, tequila had acquired a festive and inexpensive – or "cheap" – reputation.

Tequila consumption in the United States continued to grow at an impressive rate, and multinational corporations started to invest more in the industry. Amid these circumstances, the Mexican government began to initiate legislation to formalize the market and protect it from competition. The increasingly synergetic relationship between the evolution of its reputation in the United States and Mexico led to the foundation of cultural institutions (e.g. tequila festivals and tequila-themed restaurants), "authorities of legitimation" (Tequila Regulatory Council), and a new set of accessories associated with tequila's consumption (Riedel glass) (Baumann, 2007: 174). The valorization of tequila's cultural field was influenced by the shifting politics taking place in both countries. The image that tequila could represent something other than its well-known reputation as a "common" or hangover-inducing drink instigated changes in its recognition in both countries: in Mexico, this involved state-backed protection, and in the United States, this involved the introduction of new types of tequila (premium and ultra-premium).

In closing, the case of tequila expands our theoretical understanding of the nuances of consumption and production within the context of globalization in three key ways. First, it illustrates how the cultural production of legitimacy can occur within more than one national setting by highlighting how broader

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geopolitical circumstances – external to the cultural field – can create a context for the actualization of new meanings within and across markets. Far from fixed, the boundaries determining what is and what is not legitimate are rife with dynamic implications. Second, while a commodity's economic capital plays a vital role in the process of acquiring cachet, class elements alone do not determine how hierarchies of distinction progress or operate – ideologies of race and gender can also contribute to the development of a commodity's reputation. Finally, the case of tequila demonstrates how commodities not only reflect, but create and sustain cultural meanings that are attributed to groups of people. Therefore, this analysis contributes to scholarly conversations regarding the role that commodities can play in the rendering of subjectivities into reality. Future scholars will find it both fascinating and fruitful to interrogate the mechanics of legitimation by applying a transnational (or multinational) lens so as to elucidate the lesser known aspects of commodities as extraordinary objects of existence (Bourdieu, 1992).

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Notes

1. Hundreds of similar articles were published in academic journals representing disciplines, including anthropology, biology, and philosophy.
2. Martínez's frozen Margarita machine is currently on exhibit at the Smithsonian's Natural Museum of American History.
3. Originally called "*cuernitos*," or little horns, these early versions were crude, carved ox or bull horns; according to legend, these makeshift glasses were used to drink tequila by revolutionary soldiers. The *caballito* physically resembles the *cuernito*, mimicking the long, tapered style of animal horns.

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Author's Biography

Marie Sarita Gaytán research lies at the intersection of Latin American and US Latino Studies. Her book, *¡Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico*, is forthcoming through Stanford University Press

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