Privileging Passion: How the Cultural Logic of Work Perpetuates Social Inequality in the Craft Beer Industry

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Abstract

Having or “finding” passion for work has become an increasingly common cultural logic of work today, one that workers use to justify career choices and managers use to make hiring decisions. However, scholars have yet to articulate how workers enact this cultural logic of work in ways that may ultimately contribute to social inequality in modern workplaces. On the basis of 115 in-depth interviews and two years of ethnographic fieldwork in U.S. craft breweries, the author shows how brewery workers express a heightened relationship to their jobs, which the author calls pure passion, in ways that encompass labor, consumption, and lifestyle practices. Yet because these enactments of pure passion are predicated on privileged social attributes with respect to race, class, and gender, this cultural logic of work ends up reinforcing the dominant position of white, middle-class men in this industry while simultaneously marginalizing the experiences of women and people of color.

Keywords

passion, inequality, culture, work, race, craft beer
highly motivated to work jobs that center values such as authenticity and craftsmanship (Land 2018; Thurnell-Read 2014) in a “cool” and trendy setting (Ocejo 2017). Many brewery owners, for instance, describe their companies as “passion projects,” which also doubles as a prominent form of branding within the industry (Koontz and Chapman 2019). Demographically, however, craft beer workers remain overwhelmingly white, male, and relatively middle class (Chapman and Brunsma 2020; Withers 2017). This raises questions about the role passion for work may play in perpetuating social inequalities within these types of settings and potentially contributing to the marginalization of women and people of color within the industry.

On the basis of 115 in-depth interviews with craft beer workers and two years of ethnographic fieldwork within the industry, I show how workers enact a heightened expression of passion for work, which I call pure passion, that involves producing and consuming products associated with their jobs, deprioritizing formal employment characteristics, and circulating among others who see this job as a lifestyle. I argue that pure passion reinforces the dominance of “bearded white guys”—class-privileged white men—in the workplace because of the intersecting privileges and social memberships that it presupposes. I close by discussing how idealizing pure passion, as a cultural logic of work enacted through privileged tastes, values, and lifestyles, marginalizes workers from nondominant groups in the craft beer industry and other emerging work settings of the new economy.

Passion, Inequality, and the New Cultural Logic of Work

As Erin Cech (2021) has argued, the 1970 publication of What Color Is Your Parachute? by Richard Bolles (2009), marks the emergence of a new approach to employment: the first known use of “passion” as a rationale for one’s career choice. The popularization of passion for work reflects a broader shift toward the individualization of work under neoliberalism (Cech 2021; DePalma 2021) and a key ideological component of the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). Today, both workers and employers see value in adhering to the passion “principle” (Cech 2021) or “paradigm” (DePalma 2021). This cultural logic of work pervades both supply-side dynamics (i.e., what workers want out of jobs) and demand-side dynamics (i.e., what employers look for in workers) of the labor market, where workers are encouraged to let their personal interests and personalities guide them to a specific job and then convey these special qualities with enthusiasm to potential employers (Gershon 2017).

The growing appeal of the “passion principle” also reflects contemporary cultural narratives about work that reach beyond the workplace. Rather than a (work) life mired in monotony, finding a job that is personally meaningful and associated with interests that are “from the heart” (Bellah et al. 1985) can be a strong source of career motivation (Bunderson and Thompson 2009). Jobs done out of passion can also “enchant” the employment experience (Endrissat, Islam, and Noppeney 2015) by prioritizing one’s authentic interests. To be sure, seeking passion in one’s work life remains a privileged orientation to the labor market more closely associated with workers from middle and upper classes, as well as those who are white and male. However, as Cech (2021) found, a growing number of workers today, particularly young workers, feel that finding a job aligned with their passions is not only the mark of a “good” job but also associated with leading a good life.

Valuing passion for work represents a double-edged sword for workers. As social psychologists note, workers who claim to be passionate about their jobs can experience positive impacts such as better workplace performance and increased job motivation (Vallerand and Houlfort 2003; Vallerand, Houlfort, and Forest 2014). Some research suggests that employees who describe themselves as passionate about their work tend to be more proactive on the job (Ho et al. 2011) and entrepreneurial (Cardon et al. 2009) than their less passionate peers. Doing jobs closely aligned with personal interests can blur boundaries between work and nonwork activities in a way that can be appealing to workers (Besen-Cassino 2014; Wilson 2019). Yet passionate workers can also experience personal drawbacks to their employment, such as becoming overly invested or obsessed with work and, as a result, incurring an increased likelihood of negative health and social outcomes (Vallerand et al. 2003).

Employing workers who adhere to the passion principle remains convenient for employers. Hiring managers often seek applicants who express passion for their work because they perceive these workers will be more committed to their jobs and less likely to advocate for better labor conditions such as increased wages or stable work hours (Cech 2021; Kim et al. 2020; McCallum 2020). Employers may also feel that workers who have a more genuine interest in their jobs will also be more genuine in their relations with coworkers and customers (Wolf et al. 2016; see Fleming and Sturdy 2011). However, critics point out that management’s preference for workers they perceive to be passionate about work also acts as a form of labor control in the sense that these workers are more likely to self-exploit by putting in long hours or putting up with low wages (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Duffy 2017; Kim et al. 2020; Mears 2015; Siciliano 2021). As DePalma (2021) noted, the popularization of the passion “paradigm” today shifts the locus of critique further away from the neoliberal institutions thought to be destabilizing job security for American workers and more toward the self.

Adhering to the cultural logic of passion for work is also not equally available to all workers on the basis of their social characteristics. This is because valuing, and then subsequently displaying, passion for work is conditioned by cultural knowledge and shaped by one’s social position with respect to race, class, and gender. For example, as Lareau...
ured labor at the hands of large corporations. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, a modern variant of craft work began to reemerge in U.S. cities, evident in the rapid growth of craft breweries as well as artisanal coffee roasters, gourmet butchers, boutique barber shops, and micro distilleries (Ocejo 2017).

As Sennett (2008) notes, craft workers invest in the “skill of making things well” (p. 8). Their labor involves honing a specialized set of skills and working closely with one’s hands to make something unique and imbued with meaning (Bell et al. 2018). For workers, engaging in craft work can bring about a positive emotional reaction to the tactile process of making something deliberately and with purpose (Bozkurt and Cohen 2019; Ocejo 2017). Appreciating the craft of craft work often involves personal investments of time, energy, and resources (Rodgers and Taves 2017). Workers gain this knowledge through interacting with people and institutions that already possess this knowledge: as workers develop their skills and become generally more socialized into the trade, they garner recognition within a larger community (Fine 1996). For these reasons, craft workers tend to be devoted to their work and committed to honing their specialized skills (Bozkurt and Cohen 2019; Sennett 2008).

A key value of modern craft work today is the perceived authenticity of its products and production methods (Thurnell-Read 2014). Both craft workers and “craft consumers” (Campbell 2005) share an appreciation for what these specialized products represent within a larger market context of mass production and corporate ownership (Borer 2019). As Ocejo (2017) argued, modern craft jobs evoke reconfigured tastes among cultural elites that romanticize the “urban village life” as symbolized by small, specialized producers and a personalized relationship between craft workers and customers.

Jobs in craft breweries today have been described as quintessential examples of modern craft work in that they revolve around the making and selling of “artisinal” products made on a small scale and imbued with cultural cache (Land 2018; Ocejo 2017). Small and independent brewing companies, known today as craft breweries (Brewers Association 2020), have enjoyed rapid and sustained growth over the past half century. During this time, the number of domestic breweries has gone from fewer than 100 to more than 9,000 (Brewers Association 2021), and more than 125,000 people are employed across craft breweries, taprooms, distributors, and other related businesses. According to recent industry demographics, the overwhelming majority of these workers tend to be white and...

Modern Craft Work in the U.S. Craft Beer Industry

Throughout much of the twentieth century, traditional craft-based jobs had been steadily declining in the U.S. because of the rise of mass production, standardization, and routinized labor at the hands of large corporations. Yet by the end of the...
male (Brewers Association 2020). For example, white men dominate jobs in the brewhouse (e.g., head brewer, assistant brewer), where more than 80 percent of workers are men and 89 percent are white (Herz 2019), as well as in brewery ownership. Although women and people of color are minimally represented in brewhouses, their respective numbers are higher in other types of jobs in the industry. For example, women are disproportionately represented in customer service jobs in brewery taprooms, while people of color, especially men of color, are disproportionately employed in delivery and distribution capacities (Wilson and Stone 2022: chap. 3). As Chapman and Brunsma (2020) noted, these racialized and gendered employment patterns in craft breweries stem in part from historical forms of structural exclusion that people of color and women have faced in the beer industry, such as barriers to securing business loans. These patterns are also reflected in the work culture of many craft breweries, which remains closely associated with whiteness, masculinity, and middle-classness (Wilson and Stone 2022; Withers 2017).

Passion figures prominently into the cultural logic of work in the craft beer industry, a sentiment evident among workers and brewery owners, as well as the branding of these companies. This relationship to craft beer transcends boundaries between work and leisure, often conjointing the two within the workplace. For example, a significant number of craft brewers trace their brewing careers back to homebrewing, which provides a direct link between their professional experiences and their “serious hobbies” before joining the industry (Rodgers and Taves 2017; Thurnell-Read 2014). Another common sentiment among brewery leadership is to describe how their personal love for brewing and consuming craft beer compelled them to sacrifice “everything” to found small brewing operations, often leaving well-paid careers and foregoing professional credentials in other fields in the process. Unsurprisingly, the passion these individuals evince for craft beer is mentioned frequently and prominently within their respective companies’ marketing material, such as in “about us” company statements and self-narrated founding stories (Koontz and Chapman 2019).

As will be further demonstrated in this study, many white, class-privileged men working as craft brewers and brewery owners enact what I call pure passion for their jobs. Pure passion describes a heightened relationship to one’s job which incorporates work, play, and lifestyle wrapped into one. Workers and managers in this study treat pure passion as the ideal relationship to the job, particularly for those in high-level positions. Yet because enacting pure passion is done through class privilege, whiteness, and masculinity, this cultural logic of work reinforces the position of “bearded white men” in craft breweries while further marginalizing workers from nondominant groups.

**Methods**

To examine how craft beer workers relate to their jobs, I use an inductive analysis of in-depth interviews as well as ethnographic field research in craft breweries located in two regional industry hubs: Los Angeles, California, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. From March 2019 until April 2022, I observed brewers, brewery owners, sales representatives, taproom workers, and delivery drivers in craft breweries and other industry settings. I attended dozens of industry events, volunteered at brewery booths at two craft beer festivals, and participated in three separate, eight-hour brew days at different craft breweries. I also conducted a total of 115 in-depth interviews with craft beer workers who held a variety of industry positions to probe in more detail how workers related to their jobs. Each of these interviews lasted between 45 and 100 minutes and took place mostly in person at locations of the interviewees’ choosing (22 interviews were moved to Zoom, an online video platform, because of health concerns related to coronavirus disease 2019 during this research). All interviews were based on semistructured questions covering a range of topics that included the worker’s past employment history, industry workplace experiences, coworker relations, and future aspirations. Interviewees were given pseudonyms and selected on the basis of a combination of snowball sampling, cold calling, and my prior contacts.

Given the large numbers of white men in craft beer, I took steps to oversample women and people of color working in the industry (see Table 1). On several occasions I decided to ask respondents directly if they knew of anyone in the industry who was a woman and/or a person of color. Because of patterns of social homophily among brewery workers, many white men could name only one or two individuals who they personally knew who fit either description, with considerable redundancy in who these interviewees suggested I contact. However, once several women and people of color were successfully reached for this study, snowball sampling proved a useful strategy in diversifying my pool of interviewees, albeit nonrandomly. I coded all interviews using the qualitative software analysis program ATLAS.ti. These data were then analyzed inductively and in the tradition of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), in which I focused on identifying and

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3This research period includes the coronavirus pandemic, during which I halted all in-person data collection out of safety precautions as well as government-mandated restrictions on in-person activities. The specific effects of the pandemic on industry employment are beyond the scope of this article.
refining emergent themes. Evident in both interview and field observational data, these themes included how workers used words such as *passion* and *love* to describe their jobs and acted on this sentiment while at work. I concluded primary data collection for this study at the point of data saturation (Small 2009) with respect to how workers discussed their relationship to their jobs in the industry.

**Findings**

*Privileging Pure Passion*

A majority of white men in this study enacted pure passion for their craft beer jobs, and in doing so, reinforced their own relationship to this work as the normative cultural logic of work within craft breweries. In the sections that follow, I detail three interwoven ways in which workers enacted pure passion: through committing material and symbolic resources to their job, by downplaying formal employment conditions, and by linking their jobs to a desired lifestyle. I illustrate how these enactments of pure passion are steeped in social privilege along the lines of race, class, and gender. As a result, expressing this cultural logic of work reinforced the dominant position of class-privileged white men within the industry while marginalizing women and people of color who are less able, or willing, to enact this particular relationship to their craft beer jobs.

*"I Was Obsessed": Committing Material and Symbolic Resources to Craft Beer.* Once he started, the prospect of devoting himself wholly to pursuing a career in craft beer was never in doubt for Charlie, a 40-year-old, college-educated white man who owns a small brewery. Charlie discovered homebrewing when he was in his late 20s by happening upon a homebrewing book; within months he was “obsessed” with learning to brew his own beer. Homebrewing began to consume nearly all of Charlie’s spare time and financial resources as he acquired homebrewing equipment and instruction books:

Charlie: I was a feverish reader of brewing textbooks, when I got to brewing school I’d already read all of the textbooks that they assigned us, which was nice. And again, I had this passionate group of people around me— we’d get together every night and just sit around and have a couple of beers together. And then on Friday and Saturday nights we would have more than a couple of beers together. We had four homebrewed beers on tap at almost all times, I was really good about keeping beer on tap. So I was brewing like 20–30 hours a week, and I didn’t just like it.

Author: You didn’t like brewing?

Charlie: No, I loved it! I fucking love it. I loved the cooking component with the extension of the fermentation aspect of beer brewing.

Charlie described his growing preoccupation with homebrewing, all while he was working full-time as a grade school teacher. A couple years after first beginning to homebrew, Charlie, with the support of his wife, made the decision to pursue his passion for brewing professionally. Although scholars note that devotion to work remains a gendered cultural ideal—one that is seen more positively for men than women (Blair-Loy 2003; Correll et al. 2014; Turco 2010)—existing narratives rarely capture the material and immaterial resources that men such as Charlie bring to their pursuits. Charlie committed his own time, energy, and resources to homebrewing on his days off. He also received ample encouragement (and some financial support) from his social networks to realize his passion more fully by entering the craft beer industry.

The experiences of other white men in the industry further illustrated how their symbolic and material commitments to craft beer helped propel them into the industry. Jerry, a 42-year-old brewery owner, explained his inspiration for working in craft beer:

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My wife and I traveled in 2003, 2004, 2005—any chance we had we were driving up the California coast to the Oregon coast, we were meeting with people like Peter Zion, Dale Smith or Vinnie Cilurzo at Russian River before everybody knew his name, Alan Sprints at Hair of the Dog. And all these guys had their own interesting stories and they all had their own interesting approaches to brewing. But one thing remained the constant: they would drop everything for an hour or two and just chit chat with an overly curious homebrewer and they were open books and they would just tell you anything you wanted to hear, anything you wanted to know. And I was like, “Man, I really want to be a part of this community.” I really loved it.

Jerry planned his vacation time away from his well-paying job as a scientist around visiting craft breweries and meeting brewery owners (all of those he mentioned above are white men). On these trips, Jerry recalled the passion for craft brewing that these brewers clearly exhibited (they would “drop everything for an hour or two and just chit chat”). It was a passion that mirrored his own. A few years later, Jerry was able to lean on his “day” job salary as an chemical engineer to help fund a small brewery, which he devoted his evenings and weekends to help oversee.

For many educated white men who are just starting out in the industry, the pure passion they exhibited for craft beer was a direct outgrowth of their devotion to it as either homebrewers or avid consumers prior to entering the industry. Nathan, a white man in his late 20s, recounted that upon “discovering” craft beer while going to local breweries with cyclist friends, he decided to quit his job to search for “whatever job I could get” in a brewery. “It seemed like everyone was so cool, having so much fun,” Nathan explained. He accepted an entry-level job delivering kegs for just above minimum wage, which he saw as a necessary step to get his foot in the door in the industry.

Many of these same workers idealized industry colleagues who, like them, demonstrated their pure passion through substantial outlays of resources and personal sacrifices in order to “make it” in craft beer jobs. Jerry, for instance, described the ideal traits he values in workers he hires:

Author: Thinking about people who are working on the brew side in general, what would you say are some of the skills that really make for somebody who’s going to do well in that capacity?

Jerry: It’s going to be drive and passion, again. Because you’re going to have to do stuff like the packaging team. It’s such a repetitive job where you just do the same thing over and over every day. But if you’re willing to stick through that and work hard at it with a good attitude, then you have a good chance of moving up and moving along. So yeah, definitely passion and drive. That’ll get you to cellar [position] and brewhouse.

Jerry pointed to passion as a core quality he looks for, particularly in brewers. He expected these workers to have made sacrifices—of resources, of time, of more lucrative possible careers—to work in craft beer, akin to what Adler (2021) described as a “commitment device” to a particular line of work, especially one that does not offer high wages or status.

By contrast, women and people of color employed at breweries were far less likely to enact pure passion for their jobs. Not that they did not enjoy working in this industry or express satisfaction with their jobs. However, whereas white men said they were “obsessed” with craft beer and driven to “do anything” to work in this industry, women and people of color were often more muted about their relationship to craft beer jobs and what they were willing to commit to them. Some mentioned alternate career interests and even “passions” that paralleled their brewery employment. For example, Enrique, a 29-year-old Latino man, drew a distinction between his relationship to craft beer and that of his white male colleagues:

Author: If we were to sit down in five years, where am I going to find you? And what might that look like for you moving forward?

Enrique: I really want to work in the movie industry… I mean, this has been a great job. It’s a great opportunity and I’ve been able to build my resume and live a really comfortable life. Something I’ve been struggling with a lot in the past few months is saying, “Hey, I kind of want to be a starving artist.” But I think, not to say this over and over again, but I think coming from a really bad background—a really poor background, overcoming a lot of abuse—it’s been hard to have confidence to do that.

For workers such as Enrique, committing extra time and money beyond what their job entailed would take away opportunities to use these resources toward other pursuits. Enrique added, “I can’t tell you how many times I’ll overhear my [white] coworkers talking about staying after their shifts to do a ‘bottle-share’ of stuff they’ve brought in themselves. I’m like, when it is time to go home, I’m ready.” Enrique clearly differentiated his own relationship with working in this industry from that of his colleagues, particularly white men. Yet precisely because making extra commitments to the job was what others in the industry valued and saw as evidence of pure passion, workers from nondominant groups such as Enrique were more likely to find themselves excluded from full membership within craft beer industry circles—including in their own workplaces.

“I Do This for Fun Anyway”: Downplaying Employment and Playing Up Passion. White men in this study systematically downplayed the fact that craft beer was their job and not just a hobby or form of “serious leisure” (Stebbins 2007). Many were reluctant to talk about wages or paid time off or health benefits because for them, their brewery jobs were
not about any of these things. Through normalizing “economic disinterest” (Bourdieu 1985) with their jobs, these workers obscured the racialized class privilege that undergirded their relationship to relatively low-paying work in this specialized field. Instead, they saw colleagues who drew excessive attention to the formal aspects of their employment as deviating from the ideal of pure passion for this line of work.

Grant, a college-educated white man in his late 20s, started working at a craft brewery because he liked “hanging out” there as a patron. This included talking to the bartenders and sampling every seasonal beer the brewery made. After several months of regularly patronizing the brewery taproom after getting off work as a golf course superintendent, one of the managers there, a white man around the same age as Grant, offered him a part-time job bussing tables. He accepted, dismissing the 50 percent pay cut he incurred with a shrug. “For me, it’s not about the money,” Grant explained. Instead he saw this job as an opportunity to immerse himself even more in his preferred environment; getting paid to do so was a perk.

The pure passion for craft beer that workers such as Grant exhibited can motivate them to leave well-compensated jobs outside the industry for poorly paid positions within it. In doing so, they trade earning potential for passion potential. For example, one college-educated white man said he got fed up with all the rules and “bean counting” involved with his job at a large, corporate-run brewery. He took a significant pay cut to work as a craft brewer in a smaller workplace instead. Similarly, a college-educated white woman in her 30s described leaving her “soul sucking” job selling “shitty” beer to instead sell the products she loved as a craft beer sales representative. Many of these workers played up the immaterial rewards of working in craft beer. In a workplace where pure passion was central to why people sought jobs, both managers and workers alike pointed to “loving your job” as an employment benefit itself, and something they expected to resonate with many of their coworkers. For example, Joanne, a white woman who co-owns a small brewery with her husband, described how the head brewer (Brandon, a white man in his 40s) managed his brewhouse staff: “Brandon tells the brewers: ‘Guys, I know you are killing yourself twice a week brewing these double batches, but try to find the joy in what you are doing!’” In this sense, Joanne and Brandon both saw “joy” as a key job perk of working in craft beer.

For similar reasons, being suspected of having a less-than-pure passion for working in craft beer can register as a grave insult to workers. Dennis, a white man in his early 30s, illustrated this by recounting an exchange that occurred after he informed his boss that he was leaving his head brewer job to go to work for another brewery:

One of the most offensive things that happened to me at Murphy’s Brewing was when the owner’s wife told me, “so are you just going to remake all of our beers at your new place?” And my reply was, “why would I? I have over 100 recipes that I never brewed while I was the brewer there. You think I need this? You don’t seem to get it, this is what I’m good at. Creating new recipes is why I do this.” [Emphasis added]

As a head brewer, Dennis interpreted his boss’s inquiry as questioning the pure passion he felt for craft brewing and the pride he took in constantly innovating new recipes on his own. For this reason, having his boss tell him not to “remake” the same product recipes—a standard precaution in many industries to protect intellectual property when employees leave—threatened Dennis’ identity as someone who was devoted to craft brewing independent of job or business requirements. In emphasizing repeatedly that his boss’s wife “did not know anything about brewing,” Dennis may have also felt his masculinity was being threatened by a woman who he perceived to be less passionate about craft beer and “overly” concerned about the company’s bottom line.

Being surrounded by workers who enacted pure passion for their jobs in craft beer was particularly frustrating for those who did not relate to their jobs this way. For many working-class people of color, downplaying formal employment and pursuing a job out of passion was not the reason they worked in this industry, which placed them at odds with their white, class-privileged colleagues. For example, Josiah, a Native American man in his early 30s, had little exposure to craft beer while growing up on an Indian reservation in northwestern New Mexico and later, during a stint in the marine corps. Josiah got a job as a cellar worker at a craft brewery, doing “basic” (his word) brewhouse tasks, such as attaching hose clamps and properly sanitizing fermentation tanks, through his cousin who also worked at the brewery. Several months into his tenure, Josiah’s boss asked him to help train new brewhouse hires, who Josiah described as mostly white, college-educated men with plenty of passion for working in craft beer but limited knowledge of the hard labor involved:

Josiah: When people who have college degrees and say they are into beer come through [get hired], I kind of get annoyed. Because those people are not doing the job, cutting corners on how they should do things, not necessarily following how things are done at [the brewery]. They just kind of fuck things up.

Author: So it is annoying to be a part of that work atmosphere?

Josiah: Hell yeah. And even more annoying when you’ve done the thing time and time again and this person has done it for the sixth, seventh time and they still can’t grasp it. You are still trying to explain to this person, and they are coming to you asking what they are doing. I was like, they told us before, figure it the fuck out. Like when I was in the Marine Corps: figure it the fuck out. Things not working out? Figure it the fuck out.
Josiah’s own relationship to his job is best encapsulated by his expression “figure it the fuck out,” which downplays the importance of pure passion while emphasizing pragmatic job skills used at work. In this sense, Josiah’s approach to work reflects aspects of working-class masculinity (Desmond 2007) that prioritize physicality and self-reliance. This approach contrasts that of the brewery’s new hires, which was steeped in class-privileged whiteness (seeking a brewery job because one is really “into beer”). Yet it was the latter relationship to work that many of Josiah’s peers, including his boss, not only expressed personally but also valued in others.

Although workers from disadvantaged social backgrounds were less likely to express passion for craft beer as a driving force behind their industry employment, some of those that did describe additional barriers to entering the industry on their terms. Ricardo, a 36-year-old Latino man, first became interested in craft beer after his involvement in a Latinx-focused homebrewing club in Los Angeles. This experience subsequently sparked his interest in working in the craft beer industry:

The beer stuff along with music, that’s my passion, so how do I merge them under one umbrella and give myself a chance to make a living as well? Do something I love and pay the bills? I’m sitting here and I’m looking like, okay, I have no access to capital. There’s nobody in my family that has a background in business. My parents aren’t business owners, my parents don’t know anything about business. And then my friends start actually doing it, start getting their business plans together, start raising capital, start going through the whole process. And man, they’re like a year into the process and they’re still not opening their doors, but they’re still shelling out all this money, paying all this debt. And so they open doors and they’re like $400,000, $500,000 in debt right off the bat, I’m like, “I don’t know if I want to do that.”

Ricardo’s passion for craft beer existed in lockstep with practical employment considerations of money and job security (”[how do I] do something I love and pay the bills?”). As a result, Ricardo found himself staring down job prospects in the industry that he perceived to be either too costly (brewery entrepreneurship), or, although not stated directly, too low paying to be support his family (such as Josiah’s cellar job). Shaped by structural inequalities related to race and class, Ricardo was unable to express a privileged version of this relationship to craft beer as evident in educated white men’s ability to downplay formal employment or business economic considerations within the industry.

“For This Is a Way of Life”: Consuming the Lifestyle of Craft Beer. Many craft beer workers in this study said a key perk of their job was how well it fit within their broader set of activities they engaged in. This was due in part to the flexible schedules and informal work atmospheres of their respective brewery workplaces. Yet it was educated white men who were most likely to see their jobs as transcending employment and representing to a chosen lifestyle. Looking past their modest wages and uncertain hours, these workers asserted that working in craft beer was a “way of life”: an embodiment of what they were passionate about. For example, Aaron, a white man and brewer, explained that his decision to pursue a career in craft beer reflected a core dimension of his self-identity:

I really flipped my perception of the narrative, you know, go to college, put on the suit, go to the city. There has got to be some other way to approach things! And you read a lot of things like: if it is not this big [extends his hands outward], then don’t do it. Or, that’s not successful. And I started over a five- or six-year period, reading a lot and realizing that you really get to define what success is to you. It is not this other bigger measure of something.

Aaron rejected the traditionally masculine logic of pursuing a career in order to provide for one’s family as a breadwinner and instead opted for a career that spoke to his heart (“you really get to define what success is to you”). Although his choice to leave his well-paying job in marketing was not easy, Aaron’s pursuit of a career in craft beer reflected what he loved to do with his time both on and off the clock.

Other workers emphasized the deep satisfaction they got from working with their hands to create things. Exemplifying Sennett’s (2008) notion of “the craftsman,” including the gendered characterization of this worker, a brewer named Jonathan described how he was “always tinkering with things while growing up,” such as breaking down radios and motorcycle engines in order to rebuild them. For Jonathan, working at a small brewery allowed him to continue to use his hands not only to brew but also to help repair the “DIY” equipment in his workplace, which constantly broke down. On the day I witnessed Jonathan working in the brewhouse, he was smiling and laughing as he constantly moving between brewing equipment, pulling open one valve, moving a hose, and hoisting sacks of grain into the mash tun. After clocking out, he stayed an extra two hours to have several beers with his coworkers. For workers like Jonathan, enacting pure passion for work transcended a single moment within the workday and spoke to a preferred way of life.

For others, expressing pure passion was intimately tied to imbibing craft beer and socializing with others who shared this interest. These individuals “consumed” work socially rather than merely laboring at it (Besen-Cassino 2014). A white man in his 40s named Jack said that he used to look forward to heading into his local brewery after getting off work as a welder to have a beer and talk with the bartenders. When he was laid off from this job, one of the brewery managers offered him a part-time job cleaning kegs, an opportunity Jack said he initially embraced in order to be closer to the beer he drank and the people who made it. Now an assistant brewer, Jack explained, “I love that I know everyone...
here from before, and after I finish brewing, I can still head over to the taproom and drink beer I helped make. For free.” For Jack, being at the brewery is an extension of his preferred lifestyle, one that blends both craft beer production and consumption.

A majority of white men in this study said they relished the opportunity to “hang out” at their breweries even when not working. Spending time at their respective workplaces off the clock deepened the love these individuals had for this line of work. Doing so also fostered social connections with coworkers and customers who displayed similar lifestyle interests (Land and Taylor 2010), in this case centered on craft products. For example, several white male workers said they coordinated a weekly “bottle share” among the brew-house staff where everyone brought in a new beer from a different brewery to taste. During these bottle shares, workers pulled together metal chairs and sacks of malted barley to sit and drink; their workplace doubled as the primary venue for this weekly social event where talk of beer got mixed in with sexual jokes and “war stories” about getting drunk at other craft breweries. In this way, white men enacted a racialized, classed, and gendered relationship to their craft jobs in ways that transcended employment and evoked leisure and comradery.

To be sure, women and people of color occasionally participated in the social lifestyles of their workplaces, and few in this study reported being overtly excluded from the off-hour activities put on by their white male coworkers. Yet it was also clear to these individuals who the core employees at the brewery were as well as the whiteness, class-privilege, and maleness of the workplace culture they were a part of (see Withers 2017). For example, Ariana, a 28-year-old Latina woman who worked in a brewery taproom, privately expressed shock that her manager, a white man in his mid-20s, thought it was okay to have one of the white brewers dress up in the attire of a well-known Mexican festival and parade around the brewery making jokes with customers while selling the brewery’s Mexican-themed beer. “It’s like, we couldn’t even find a Hispanic man to do that?” said Ariana, adding: “These are things that I am never not thinking about while I’m at work.” In light of this, it is somewhat surprising that Ariana still claimed to enjoy her brewery job. Yet within the “bearded white guy” space of craft breweries, women and people of color such as Ariana routinely did not feel that they were full participants in their workplace’s culture. Nor were they part of the in-group of white men who were able to enact pure passion by installing their lifestyles and interests as the default within these workplaces.

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent scholarship describes how passion functions as an important cultural logic of work in the new economy, albeit one with mixed implications for workers (Cech 2021; DePalma 2021; Tan and Jachimowicz 2000). The present study builds on research linking passion to social inequality in contemporary workplaces by emphasizing how passion gets enacted by workers in ways that are racialized, classed, and gendered and subsequently treated as the ideal relationship to work. Drawing on a case study of U.S. craft brewery workers, I argue that pure passion—a relationship to one’s job which incorporates work, play, and lifestyle—operates as the central cultural logic of work within the industry. Class-privileged white men enacted pure passion in three primary ways: by committing material and symbolic resources to their job pursuits, by downplaying concerns about their formal employment, and by consuming the lifestyles associated with their jobs. In this sense, enacting pure passion threaded together elements of work, leisure, and lifestyle for these workers. Yet because enacting pure passion is done through social privilege—specifically, whiteness, class privilege, and masculinity—these workers normalize a cultural logic of work that shores up the dominant position of educated white men within craft breweries.

As a cultural logic of work, pure passion reinforces existing forms of structural inequality within contemporary workplaces in ways that are subtle and inconspicuous. Indeed, whether one expresses pure passion or not appears to be derived solely from one’s preference for work and “commitment” to their career. On the contrary, this study shows how the enactment of pure passion is racialized, classed, and gendered, such that expressing this relationship to work is premised on economic security, racialized tastes associated with whiteness, and membership within privileged social networks and organizational spaces. Furthermore, the expectation by managers and workers alike that their colleagues will exhibit pure passion illustrates how this cultural mechanism of social inequality (Lareau 2015) gets entrenched within particular workplaces and other industry settings.

The ideal of pure passion for work is not confined to craft breweries. The findings of this research likely extend to other modern craft workplaces that center values such as authenticity and reward people for their devotion to specialized products and production methods (Land 2018; Ocejo 2017; Thurnell-Read 2014). Insofar as modern craft workers continue to idealize and treat as normative colleagues who enact pure passion in ways described above, they will continue to center whiteness, class privilege, and masculinity (see Tak et al., 2019) within these settings. Future research could fruitfully examine the extent to which socially exclusive relationship to work gets expressed in other craft work contexts in which women are overrepresented, as with Etsy producers (see McRobbie 2018), or in which working-class men make up the majority of workers, as in the case of classic car repair (Bozkurt and Cohen 2019). Pure passion is also likely to be seen as an idealized cultural logic of work in settings that stress meaningful work (e.g., Bunderson and Thompson 2009) or are widely understood to involve material sacrifice and exposure to employment risk, such as in creative and cultural industries.
In all such cases, it is not only the set of cultural values surrounding work that have implications for social inequality but also how these values get enacted by workers in ways that are racialized, classed, and gendered.

Furthermore, even in settings in which pure passion remains the idealized cultural logic of work, it may not be the only one with value among workers. One emergent pattern in the data for this larger research project (but not fully explored here) is that a number of workers who are women and people of color may be accessing alternative career pathways within the craft beer industry less dictated by pure passion and the privileged statuses that frame it. Expressing different relationships to their jobs—for instance, by voicing social justice advocacy through their employment platform—could be a source of strategic advantage for some workers in an era when more organizations are publicly signaling their support for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (see Chapman and Brunsma 2020; Wilson 2022; Wilson and Stone 2022).

As an alternative cultural logic of work that highlights social identity issues, especially those that are underrepresented, the popularization of this narrative could potentially support the upward mobility of workers from marginalized social groups. However, this same trend could also put these same workers at risk for shouldering the burdens of the company’s superficial diversity efforts (Berrey 2015)—a process that Wingfield (2019) called “racial outsourcing” (Wingfield and Alston 2014). This would reinforce the structural disadvantages experienced by women and people of color in workplaces that otherwise idealize pure passion and the unbridled pursuit of (craft) work above all else.

One limitation of the present research is that I was unable to assess the extent to which workers from dominant status groups (e.g., educated white men) were able to penalize others who did not display pure passion. That is, although the former frequently enacted pure passion and lauded similar expressions of this cultural logic of work by their colleagues, I observed fewer instances of workers deliberately excluding less passionate workers through either formal means (denying them promotions) or informal means (leaving them off communication chains). Following Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt’s (2019) notion of studying “relational inequalities” in the workplace, additional research could bolster the findings of this study by examining whether pure passion is systematically used by managers as job criteria at key employment junctures, or, alternatively, by workers from dominant groups to exact social closure against workers from nondominant groups. That said, this study does suggest that pure passion contributes to the exclusion of women and people of color in modern craft workplaces because enacting this particular relationship to work is predicated on one’s cultural fit among socially privileged colleagues (Rivera 2012).

This is consistent with previous research showing that men’s devotion to their jobs are viewed more positively than women’s (Blair-Loy 2003; Correll et al. 2020), just as people of color must contend with racialized assumptions about their commitment and competence on the job (Evans and Moore 2015). Pure passion derives much of its value within the workplace because of who enacts it.

In sum, this research corroborates recent studies suggesting that passion represents a key component in today’s culture of work and one that contributes to the persistence of social inequalities among workers (Cech 2021; DePalma 2021; Rao and Tobias Neely 2019). By specifying how educated white men enact and value a privileged version of passion (pure passion) in craft breweries, this research advances our understanding of the cultural mechanisms that serve to reinforce social inequalities based on race, class, gender, and other statuses in contemporary workplaces. Talk of passion may be increasingly common among workers today, but not all ways of enacting it hold equal value in the workplace.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Odul Bozkurt, Erin Cech, Ruben Hernandez-Leon, Phi Hong Su, Michael Siciliano, and members of the Book Working Group at the University of New Mexico for valuable feedback on previous drafts of this paper. All remaining errors are my own.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research received funding from University of New Mexico’s research allocation committee grant.

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