Can people distinguish between different brands of European pale lager beer?

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Pale lager is the world's most popular style of beer, dominating the beer market on every continent. Competition in the pale lager market is fierce, and brand allegiance amongst consumers is strong. However, Allison and Uhl (1964) found that in blind tastings, regular beer drinkers could not distinguish the taste differences between six different major brands of American pale lager. We employ a different experimental setup—a triangle test, similar to the wine-tasting setup employed by Weil (2001, 2007)—to test whether regular beer drinkers in the US can distinguish between major brands of European pale lager, which are considered to be archetypes of the style.

We served three different major brands of European pale lager from three different countries (Czechvar from the Czech Republic, Heineken from the Netherlands, and Stella Artois from Belgium) to a sample of 138 regular beer drinkers at the Green Dragon Pub in Portland, Oregon. Each subject received three tasting-sized samples of pale lager beer, of which two were identical and the third was a different. Subjects were asked to identify which of the two beers were the same. The order of samples was randomized, and brands were rotated through in equal proportions.

Subjects performed no better than chance (N=138, coefficient=.370, std error=.041, 0.288<95% CI<0.451) at identifying the two identical beers. We conclude that the differences between these three European pale lager brands are too subtle to be detected by regular beer drinkers, even under controlled conditions.

The finding that consumers cannot perceive the taste differences between major pale lager brands from different European countries suggests that those brands must rely solely on means other than taste differentiation to win customer loyalty in the beer market. This implication would be consistent with the extraordinarily high advertising spend as a proportion of cost base amongst pale lager producers, with some beer conglomerates spending more than $1 billon annually on direct advertising to consumers.