

# A Deep-Dive into Consumer Motivations and IMC Strategy Development for Ready-to-Drink Cocktails: A Case Study of High Noon Tequila

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**Abstract.** The global Ready-to-Drink cocktail market is characterized by rapid growth and intense functional homogenization, pushing brands to seek differentiation beyond product attributes. This qualitative case study explores the underlying psychological, emotional, and cultural motivations driving consumer preference for High Noon Tequila within this competitive landscape. Through in-depth interviews with six regular consumers and a thematic analysis, the study identifies four core motivational themes: the use of the brand as a symbol for group belonging, the perception of its authenticity enabling a “smart choice” identity, its role in facilitating contextualized effortless sophistication, and its delivery of a controlled pleasurable release. Interpreted through Symbolic Consumption and Self-Determination Theory, these findings are synthesized into a central consumer insight: High Noon Tequila functions as a “Sanctioned Transition Ritual,” allowing consumers to legitimately shift from daily responsibilities to a valued leisure identity. Ultimately, the study translates this foundational insight into a proposed Integrated Marketing Communications campaign, “The Sanctioned Shift,” demonstrating how deep consumer understanding can forge a meaningful competitive advantage by addressing fundamental psychological needs.

**Keywords:** Ready-to-Drink Cocktails; Consumer Motivation; Self-Determination Theory; Symbolic Consumption; Integrated Marketing Communications; Brand Authenticity.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The global alcoholic beverage market is undergoing a profound transformation, with the Ready-to-Drink (RTD) category emerging as one of the fastest-growing segments, driven by its convenience, diversity, and innovative appeal. The RTD cocktails market has experienced rapid expansion with younger demographics increasingly choosing premixed cocktails over traditional formats, and the premium spirit-based segment expected to grow significantly in the coming years[1].

Within this category, Hard Seltzers and Cocktails-in-a-Can have rapidly captured the attention of younger consumers by emphasizing low-calorie, low-sugar formulations, refreshing tastes, and versatile consumption occasions, thereby creating a fiercely competitive and increasingly saturated market landscape. RTD brands are increasingly promoting lower alcohol content and diverse flavor profiles to meet these preferences[2].

In this context, spirit-based brand extensions, such as High Noon Tequila, aim to carve out a new niche for premium, convenient experiences amidst competition from traditional beers, hard seltzers, and pre-mixed cocktails. Premiumization and bar-quality experience expectations are key trends propelling spirit-based RTDs[3].

However, market growth has led to significant homogenization. Numerous brands now tout similar functional benefits: the use of real spirits, natural flavors, low-calorie recipes, and convenient canned formats. As attributes like “healthy,” “convenient,” and “natural” become standard category expectations, marketing messages relying solely on functional advantages lose their potency, and brands risk being trapped in an increasingly commoditized competitive landscape. For High Noon Tequila, the core challenge is no longer simply informing consumers what the product is, but rather answering a more profound question: amidst numerous functionally similar options, why High Noon?

This challenge points to a central issue in consumer behavior research: in the fast-moving consumer goods sector, particularly within emotionally and symbolically charged markets like alcoholic beverages, the ultimate purchase decision is often driven not by rational functional comparisons, but by deeper psychological needs, identity projects, and cultural affiliations. Previous research on consumption behavior points out that social context and emotional meaning often shape drinking habits beyond rational utility[4].

Consequently, understanding the emotional connection between consumers and a brand—a connection that transcends mere utilitarian benefits—becomes crucial for building differentiated brand equity and achieving effective communication.

Against this backdrop, this study posits the following core research question: Within the functionally homogenous market of ready-to-drink cocktails, what are the underlying psychological, emotional, and cultural motivations driving consumer preference for High Noon Tequila?

To address this question, this research aims to look beyond surface-level factors such as price, flavor, and packaging. Through in-depth qualitative exploration, it seeks to uncover the fundamental, universal “human insight” hidden beneath consumer behavior. The ultimate objective of this study is not only to reveal why consumers choose this brand but also to translate this foundational insight into the cornerstone of an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) strategy. This will provide a robust theoretical and practical foundation for the brand to execute persuasive and effective communication within a complex marketplace.

## **1.2 Significance of the Study**

### **1.2.1 Theoretical Significance**

This study aims to deepen and extend the application and understanding of core theories in consumer behavior within the contemporary fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market, particularly the alcoholic beverage sector. By focusing on the specific case of High Noon Tequila, the research seeks to enrich the conceptual foundations of emotional consumption and symbolic consumption theories, which emphasize that consumption is driven not only by functional utility but also by experiential pleasure, emotions, and meaning-making processes[5] [6].

Existing scholarship has often concentrated on high-value, high-involvement durable goods or luxury items, where symbolic meanings and identity expression are more overt, leaving a relative gap in the micro-level examination of how emotional and symbolic meanings drive decision-making for high-frequency, low-involvement FMCG products[7]. Through in-depth interviews, this study endeavors to reveal the processes through which consumers project emotional values (e.g., relaxation, pleasure, and a sense of control) and social symbolic meanings (e.g., taste, identity, and group belonging) onto a can of ready-to-drink cocktail.

In doing so, the product is transformed from a mere “functional object for quenching thirst or seeking a buzz” into a “vehicle of meaning” that carries personal narratives and facilitates social interaction, reflecting the broader cultural perspective that consumer goods function as symbolic carriers embedded in everyday life[8]. This exploration will not only offer empirical substantiation for existing theories within an emerging consumption context but also contribute to a more precise positioning of RTD consumption motivations along the utilitarian - hedonic spectrum, a foundational framework in consumer behavior research[7][9]. In this way, the study addresses a notable research gap concerning the application of emotional and symbolic consumption theories to niche FMCG markets.

### **1.2.2 Practical Significance**

On a practical level, this study delivers direct and actionable value for brand managers and marketing practitioners. Primarily, its core output—a “human insight” into consumers’ underlying motivations—will provide a critical evidence-based foundation for the High Noon brand to formulate its subsequent Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) strategy. Communication strategies rooted in deep insight can transcend generic functional messaging to directly address the emotional

needs and aspirational values of the target audience. This approach fosters stronger, more differentiated brand connections amidst market clutter, thereby enhancing the conversion efficiency of marketing investments and brand loyalty.

Secondly, the qualitative research paradigm employed in this study—centered on “in-depth interviews” and “thematic analysis”—offers the industry a replicable, systematic framework for excavating profound consumer insights. In an era of data saturation, this methodology emphasizes a return to a deep understanding of people. It empowers brands to look beyond surface-level correlations found in big data and capture the nuanced emotional and cultural undercurrents often missed by quantitative research. Consequently, it provides a classic research pathway from “data” to “insight,” offering valuable methodological reference for the broader RTD beverage industry and the FMCG sector at large.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter aims to systematically review the key concepts, theoretical foundations, and prior research relevant to this study, thereby establishing a solid theoretical basis and academic context for the subsequent research design and analysis. Specifically, this chapter first defines ready-to-drink (RTD) alcoholic beverages and related consumer behavior concepts, then introduces and elaborates on the core theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, and finally reviews and evaluates existing research on alcohol consumption motivations and Generation Z consumption trends. Through this process, the chapter clarifies the theoretical positioning and research gap addressed by the present study.

### **2.1 Definition of Key Concepts**

#### **2.1.1 Ready-to-Drink Alcoholic Beverages (RTDs)**

Ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages (RTDs) generally refer to alcohol products that are pre-mixed and ready for immediate consumption, requiring no additional preparation by consumers. Common packaging formats include cans and bottles. This category typically encompasses pre-mixed cocktails, hard seltzers, and spirit-based RTD beverages. Prior academic research and industry reports indicate that the core value of RTD beverages lies in their convenience, flavor variety, and adaptability to diverse consumption occasions, which has driven their rapid adoption among younger consumer segments.

From a consumer research perspective, RTD beverages are not merely functional drink choices but have increasingly evolved into lifestyle symbols that embody meanings associated with relaxation, sociability, and contemporary leisure culture. This perspective aligns with cultural consumption research, which emphasizes that everyday consumer goods often function as carriers of social and cultural meaning[8]. As such, RTD beverages provide a particularly relevant context for examining the construction of emotional and symbolic meanings within high-frequency, low-involvement consumption.

#### **2.1.2 Hard Seltzer**

Hard seltzer represents one of the fastest-growing subcategories within the RTD market. Typically based on carbonated water with added alcohol and fruit flavors, hard seltzers are commonly positioned around low-calorie, low-sugar, or “better-for-you” attributes. Existing academic and industry research suggests that the success of hard seltzers cannot be attributed solely to their functional characteristics. Rather, their appeal is closely tied to a consumption narrative emphasizing lightness, guilt-free enjoyment, and health consciousness without sacrificing pleasure, a pattern consistent with prior findings on the legitimization of hedonic consumption in low-risk contexts[7]. This narrative has laid important cognitive and symbolic groundwork for the emergence of premium, spirit-based RTD products such as High Noon Tequila.

### **2.1.3 Consumer Motivation: Utilitarian and Hedonic Motivation**

Consumer motivation is a central construct in consumer behavior research and is commonly conceptualized as comprising utilitarian motivation and hedonic motivation. Utilitarian motivation emphasizes functional, instrumental, and problem-solving value, whereas hedonic motivation focuses on emotional experiences, sensory pleasure, and symbolic meaning derived from consumption. This distinction has become a foundational framework for understanding consumer attitudes and choices[7].

In the context of food and beverage products and other fast-moving consumer goods, traditional research has often simplified consumer choice as being driven primarily by price, convenience, and taste. However, more recent studies have demonstrated that even in low-involvement consumption contexts, consumers actively express emotional states, lifestyle orientations, and self-identity through brand choice, a phenomenon well documented in experiential and symbolic consumption research[6] [10]. This perspective provides a critical theoretical foundation for examining emotional consumption motivations within the RTD cocktail category.

### **2.1.4 Brand Emotional Connection**

Brand emotional connection refers to the emotional attachment and psychological bond that consumers develop with a brand over time. Unlike brand attitudes grounded primarily in functional evaluation, emotional connection emphasizes the affective significance and symbolic role a brand plays in consumers' lives. Prior research indicates that strong brand emotional connections are positively associated with brand loyalty, willingness to engage in word-of-mouth communication, and tolerance for price fluctuations[11].

In product categories characterized by strong social and situational attributes, such as alcoholic beverages, brand emotional connections are often reinforced through consumption occasions, social interactions, and cultural narratives. Accordingly, examining RTD cocktail brands from the perspective of emotional connection enables a deeper understanding of competitive advantage beyond functional product attributes.

## **2.2 Theoretical Foundations**

### **2.2.1 Self-Determination Theory and Consumer Behavior**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan, posits that human behavior is driven by the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness[12]. When behaviors satisfy these needs, individuals are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, higher levels of satisfaction, and sustained engagement.

In consumer behavior research, SDT has been widely applied to explain why consumers are drawn to products and brands that provide psychological fulfillment beyond functional utility. Even within everyday consumption contexts, consumers may use brand choices to experience a sense of control over their lifestyle (autonomy), affirmation of personal taste and judgment (competence), and emotional or social connection with others (relatedness). RTD cocktail consumption often occurs in contexts associated with relaxation, socialization, or self-reward, making it highly compatible with the psychological needs emphasized by SDT.

### **2.2.2 Symbolic Consumption Theory**

Symbolic consumption theory posits that consumers do not consume products solely for their physical attributes but also for their capacity to convey and construct meaning related to the self. Belk's concept of the "extended self" suggests that products and brands can function as symbolic resources that consumers incorporate into their self-concepts and personal narratives[6].

Within alcohol consumption contexts, brand choice frequently serves a social signaling function, communicating lifestyle preferences, social attitudes, and group affiliation. For RTD cocktails, elements such as packaging design, brand storytelling, and consumption occasions collectively form a symbolic system through which the product becomes embedded in everyday social interaction and

self-expression. This theoretical perspective provides a critical lens for understanding how RTD cocktails transcend functional beverage attributes to become meaningful cultural artifacts.

### **2.2.3 Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)**

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory emphasizes a consumer-centric approach to brand communication, advocating for the coordination of messaging across multiple touchpoints based on a unified core idea. Early IMC scholars argue that effective brand communication should be grounded in a deep understanding of consumer insight rather than fragmented, channel-driven messaging[13].

In highly homogenized RTD markets, IMC theory offers strategic guidance on how brands can translate a central “human insight” into consistent narratives across media channels. By deriving core consumer motivations through qualitative research, the present study aims to construct an IMC strategy for High Noon Tequila that is anchored in a single, compelling insight, thereby demonstrating the practical application of IMC principles in a contemporary FMCG context.

## **2.3 Review of Prior Studies**

### **2.3.1 Research on Alcohol Consumption Motivation**

Existing research on alcohol consumption has primarily focused on the classification of drinking motives, the influence of social contexts, and health-related risk perceptions. Psychological studies commonly distinguish among social, coping, and enhancement drinking motives, suggesting that alcohol consumption is closely linked to emotion regulation and social interaction[14]. However, much of this literature relies heavily on quantitative survey methods and places limited emphasis on how consumers construct emotional and symbolic meanings through specific brand and product choices.

### **2.3.2 Generation Z and Young Consumers’ Consumption Trends**

Research on Generation Z and younger consumer cohorts consistently indicates that these groups place greater importance on authenticity, emotional resonance, and alignment between brand values and personal identity. In the alcoholic beverage category, younger consumers are concerned not only with taste and perceived healthfulness but also with whether brands reflect their lifestyle aspirations and social values[15]. Nevertheless, much of the existing research remains at a macro-trend level, with relatively limited exploration of the micro-level psychological mechanisms underlying consumption in specific categories such as RTD cocktails.

### **2.3.3 Research Gaps and Positioning of the Present Study**

In summary, while prior literature provides valuable insights into alcohol consumption behavior and generational consumption patterns, several gaps remain. First, academic research specifically addressing RTD cocktails as an emerging product category remains limited. Second, the micro-level processes through which emotional and symbolic meanings are constructed in low-involvement, high-frequency consumption contexts have not been sufficiently explored through qualitative methods. Third, the systematic linkage between consumer motivation research and the development of integrated marketing communications strategies remains underdeveloped.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts an in-depth interview approach with High Noon Tequila consumers to systematically uncover emotional and symbolic consumption motivations within the RTD cocktail category. Furthermore, the study translates these insights into the construction of an integrated marketing communications strategy, thereby contributing both theoretical and practical value to the literature on consumer behavior and contemporary brand communication.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Paradigm**

This study adopts an interpretivist - constructivist research paradigm to explore consumers' underlying motivations and meaning-making processes in the context of ready-to-drink (RTD) alcoholic beverages. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed rather than objectively given, and that individuals actively interpret their experiences based on personal histories, social interactions, and cultural contexts [16] [17]. From this perspective, consumer behavior cannot be fully understood through causal explanation or variable-based measurement alone, but instead requires an in-depth examination of how consumers perceive, narrate, and assign meaning to their consumption practices.

Within the interpretivist - constructivist tradition, consumption is viewed as a symbolic and experiential activity embedded in everyday life. As Denzin and Lincoln argue, meanings are co-created through interaction between individuals and their social environments [18]. In the context of RTD cocktails, consumers' brand choices may reflect not only functional considerations such as taste or convenience, but also emotional states, lifestyle aspirations, identity negotiations, and culturally shared norms around alcohol consumption. Therefore, this paradigm is particularly suitable for examining how High Noon Tequila consumers construct subjective meanings around drinking occasions and how these meanings influence brand preference. By prioritizing participants' own voices and interpretations, this study seeks to generate contextually grounded insights rather than universal generalizations.

#### **3.2 Research Method: Qualitative In-depth Interviews**

To address the research question concerning the psychological, emotional, and cultural motivations behind consumers' preference for High Noon Tequila, this study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically in-depth interviews. Qualitative methods are widely recognized as appropriate for exploring complex, implicit, and emotionally laden phenomena that are difficult to capture through structured surveys or experimental designs [19] [20]. Consumer motivations related to alcohol consumption often involve tacit feelings, symbolic meanings, and socially negotiated norms, which require open-ended exploration rather than predetermined response categories.

In-depth interviews allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words, providing access to rich narratives that reveal how consumers interpret their drinking behaviors and brand choices. This method offers flexibility for probing emerging themes, clarifying ambiguous statements, and exploring unanticipated insights during the interview process. Compared with focus groups, in-depth interviews also reduce social desirability bias and peer influence, which is particularly important when discussing personal consumption habits and emotional experiences. As such, in-depth interviews are well suited to uncovering the emotional and symbolic dimensions of RTD cocktail consumption within a competitive and functionally homogeneous market.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

##### **3.3.1 Sampling Strategy**

This study employs purposive sampling to select information-rich participants who are directly relevant to the research objectives [20]. The sample consists of six individuals who report stable and regular consumption of High Noon Tequila. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the goal of this sampling strategy is to capture depth, relevance, and diversity of perspectives among experienced consumers of the brand.

To ensure variation in lived experiences, the sampling process considered differences in gender, age (22-35 years old), and typical drinking occasions, such as social gatherings with friends, outdoor or leisure activities, and relaxation at home. This age range corresponds broadly to younger adult consumers, who constitute a core target segment for RTD alcoholic beverages. Prior qualitative

research suggests that when a study focuses on a relatively specific consumer group, a small number of carefully selected interviews can be sufficient to reach thematic saturation, where no substantially new themes emerge from additional data[21]. Therefore, a sample size of six participants is considered appropriate and methodologically defensible for the exploratory aims of this study.

### **3.3.2 Interview Guide Design**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to provide a clear analytical focus while maintaining flexibility to explore participants' unique experiences. Semi-structured interviews balance consistency across interviews with openness to emergent insights, making them particularly suitable for interpretivist qualitative research. The interview guide was organized around four key dimensions derived from the literature review: consumption experiences, perceived meanings, identity expression and social symbolism, and broader cultural or lifestyle influences.

Questions related to consumption experiences explored when, where, and with whom participants typically consume High Noon Tequila, as well as the emotions and sensations associated with these occasions. Questions on meaning and symbolism examined what the brand represents to participants and how it differs from other alcoholic beverage options. Identity-related questions focused on whether and how consuming High Noon Tequila aligns with participants' self-image or desired social identity. Finally, questions addressing cultural and lifestyle influences probed the role of health consciousness, social norms, and generational values in shaping consumption choices. Open-ended wording and follow-up prompts were used throughout to encourage reflection and depth of response.

### **3.3.3 Interview Procedure**

Interviews were conducted either online or offline depending on participants' availability and personal preferences. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for rapport building, in-depth discussion, and probing of key themes. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of data capture. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, preserving participants' original wording for analysis. Conducting interviews in a flexible and participant-centered manner helped create a comfortable environment in which participants felt able to openly discuss their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences related to alcohol consumption and brand choice.

## **3.4 Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within data[22]. Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for both inductive exploration of participants' narratives and theoretically informed interpretation of emerging themes.

The analysis followed a systematic, multi-stage coding process. First, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of text and generate initial codes closely grounded in participants' language. Second, axial coding was used to examine relationships among these codes and to organize them into broader conceptual categories. Finally, selective coding was applied to integrate and refine these categories into a set of core themes that captured the central motivational structures underlying High Noon Tequila consumption. Throughout the process, coding decisions were revisited iteratively, allowing themes to be refined and clarified. This reflexive approach is consistent with later developments of thematic analysis that emphasize the active role of the researcher in meaning construction[23][24].

## **3.5 Research Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted multiple strategies consistent with qualitative research standards. Drawing on the framework proposed by Lincoln and

Guba[25], the study addressed credibility, dependability, and transferability rather than traditional quantitative notions of reliability and validity.

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby preliminary interpretations and themes were shared with selected participants to assess whether the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Dependability was supported through peer debriefing, in which coding decisions and thematic interpretations were discussed with academic peers to reduce individual researcher bias and enhance analytical transparency[18]. Transferability was addressed through the use of thick description, including detailed contextual information and illustrative quotations, enabling readers to assess the potential applicability of the findings to similar consumption contexts.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured that their involvement was voluntary. To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms (P1 - P6) were used in all reporting of results.

The collected data were used exclusively for academic research purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. By adhering to principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data management, this study maintains ethical integrity while respecting the rights and dignity of all participants.

## **4. Findings**

This chapter systematically presents the core results derived from the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with key consumers. It begins with a necessary clarification regarding the study's sample composition and provides an overview of the participants' basic demographic information. Subsequently, the chapter elaborates on four central themes that emerged from the interview data, aiming to answer the core research question: Within the functionally homogenous market of ready-to-drink cocktails, what are the underlying psychological, emotional, and cultural motivations driving consumer preference for High Noon Tequila?

### **Sample Clarification:**

During the data collection phase, a total of seven in-depth interviews were conducted. To strictly adhere to the research design and maintain focus on core consumption motivations, the subsequent thematic analysis was based on the interview transcripts of six individuals identified as regular consumers of High Noon Tequila. The seventh interviewee, a hospitality management scholar with a global perspective, provided valuable insights. His viewpoints are referenced in Chapter 5 to supplement and validate the core findings from a cross-cultural angle but were not included in the formal thematic coding process for this chapter.

### **4.1 Participant Demographics**

The table below summarizes the key demographic characteristics and typical consumption contexts of the six participants (anonymized as P1-P6) who form the core of the analysis. This information provides essential context for understanding the motivational themes that follow

**Table 1.** Summary of Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Age Range	Occupational Background	Typical Consumption Occasions
P1	22-25	Healthcare Professional (Paramedic)	Pre-gaming with friends, impulse purchases at convenience stores
P2	22-25	Graduate Student / Part-time Retail	Weekend parties, poolside gatherings, concerts
P3	22-25	Undergraduate Student	Music festivals, picnics with friends, social gatherings
P4	25-30	Sommelier / MBA Student	Watching sports games, outdoor barbecues, casual relaxation
P5	30-35	Food & Beverage Director / Sommelier	Industry research, social functions, outdoor events
P6	30-35	Lecturer of Hospitality & Tourism Marketing	Personal enjoyment, social occasions, as a marketing case study

#### 4.2 Theme One: Symbolic Inclusion and Group Belonging

This theme reveals that consumers perceive choosing High Noon Tequila as a symbolic act of inclusion within specific social circles or cultural currents. The consumption behavior is not merely an expression of personal taste but a social practice aimed at seeking recognition, achieving a sense of being “seen,” and confirming one’s position at the forefront of trends.

The narratives of multiple participants clearly illustrate this motivation. P1 (Sydney) felt “seen” upon discovering the tequila variant and explicitly expressed a desire “to be on the high noon bandwagon.” This choice allowed her to share a brand community with friends who were fans of the vodka version, despite the difference in base spirit. P3 (Sofia) described a more direct experience, stating that drinking High Noon made her feel like she was “in on the trend, not behind it.” She noted that bringing it to a party immediately signaled a “fun” vibe, reinforcing its function as a “social token.” P2 (Anna)’s account demonstrated how this sense of belonging could crystallize into concrete social rituals. She recalled a pool party where High Noon became the “signature drink” for the entire day, evolving into a recurring tradition for future gatherings. This indicates the brand’s transition from an individual choice to an integral part of group practice.

#### 4.3 Theme Two: Perceived Authenticity and Prudent Consumption

This theme reflects how consumers internalize the brand’s “Real Tequila, Real Juice” value proposition as a marker of a “smart” and “discerning” choice. This allows them to enjoy convenience while avoiding the potential psychological guilt associated with opting for cheaper, artificially mixed alternatives, thereby fostering a self-identity as a “prudent hedonist.”

Participants emphasized this perception of “authenticity” and “quality” from different angles. P4 (Daniel), a professional, pinpointed its key differentiator as “authenticity,” praising the use of real ingredients as rare in the RTD market. P6 (Kenneth), from a marketing perspective, argued that this clear value proposition makes consumers feel “smart,” as it enables them to understand its worth without specialized knowledge, leading to a “‘wise’ choice.” Even general consumers like P1 (Sydney) justified their preference through sensory comparison, noting that tequila “smells good” and “does not burn nearly as bad going down,” implying a rejection of inferior base spirits and an appreciation for better quality. P5 (Mathieu) elevated this quality perception into the brand’s “confidence,” suggesting its simplicity stems from faith in the product itself, and that this “honesty” earns consumer respect.

#### 4.4 Theme Three: Contextualized Effortless Sophistication

This theme describes how High Noon Tequila perfectly aligns with the demand for a specific “vibe” and “experience” in informal social settings. It provides a “perfect in-between” (P2, Anna) point—somewhere between the casualness of beer and the fuss of craft cocktails—representing a form of

“effortless sophistication” (P4, Daniel) that satisfies the desire to maintain a sense of taste and style even in laid-back contexts.

All participants closely associated drinking High Noon with specific leisure and social scenarios. P2 (Anna) and P3 (Sofia) repeatedly mentioned pool parties, picnics, and concerts, describing the product as “refreshing” and “light”—ideal for such occasions. P4 (Daniel) specifically positioned it as a choice for watching soccer or outdoor barbecues, emphasizing its portability and readiness for “casual, laid-back occasions.” More importantly, the product was ascribed the value of enhancing the situational atmosphere. P3 (Sofia) highlighted that during a park picnic, the High Noon cans “looked so aesthetic” and “literally matched the mood.” P4 (Daniel)’s concept of “effortless sophistication” succinctly captures this mentality: the ability to uphold one’s own “taste and standards” in an informal setting through this choice, without appearing to try too hard.

#### **4.5 Theme Four: Controlled Pleasurable Release**

This theme captures the delicate balance consumers seek between pursuing pleasurable experiences and maintaining self-control. High Noon is perceived as a beverage that offers a “better buzz” (P1, Sydney) than some base spirits while remaining “light” and “not too strong,” thus resonating with the modern consumer’s—particularly the young professional’s—internal conflict between the desire to unwind and the reluctance to lose complete rational control.

This pursuit of “controlled pleasure” manifested repeatedly in the interviews. P1 (Sydney), when comparing the vodka and tequila variants, mentioned not only taste preference but also a differentiated perception of the quality of the buzz. P2 (Anna) explicitly stated that drinking High Noon allows her to “feel good without getting weighed down,” directly linking enjoyment to physical and mental controllability. P4 (Daniel) connected this sense of “control” to personal standards, suggesting that even in casual settings, choosing High Noon allows him to feel he has maintained his “standards,” which is itself an exercise of autonomous control over the quality of experience. P5 (Mathieu)’s comments about the brand’s “confidence” and “not trying to trick consumers” indirectly support this experience’s predictability and reliability from a product integrity standpoint, reducing consumer anxiety about “unknown” or “uncontrollable” outcomes.

#### **4.6 Preliminary Synthesis**

In summary, in-depth interviews with six High Noon Tequila consumers revealed four core themes: 1) Symbolic Inclusion and Group Belonging; 2) Perceived Authenticity and Prudent Consumption; 3) Contextualized Effortless Sophistication; and 4) Controlled Pleasurable Release. These themes demonstrate that the consumer’s choice is far from an isolated decision based solely on flavor or price. Instead, it is a complex psychological and social process. The brand acts as a mediator reconciling multiple contradictions: between the individual and the community, convenience and quality, relaxation and control, casualness and refinement. These surface themes collectively point toward a deeper, unified framework of consumer motivation and meaning-making. In the next chapter, this study engages in a theoretical discussion of the findings, integrate and synthesize them to distill a core consumer insight, and subsequently use this as a foundation to construct a persuasive integrated marketing communications strategy.

### **5. Discussion and IMC Campaign Development**

This chapter aims to situate the themes derived from the empirical data in Chapter 4 within a broader theoretical landscape for interpretation and dialogue. This serves not only to validate the theoretical soundness of the findings but also to deepen the understanding of their inherent logic, thereby distilling a core insight of strategic potency. This study finds that the relationship between consumers and High Noon Tequila is, in essence, a microcosm of how individuals in contemporary consumer culture engage in meaning construction, identity negotiation, and psychological adaptation.

## 5.1 Theoretical Interpretation of Findings and Core Insight Distillation

The four core themes identified in this study do not exist in isolation; they collectively weave a web of meaning that explains the complex relationship between consumers and High Noon Tequila. By dialoguing with established theories, the deeper connotations of these themes and their interrelationships become clear.

### 5.1.1 Consumption as a Symbolic System: Belonging, Distinction, and Contextualized Meaning

Theme One (Symbolic Inclusion and Group Belonging) and Theme Three (Contextualized Effortless Sophistication) jointly reveal the semiotic dimension of consumption behavior. According to Belk's "Extended Self" theory, possessions constitute part of the self-concept[6]. Consumers' choice of High Noon is far from random; it is an active incorporation of the product as a symbolic resource to extend their social identity. P1's desire to "be on the high noon bandwagon" and P3's feeling of being "in on the trend" clearly indicate that the product serves as an effective form of cultural capital[26]. Within youth social spheres, knowledge and consumption of a specific brand signify mastery of the group's "cultural code," thereby granting entry and a sense of belonging. This transcends simple conformity, representing an active act of identity projection and community identification.

Furthermore, this symbolic consumption is highly contextualized. McCracken's "Culture and Consumption" model posits that meaning flows from the cultural world to consumer goods via the marketing system, and then to the individual through consumption rituals[8]. High Noon's strong association with specific leisure scenarios — "pool parties," "picnics," "watching sports outdoors" (P2, P3, P4) — has successfully loaded it with a whole set of cultural meanings: "sunshine," "relaxation," "social fun," and "modern leisure." Consumption thus becomes a ritualistic practice; each opening of a can is a brief enactment and proclamation of this positive lifestyle. The product's packaging aesthetics (e.g., P3's mention of aesthetic "match") and the drinking context together form a complete meaning-generation system, elevating functional consumption to a form of situational self-expression and cultural participation.

### 5.1.2 Strategic Fulfillment of Psychological Needs: Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness

Theme Two (Perceived Authenticity and Prudent Consumption) and Theme Four (Controlled Pleasurable Release) can be deeply interpreted through the lens of motivational psychology, specifically Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT posits that satisfying the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is key to fostering high-quality motivation and behavior[12].

First, the emphasis on "real ingredients" and the self-narrative of a "wise choice" (P4, P6, P1) directly address the fulfillment of the competence need. In a market saturated with marketing rhetoric and consumer skepticism, High Noon's clear proposition of "Real Tequila, Real Juice" lowers consumers' information-screening costs. Choosing it makes consumers feel they have made an informed, discerning decision, thereby gaining a sense of efficacy and cognitive mastery as "smart consumers." This is not passive acceptance of marketing messages but an active, self-empowering cognitive construction.

Second, the pursuit of a "light," "not heavy" experience (P2) and the emphasis on the quality rather than the intensity of the buzz (P1) profoundly reflect the protection of the autonomy need. Alcohol consumption often carries the risk and stigma of loss of control. Through its product attributes (moderate ABV, refreshing taste), High Noon designs a controlled path to pleasure for consumers. It allows users to engage in a "calculated risk" within the socially sanctioned framework of "drinking," enjoying decompression and pleasure while firmly maintaining control over body and mind. This "release under control" marks the key psychological boundary distinguishing modern adult consumers from those seeking complete abandonment, echoing research on "rational hedonism"[7][9].

Finally, as discussed, the group belonging achieved through consumption (Theme One) directly satisfies the relatedness need. Thus, High Noon skillfully and systematically satisfies the core SDT triad of psychological needs through a single product, constructing powerful intrinsic appeal.

### 5.1.3 Transcending the Dichotomy: Generation of an Integrative Core Insight

The findings of this study prompt a reconsideration of the traditional “utilitarian-hedonic” consumption motivation dichotomy[7]. For High Noon consumers, these motives are not two ends of a spectrum but are intertwined and mutually dependent. “Real ingredients” (utilitarian) form the basis for the “smart choice” (hedonic pride); the “convenient format” (utilitarian) enables the achievement of “contextualized sophistication” (hedonic); and the “controlled experience” (utilitarian management of the hedonic process) itself constitutes a deeper layer of hedonic satisfaction.

Therefore, this study distills an integrative core consumer insight:

High Noon Tequila provides contemporary consumers with a “Sanctioned Transition Ritual.” It acts as a highly symbolic medium, granting individuals the legitimacy to briefly disengage from their daily roles and pressures (“worker,” “responsible person”) and transition, safely and respectably, into a culturally endorsed “leisure socializer” identity. In this ritual, consumers simultaneously achieve confirmation of group belonging (relatedness), validation of their own discernment (competence), and autonomous control over the boundaries of pleasure (autonomy).

This insight transcends product functional description, revealing the psychological and social function the brand plays in consumers’ lives. It is no longer merely a beverage but an interface for meaning exchange, a solution to psychological needs, and a portable tool for identity management. This provides the most fundamental strategic basis for the brand to elevate from functional marketing to meaning-based marketing.

### 5.1.4 Cross-Cultural Validation and Meaning Expansion

The interview with the seventh participant (P7, Jake, a hospitality management scholar with extensive multinational living and work experience), while not included in the formal thematic coding process, provides a valuable global perspective that offers strong external validation and expands the meaning of the aforementioned findings. P7’s viewpoint, focused not on personal consumption motives but on industry and cultural dissemination, confirms the cross-cultural universality and modernity of the motivations distilled in this study.

First, P7 explicitly stated that High Noon’s core selling points — “refreshing,” “authentic,” “easy to drink”—are universal, and considered its modern design to have “no cultural barriers.” This, from an industry expert’s perspective, corroborates that the product values underpinning Theme Two (Perceived Authenticity) and Theme Three (Contextualized Effortless Sophistication) transcend a single cultural context, forming a shared aesthetic and quality foundation for young consumers globally.

Second, P7 interpreted this universal appeal as a sense of “freedom,” where the product, lacking strong cultural labels, allows it to be easily embraced by consumers from diverse cultural groups within the U.S. This insight profoundly supplements the connotations of Theme One (Symbolic Inclusion). The “sense of belonging” fostered by High Noon is not confined to a specific subculture but pertains to a broader affiliation with a “global leisure lifestyle.” Choosing High Noon symbolizes the individual as an open, international “global citizen” (P7’s term), adding a richer layer to the brand’s symbolic meaning.

Finally, P7 observed that today’s young consumers increasingly value “cross-cultural” experiences and “inclusivity,” a trend that High Noon’s success captures. This resonates highly with this study’s core insight. The “Sanctioned Transition Ritual” provided by the brand derives its “sanction” not only from social circles but also from a globalized, progressive life value—encouraging people to seek balance amidst busyness and to enjoy relaxation based on respect for quality. Therefore, P7’s perspective extends the study’s findings from individual psychological and social motivations to the broader context of global consumer cultural shifts, further solidifying the depth and strategic foresight of the core insight.

## 5.2 Integrated Marketing Communications Campaign Development Based on Core Insight

Based on the core insight of the “Sanctioned Transition Ritual,” this study proposes an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) campaign for High Noon Tequila named “The Sanctioned Shift.” This campaign aims to position the brand as a legitimate, respectable, and anticipated “switch” within the rhythm of modern life, encouraging consumers to achieve a balanced and positive transition between responsibility and pleasure, work and leisure, collective norms and personal needs.

### 5.2.1 Core Communication Proposition

“High Noon. Sanction Your Shift.”

This proposition carries greater semantic tension and agency. The word “Sanction” combines the formal sense of “official permission/approval” with the positive connotation of “encouragement/support,” perfectly echoing the dual aspects of “ritualistic sanction” and “psychological empowerment” in the insight. “Shift” accurately describes the dynamic transition from one state to another, more neutral and connoting greater control than “Escape,” emphasizing that this is an active identity transformation initiated by the consumer, not a passive flight. It implies: High Noon is the ritualistic permit you issue to yourself to transition from daily discipline to momentary ease.

### 5.2.2 Refined Target Audience Profile: The Urban Equilibrium Explorer

Integrating the research findings, the core target audience should be further refined as the “Urban Equilibrium Explorer.” They are primarily urban professionals and upper-level students aged 22-35. They subscribe to the philosophy of “work hard, play seriously,” pursuing efficiency, achievement, and social recognition while intensely valuing personal experience, emotional quality, and life aesthetics.

Their consumption behavior is strategic: they use consumption to manage identity, regulate emotions, and demarcate life quadrants. They dislike binary choices and are adept at, and enjoy, finding elegant balance points within contradictions. For them, High Noon is not merely a beverage but a socio-psychological tool—it legitimizes a post-meeting drink, makes maintaining discerning taste in social settings possible, and imbues brief moments of solitude with ritual. They are devoted believers in “ritual,” convinced that well-designed micro-moments enhance overall life quality.

### 5.2.3 Integrated Communication Mix

All communication activities will serve as tangible expressions of “The Sanctioned Shift,” ensuring consistency, cumulative impact, and immersiveness across channels.

#### 5.2.3.1 Content and Digital Storytelling:

- **Thematic Short Film Series: *State of Shift*:** Produce a series of mini-episodic short films with cinematic quality, each focusing on a quintessential “shift” moment. For example, Episode 1: From Presenter to Patron: the protagonist, after a key presentation, walks alone to a rooftop, opens a can of High Noon, their expression shifting from a tense “performance mode” to a relaxed “self mode.” Cinematography emphasizes changes in environment, lighting, and subtle demeanor, with the product appearing as the marker of a completed shift, not the focal point of the process. A companion podcast could invite psychologists and lifestyle writers to discuss “the art of state-shifting in modern life.”

- **Social Media Momentum: *Launch #MySanctionedShift*:** Encourage users to share evidence of their own “sanctioned shifts.” Content is not limited to drinking but expands to any ritual marking the end of work and start of leisure: closing a laptop, changing into casual shoes, playing the first note of a specific playlist. High Noon appears as the most classic, tangible symbol within this. The brand’s official accounts should act as “ritual observers” and “sanction granters,” curating and commenting on user content to strengthen community identity.

#### 5.2.3.2 Experiential Marketing:

- **“Shift Pod” Urban Pop-Up Installation:** In business districts, creative hubs, or transit centers, establish a highly designed immersive space, the “Shift Pod.” Using sound, light, and scent design, it creates a serene, relaxing environment starkly different from the external hustle. Entrants

can earn a High Noon by completing a simple “shift ritual” (e.g., placing their phone in a designated locker). This experience aims to physically deliver on the “Sanction Your Shift” promise, translating an abstract proposition into a memorable sensory experience.

#### 5.2.3.3 Influencer and Partnership Ecosystem:

- Build a network of partners highly aligned with the Equilibrium Explorer’s identity aspirations. Collaborators should include: productivity and mindfulness-focused workplace influencers (interpreting the work-to-leisure shift), niche travel and urban explorers (interpreting the familiar-to-novel shift), cocktail culture communicators and ingredient experts (interpreting the ordinary-to-curated shift, endorsing “real ingredients”). The key is that all collaborative content must move beyond product display to delve into the story and philosophy of the “shift.”

- Continue partnerships with platforms like Barstool Sports, which possess “authentic, anti-pretentious” cultural capital, but pivot the collaboration angle from “party sponsorship” to “post-game celebration” or “fan viewing rituals,” emphasizing its role as a catalyst for collective “state-shifting.”

#### 5.2.3.4 Omni-Channel Retail Activation:

- Implement a “scene-embedding” strategy in channel placement. Beyond traditional retail points, actively enter the lounge areas of boutique gyms/yoga studios, the coffee bars of co-working spaces, design bookstores and lifestyle shops, and high-end bicycle or outdoor gear stores. At these touchpoints, High Noon should be presented akin to a “lifestyle accessory,” with shelf-talkers featuring prompts like “Reward Your Focus” or “Fuel Your Exploration,” achieving seamless integration of marketing message and consumption context.

Through the “The Sanctioned Shift” campaign, High Noon Tequila will systematically evolve from a ready-to-drink alcoholic beverage into a modern life management tool and a cultural ritual symbol. It no longer merely satisfies a physical craving but aims to address the deeper psychological and social needs of its target audience, thereby building an emotional and meaningful barrier that competitors will find difficult to surmount.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

### 6.1 Research Conclusions

The main conclusions of this study can be summarized on three levels.

First, at the level of empirical findings, the analysis revealed that the consumer relationship with High Noon Tequila is structured around four core themes: 1) Symbolic Inclusion and Group Belonging, where consumption acts as “cultural capital” for gaining community acceptance; 2) Perceived Authenticity and Prudent Consumption, where the brand promise is internalized as a “smart choice” demonstrating personal discernment; 3) Contextualized Effortless Sophistication, where the product serves as a key prop for cultivating specific leisure atmospheres and enacting an “effortlessly sophisticated” lifestyle aesthetic; and 4) Controlled Pleasurable Release, which involves pursuing a “calculated risk” that offers relaxation while maintaining physical and mental autonomy. These themes indicate that the consumption decision is a complex process of meaning construction, integrating social signaling, self-worth validation, and psychological need fulfillment.

Second, at the level of theoretical interpretation, this study successfully connected the empirical findings with Symbolic Consumption Theory and Self-Determination Theory. The research found that High Noon functions as a “symbolic system,” aiding consumers in identity projection and cultural participation. Simultaneously, by satisfying the three core psychological needs of competence (smart choice), autonomy (controlled pleasure), and relatedness (group belonging), it constructs powerful intrinsic appeal. This transcends the traditional “utilitarian-hedonic” dichotomy, revealing how functional attributes and emotional/symbolic value are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive even within fast-moving consumer goods.

Ultimately, this study distilled an overarching core consumer insight: High Noon Tequila functions as a “Sanctioned Transition Ritual.” It acts as a highly symbolic medium, granting consumers

permission to legitimately, safely, and respectably transition from their disciplined daily roles into a leisure-socializer identity, simultaneously accomplishing group belonging confirmation, validation of self-discernment, and autonomous control over pleasure within this ritual.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Regarding theoretical contributions, this study provides a robust empirical case for applying theories of emotional and symbolic consumption in consumer behavior to the context of high-frequency, low-involvement Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). It confirms that even for everyday consumables like ready-to-drink cocktails, consumption motivations are deeply embedded within complex networks of social meaning and individual psychological needs, thereby calling for greater academic attention to the emotional and symbolic dimensions of such products. Furthermore, by integrating semiotic and motivational psychology perspectives, the study offers a synthesized analytical framework for understanding the contemporary consumer's propensity toward “rational hedonism.”

Regarding practical implications, this study provides clear strategic direction for the High Noon brand and similar RTD beverages. The research clearly indicates that a brand's competitive edge can no longer rely solely on functional claims but depends on its ability to become a symbolic solution for consumers navigating modern life contradictions (e.g., work vs. leisure, individual vs. group, indulgence vs. restraint). The “The Sanctioned Shift” IMC campaign, built upon the insight of the “Sanctioned Transition Ritual,” offers a comprehensive blueprint—from core proposition and audience persona to omni-channel touchpoints. It demonstrates how to translate profound consumer insight into cohesive and persuasive market communication, exemplifying a brand value evolution from “selling a product” to “selling meaning and experience.”

## 6.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is inevitably subject to certain limitations, which also point the way for future research.

Research limitations primarily include: First, sample limitations. Although the six in-depth interviews achieved thematic saturation, aligning with the goals of qualitative research, the small sample size and reliance on purposive sampling mean the findings aim to provide deep understanding and theory generation rather than statistical generalization. Second, methodological limitations. The research relies on consumer self-reports, which, despite the depth sought through interviews, may still be subject to social desirability or recall bias. Furthermore, the study focused on the positive motivations of existing consumers, leaving the perspectives of non-consumers or lapsed consumers unexplored.

Directions for future research could develop along the following lines: First, quantitative validation and extension. Subsequent studies could employ large-scale survey methods to quantitatively test the four thematic motivations identified here and their interrelationships, and explore motivational differences across demographic or behavioral segments. Second, cross-cultural comparative studies. As suggested by the scholar interviewee (P7), High Noon's appeal possesses a degree of universality, but the specific construction of its meaning may vary by culture. Future research could conduct comparative studies across different countries or cultural contexts to investigate how cultural values moderate the symbolic meaning and consumption motivations of RTD beverages. Third, longitudinal or ethnographic research. Through long-term tracking or immersive observation, researchers could gain a more dynamic understanding of the evolution of consumer-brand relationships and the concrete embedding of consumption rituals within daily life practices, thereby achieving richer, contextualized understanding.

In summary, through in-depth qualitative exploration, this study has uncovered the rich world of meaning underlying High Noon Tequila consumption behavior, providing valuable insights for both academic understanding and marketing practice. The bond between a brand and its consumers is, ultimately, a dialogue about meaning, identity, and need. This study represents one instance of listening deeply to that conversation.

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