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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Master's thesis
<input type="checkbox"/>	Licentiate's thesis
<input type="checkbox"/>	Doctor's thesis

Subject	Marketing	Date	13.6.2019
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		Number of pages	100 + appendices
Title	Brand authenticity: Meditating authentic experiences through brand communication		
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Brand authenticity is considered as a core element in the contemporary brand management, but its theory and practice are still surrounded with varying point of views and lack of consensus. In the previous academic research, it has been stated that brand authenticity has positive impact on brand equity and overall reputation as people have an innate desire for authenticity. At an increasing rate, consumers are seeking products that resonate with their desire of authenticity and opine that the existence for the real or genuine have been denied from them.</p> <p>Mezcal is a distilled alcoholic beverage produced from fermented agave juice. Mezcal forms a part of Mexican culture and has deeply entwined roots in the country's history. By researching mezcal brands, the purpose of this study is to describe how brand authenticity can be mediated in brand communication. The purpose is subsequently divided into four sub-questions: 1. What are the strategic level requirements for brand authenticity? 2. What cues implicate brand authenticity? 3. What signs convey brand authenticity? and 4. How the different signs of authenticity can be interpreted? This study aims to arouse relevant and critical ideas about branding by exploring the actual and potential contributions of brand authenticity communication with semiotic perspective. The study was conducted with qualitative mixed method research by combining semiotic content analysis and poetic inquiry. In total of 49 mezcal brands were examined and both visual and textual authenticity cues are collected.</p> <p>Derived from the prior research on brand authenticity, four strategic level requirements are predominant in constructing and maintaining an authentic brand strategy; purpose, genuineness, consistency and product orientation and the cues that implicate brand authenticity are downplaying commercial motives, craftsmanship, heritage and history, artistry and appealing to lifestyle. By evaluating these cues that are communicated through varying signs, the viewer performs unconsciously an assessment of the brand thus either allowing or denying the authenticity. Based on the research, a brand authenticity syntagm-paradigm was formed to better understand the semiotic levels and practices of brand authenticity communication. Evidently, brand authenticity can be communicated in multiple ways in hidden subliminal messages or presented explicitly throughout brand communication. With different brand authenticity signs, it is possible to create rich, multi-dimensional experiences with consumers and resonate with them in deeper levels.</p>			
	Brand authenticity, semiotics, storytelling, mezcal, mixed methods, poetic inquiry		
Further information			





	Kandidaatintutkielma
x	Pro gradu -tutkielma
	Lisensiaatintutkielma
	Väitöskirja

Oppiaine	Markkinointi	Päivämäärä	13.6.2019
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		Sivumäärä	100 s. + liitteet
Otsikko	Brändiautenttisuus: Autenttisten kokemusten tuottaminen brändiviestinnän välityksellä		
Ohjaaja(t)	KTT Ulla Hakala		
Tiivistelmä			
<p>Brändiautenttisuutta pidetään yhtenä nykyaikaisen brändinjohtamisen keskeisistä elementeistä, mutta sen teoriaa ja käytäntöä ympäröi edelleen yhtenäisyyden puute sekä joukko erilaisia näkemyksiä. Akateemisessa tutkimuksessa on todennettu, että brändiautenttisuudella on positiivinen vaikutus brändin pääomaan sekä maineeseen, sillä ihmisillä on todettu olevan luontainen kaipuu autenttisuutta kohtaan. Kuluttajat etsivät yhä enemmän tuotteita ja yrityksiä, jotka resonoivat tämän kaipuun kanssa, ja kokevat, että nykyaikaisessa kaunistellussa maailmassa kuluttajien oikeus aitouteen ja todenmukaisuuteen on eväty.</p> <p>Mezcal on fermentoidusta ja tislatusa agaave-kasvin mehusta valmistettua alkoholijuomaa. Mezcal on tärkeä osa Meksikon kulttuuria ja sillä on syvälle juontuvat juuret maan historiassa. Tutkielman tarkoitus on kuvata mezcalbrändejä tarkastelemalla, kuinka brändin autenttisuutta voidaan välittää brändin viestinnässä. Tutkielman tarkoitus on jaettu neljään osaongelmaan: 1. Mitä strategisen tason vaatimuksia brändiautenttisuuden toteuttamiselle on? 2. Mitkä tekijät ilmentävät brändin autenttisuutta? 3. Mitkä merkit välittävät brändin autenttisuutta? ja 4. Miten autenttisuuden merkkejä voidaan tulkita? Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on herättää merkityksellisiä ja kriittisiä pohdintoja bränditutkimuksen saralla tutkimalla brändiautenttisuuden viestinnän mahdollisia vaikutuksia semioottisesta näkökulmasta. Tutkimus suoritettiin laadullisena monimenetelmätutkimuksena yhdistämällä semioottisen sisällönanalyysin sekä poetic inquiry -tutkimusmenetelmän keinoja. Tutkimuksessa analysoitiin yhteensä 49:n mezcalbrändin visuaalisia ja tekstuaalisia autenttisuustekijöitä.</p> <p>Aikaisempaan tutkimukseen nojaten neljä strategisen tason vaatimusta brändiautenttisuuden toteuttamiselle ovat arvopohjaisuus, aitous, johdonmukaisuus ja tuotelähtöisyys. Autenttisuustekijöitä ovat puolestaan kaupallisten motiivien minimointi, ammatti- ja käsityötaidot, perimätieto ja historia, taiteellisuus sekä elämäntyyliin vetoaminen. Kuluttajat arvioivat näitä tekijöitä viestinnässä esiintyvien merkkien avulla tehden samalla tiedostamattomia arvioita brändin autenttisuudesta. Tutkimuksen pohjalta muodostettiin syntagma–paradigma -taulukko, joka selventää tarkemmin brändiautenttisuuden semioottisia tasoja ja käytäntöjä. Autenttisuutta voidaan ilmentää useilla eri tavoilla joko suorasti tai piilotetusti. Erilaisten brändiautenttisuusmerkkien avulla yritysten on mahdollista luoda moniulotteisia autenttisia kokemuksia asiakkailleen ja resonoida näin heidän kanssaan syvemmin.</p>			
Asiasanat	Brändiautenttisuus, tarinankerronta, semiotiikka, mezcal, monimuotomenetelmä		
Muita tietoja			





**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

Turku School of
Economics

BRAND AUTHENTICITY

**Meditating authentic experiences through brand communica-
tion**

Master's Thesis
in Marketing

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13.6.2019
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The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire initiated a rich culinary revolution in the history of humankind. As Hernán Cortés, Spanish explorer, commanded his expedition towards the New World, instead of monetary richness the explorers uncovered a variety of culinary treasures, such as chocolate, vanilla, beans, avocados, coconuts, corn and tomatoes. Though the conquerors occupied the Aztec empire and defeated the last emperor Moctezuma Xocoyotzin through various battles and pervaded the territory with Spanish structures and institutions, the native culture and traditions from the pre-Hispanic era are still embedded in the Mexican culture. (Misiura 2006, 199–200.)

One of the cultural culinary products is mezcal, a Mexican alcoholic beverage obtained by distilling cooked and fermented agave plants (Trejo-Pech et al. 2010, 119). Mezcal is one of the vivacious remains of pre-Hispanic culture (García Mendoza 2010, 11; Valenzuela Zapata & Gaytán 2012, 1) and one of the most widespread and historically rooted products of Mexico (García Marín et al. 2010, 36). Illsley Granich (2010, 18–19) argues that *no other alcoholic beverage in the world entails such biological and cultural diversity*. Mezcal producers, *mezcaleros*, all over Mexico are still crafting mezcal by honoring the traditions of previous generations, by harvesting wild agaves from the hillsides, roasting the hearts of the plants in a ground-dug oven, and distilling the fermented juice in wood-fired pot stills (Bowen 2015, 127).

For long, mezcal was considered a poor-quality liquor or a cheap hooch that was mostly consumed by the lower economic segments of Mexico. Surprisingly, in the past decade an interest towards mezcal has risen substantially, thus shown in the growing rate of multinational companies investing in mezcal production and trade. William Grant & Sons added Montelobos mezcal in their portfolio in the United States in 2012, while Proximo Spirits, the distributor of world's best-selling tequila José Cuervo, introduced the Creyente Mezcal in 2016. Only a year after, Bacardi, the world's largest independent spirits producer, acquired a minority stake in Ilegal mezcal. Later in 2018, Diageo added Casamigos Mezcal to its portfolio in Europe. While the United States is the largest mezcal consumer outside Mexico, the interest is developing steadily as well in Europe and Asia. (Pelner 2018.) From where is the tendency of mezcal arising?

Globalization has allowed the exchange of knowledge concerning the way of life and traditions from all over the world. Meanwhile, naturally or paradoxically, many things tend to homogenize. At the same time, all those that maintain a unique essence anchored in deep cultural roots acquire exceptional value. (Rasero 2010, 65.) People have an innate desire for authenticity. Most institutions that have traditionally been considered as the

building blocks of people's identity, such as church, long-lasting careers in one company or other social institutions used to gather people together to rely their identities are in decline. Consequently, the loss of traditional identity cornerstones and the increased supremacy of conserving or building an image has led to behavior that affirms an individual's desire for authentic self and collective connection. (Beverland 2009, 21–23.)

Brands are ubiquitous and have claimed their position as one of the most dominant institutions in consumer societies. It is common that people with a BMW car, an Apple phone, Dr. Martens shoes or a Starbucks take-away coffee are not merely consumers of these goods, but these objects are rather imbued with rich, personal meanings disregarding the objects mass-produced nature. These everyday-life, mass-produced products can eventually obtain even sacred status by consumers, who have transformed them into authentic objects. (Beverland 2009, 21–23.) Gilmore & Pine (2007, 19) state that all consumers desire authenticity and confirm that the appeal for real is a universal necessity.

Three reasons can be seen to affect the reshaping of how and where people find identity and authenticity. The first of them, as mentioned before, refers to globalization which has played an immense role in postmodern societies. Within the increased global trade, migration and the augmented exposure to global forces, confusion among individuals considering their stand in the world has engendered. Secondly, globalization has simultaneously widened the possibilities for deterritorialization. More possibilities have emerged for people to move from nation to nation, be it through tourism or migration, which has caused a constant exposure to different cultures, art, entertainment and cuisine. The fusillade of global exposition is withering individual's connection to their original place of origin that have helped them in forming their identities. Together with globalization and deterritorialization, in comes hyperreality. The increase of stylization of everyday life, through social media, advertorials, viral or guerrilla marketing has resulted in difficulties in telling real from fake. (Beverland 2009, 23.)

Prior research shows that authenticity is salient on brand equity and overall corporate reputation (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and it is an essential influencer of brand recollection or even brand love (Godey et al. 2016). Additionally, authenticity is currently considered as a cornerstone element of branding in the luxury segment (Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 29). Perceived brand authenticity is a critical determinant on consumers' brand choice intention: it intensifies brand attachment in the emotional level, increases word-of-mouth and drives the likelihood of brand choice (Morhart et al. 2015). Regarded by some as the cornerstone of contemporary marketing, authenticity has started to obtain growing attention amid the marketing literature. In spite of the frequent highly prosperous applications of authenticity in business context, brand authenticity has not been thoroughly examined in the academic research and it is still lacking exploration to its contribution to branding theory. (Schallehn et al. 2014, 192; Ilicic & Webster 2014, 4; Morhart et al. 2015, 200.)

Within the crescent pressure to respond to the consumers' authenticity demand, companies pursue to understand ways to influence brand's perceived authenticity (Fritz et al. 2017). Already some brands are saturated with stories that consumers find essential in constructing their identities (Holt 2004, 3–4), expressing their authentic self or reconnecting to place, time, culture and others (Napoli et al. 2014, 1090). For example, Coca-Cola states to be *the real thing*, Adidas proclaims to be *once innovative, now classic, always authentic* as simultaneously Nike declares an *authentic athletic performance* (Schallehn et al. 2014, 192).

People have become resentful with commerciality and marketing efforts and are willing to re-examine and alternate their customary consumption behavior. Consumers are seeking products that resonate with their desire of authenticity and opine that the existence for the real or genuine have been denied from them. (Napoli et al. 2014, 1096.) Consequently, targeting the minds of consumers is no longer enough. Marketers should aim their messages much deeper, to the hearts of people, by evolving the marketing efforts to a stage where it addresses the spirit of the consumers, understands their anxieties and desires and touches their souls (Kotler et al. 2010, 35).

1.2 Purpose and structure of the study

Based on the earlier research, it is notable that brand authenticity is a core element in the contemporary brand management. It is important to cast light in the creative corners of brand authenticity theory and peruse the signs and connotative levels to better resonate with consumers and create them authentic experiences. The creative, visual and narrative aspect of brand authenticity is not yet a well-researched area, and the subject requires further research. This study aims to arouse relevant and critical ideas about branding by exploring the actual and potential contributions of brand authenticity communication in the marketing practice and theory. This study was conducted to further elucidate the research gap on brand authenticity.

By researching mezcal brands, the purpose of this study is to describe how brand authenticity can be mediated in brand communication. This purpose is divided into following sub-questions:

- What are the strategical level requirements for brand authenticity?
- What cues implicate brand authenticity?
- What signs convey brand authenticity?
- How the different signs of authenticity can be interpreted?

This research has been constructed based on the purpose and the sub-questions. To better understand the concept of brand authenticity, the first main chapter introduces the prior research of the topic and describes the dimensions and cues of brand authenticity in more detail. In the second main chapter, concepts of authentic communication and semi-otics are explored further. Subsequently to the core concepts, the research methodology, data collection and analysis are represented. In chapter 5, the found authenticity signs are introduced and interpreted and lastly, the discussion of the findings and contributions of the study are presented.

2 BUILDING BRAND AUTHENTICITY

2.1 Brand authenticity definition

Authenticity has been studied from a multitude of research disciplines, including philosophy, arts, sociology, anthropology, tourism and psychology. Despite the ancient appreciation for authenticity by humankind, only recently the construct has caught the attention of marketing academics as an important dimension of branding. (Fritz et al. 2017, 324–325.) Originally, the term authenticity was built upon an earlier form of individualism, and to this day it remains a powerful moral ideal. Diverse terms, such as originality, genuineness, exclusivity, non-commerciality, trustworthiness, reality, self-expression, freedom and handcrafting are often used to describe authenticity (e.g. Fine, 2003; Beverland, 2005a & 2005b; Damien 2006). It is worth mentioning that the allusion to genuineness itself is nothing new and the definition has deep and multidisciplinary roots. As this study focuses primarily on brand authenticity, merely the definitions considering marketing are discussed.

An existing literature regarding brand authenticity can be found among academic marketing research. Yet, a lack of consensus reflecting the conceptualization of the construct still remains lingering above it (e.g. Napoli et al. 2014; Ilicic & Webster 2014; Akbar & Wymer 2017; Fritz et al. 2017; Athawal & Harris 2018). However, some consent to the definition have been agreed upon.

Firstly, authenticity is more than a marketing claim. It is commonly agreed that as authenticity has different meanings depending on the receivers' varying point of views, a mere repetition of an authenticity claim of a brand would not prove to be a successful tactic. For some the word authenticity indicates the relation of real versus fake, while for others it implies something deeper and symbolic, such as cultural icon (Grayson & Martinec 2004, 296; Holt 2004, Beverland 2005a, 460; Bai et al. 2009). Gilmore and Pine (2007, 102–104) go as far as stating that no business offering can fundamentally be authentic, since every manmade commercial product or offering is in its essence artificial and thus, fake. Nonetheless, as experiences occur in people's minds, they cannot be inauthentic. Businesses that are able to harness these authentic experiences can therefore gain the perception of authenticity and seize it in their marketing strategies. This view is concordant with Beverland's (2006, 257) statement that companies' claims and consumers' perceptions of authenticity consist of both stylized or fictional factors that can be interpreted either objectively or subjectively. Gilmore and Pine (2007) emphasize that brand authenticity is ambiguous and multifaceted concept, and correspondingly, Bai et al. (2009, 249) and Napoli et al. (2014, 1096) suggest that authenticity is both theoretical and created construct.

Secondly, the majority of the authenticity research based on consumers and branding uses terms indexical and iconic authenticity as demonstrated in Figure 1.

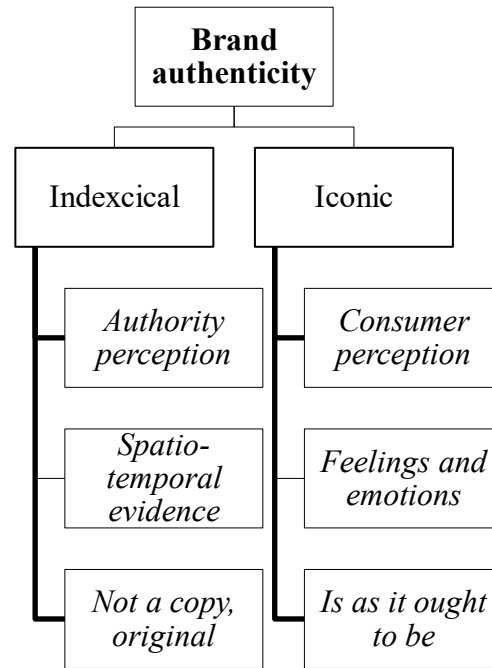


Figure 1 Indexical and iconic brand authenticity

Indexical authenticity, or indexicality, is used to describe the distinguishing a real thing from a fake or a copy (Grayson & Martinec 2004; Athwal & Harris 2018, 349). A brand is considered indexically authentic, if it can be proved to be the original instead of an imitation, placing the emphasis on the spatio-temporal evidence and authority perception (e.g. Grayson & Martinec 2004; Beverland 2006; Bai et al. 2009, 253; Athawal & Harris 2018). Indexical authenticity cues are commonly inspected in evaluating artwork or luxury products, such as handbags or wines.

On the other side of the spectrum, iconic authenticity takes into consideration the individual or communal evaluations of a brand. Iconic authenticity is considered to emerge from consumers' projections of a brand in evaluating *how a brand is ought to be*, or if it answers to the consumers expectations and fits to the pre-existing lifestyle or culture. The viewers' emotions and feelings are essential factors in navigating the impression of iconic authenticity. (Grayson & Martinec 2004, Holt 2004; Napoli et al. 2014.) Rather than attesting the connections to a point of reference with evidence as in indexical authenticity, iconic authenticity forms emotional impressions of a brand's perceived authenticity emphasizing the evaluator itself (Fritz et al. 2017, 327).

As a conclusion, it is a generally agreed that authenticity is not only an attribute inherent to an object, but rather a socially constructed analysis of a brand (Brown et al. 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Beverland 2005a & 2006; Napoli et al. 2016, 1201).

Henceforth, consumers are considered as co-creators of authenticity alongside with brands (Leigh et al. 2006).

There are numerous varying definitions of brand authenticity. According to Napoli et al. (2014, 1091) brand authenticity is *a subjective evaluation of genuineness attributed to a brand by consumers*. This view is also supported by Akbar and Wymer (2017), who propound that brand authenticity is the *extent to which a brand is considered unique, legitimate, truthful to its claims, and lacking falsity*. Similarly, Frizt et al. (2017, 327) support this view, as they suggest that authenticity is *the perceived consistency of a brand's behavior that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, not undermining its brand essence or substantive nature, whereby the perceptual process involves two types of authenticity (i.e. indexical and iconic authenticity)*. As seen in the Figure 2, according to Hitzler and Müller-Stewens (2017, 34–35), authenticity is the congruence of the brand's self-image, behavior and the public image.

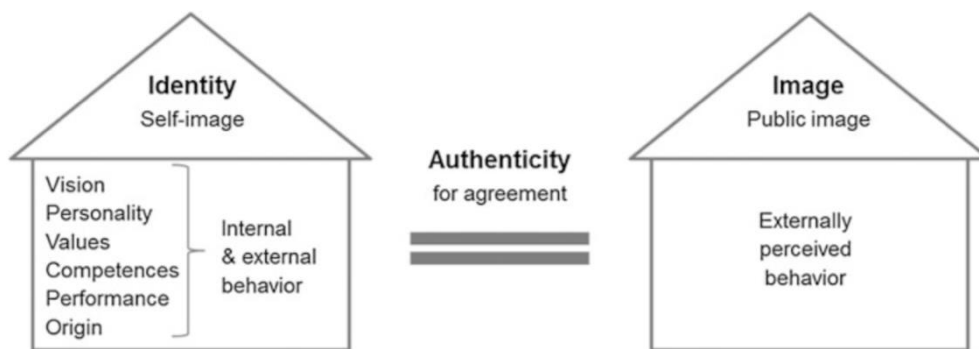


Figure 2 The definition of authenticity by Hitzler & Müller-Stewens (2017, 35)

On their point of view, company's predefined values, competences, performance, personality, origin and vision are the main shapers of the organization's identity. This identity is reflected in company's internal and external behavior, such as communication, and in the other end of the spectrum received and interpreted by the consumers. If a company displays authenticity in a constant manner, the end result will be an authentic impression.

Beverland (2005b, 1008; 2009, 26) defines authenticity from an iconic point of view, and states that brand authenticity is *a story that balances industrial (production, distribution and marketing) and rhetorical attributes to project sincerity through the avowal of commitments to tradition (including production methods, product styling, firm values, and/or location), passion for the craft and production excellence, and the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations*. In this study, brand authenticity is derived from earlier research and is defined as follows: Brand

authenticity is consumers' perception of a brand being true to itself and its consumers' aspirations throughout its actions and communication.

2.2 Strategic level requirements for brand authenticity

Brand authenticity is strictly tied to company's identity and must accordingly be entwined in the branding strategy. To fulfill an authentic brand experience, a fundamental commitment in the strategy is essential. Derived from the prior research on brand authenticity, four strategic level dimensions are predominant in constructing and maintaining an authentic brand strategy. These attributes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Strategic level brand authenticity dimensions and their source

Purpose	
Higher aim	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Clearly defined values that reflect company's history and vision	Eggers et al. 2012
Brand essence, value	Spiggle et al. 2012
Demonstrating strong morals	Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1390
Genuineness	
Sincerity	Napoli et al. 2014
Credibility, Integrity	Morhart et al. 2015
Genuiness (sincerity, actuality)	Bai et al. 2009
Uniqueness	Moulard et al. 2016, 421
Originality, self-expression	Bai et al. 2009
Indivuduality	Schallen et al. 2014
Consistency	
Consistency	Fritz et al. 2017, 328
Stylistic consistency	Beverland 2006, 257
Design consistency	Napoli et al. 2014
Consistent original design	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Consistency	Spiggle et al. 2012
Consistency	Athawal & Harris 2018
Design consistency	Brown et al. 2003; Kozinets, 2001
Longitudinal Consistency	Moulard et al. 2012
Continuity	Morhart et al. 2015
Consistent and continuous	Schallen et al. 2014
Product orientation	
Product orientation	Moulard et al. 2016

Purpose, genuineness, consistency and quality commitment have previously noticed to form the basis of strategic brand authenticity. These four dimensions are partly inter-related, as shown in the Figure 3.

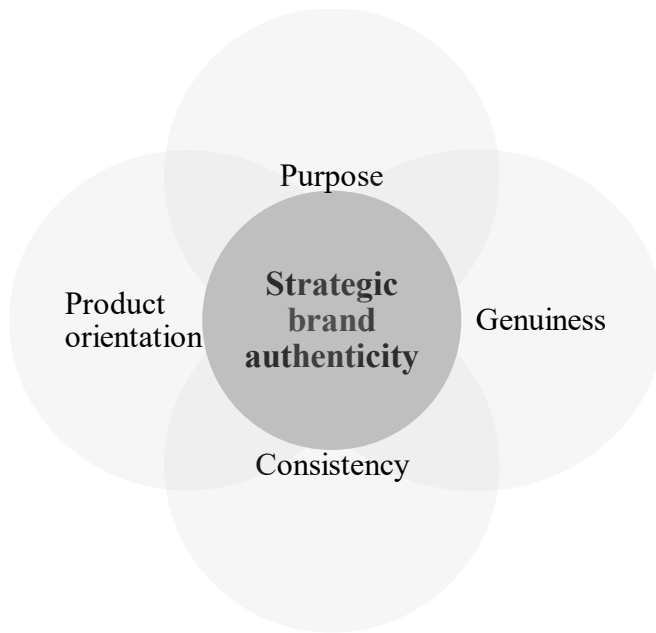


Figure 3 Interrelatedness of strategic brand authenticity dimensions

It difficult to ascertain their equal importance of the dimensions in building of brand authenticity (Athawal & Harris 2018, 350). The significance and the impact of the authenticity dimensions varies and depends heavily on the context and the offering, and the dimensions are not clearly distinguishable from each other. Each of the strategic level authenticity dimensions are explained subsequently in more detail.

2.2.1 *Purpose*

Since the dawn of human thought, purpose has guided and inspired people, given humans reasons to believe in something greater. For long, purpose has been associated with religion, nonprofit organizations and values in everyday life. (Reiman 2013, 5.) Besides the economic incentives inherent to businesses, brand authenticity is also inseparably connected to other motivations, such as political and societal goals (Freathy & Thomas 2015, 178). According to Reiman (2013, 5) a purpose acts as a universal force and its positive presence should be acknowledged everywhere. Purpose forms the soul of the brand and it is comprised of the company's fundamental values. To show and act accordingly to the purpose, brand must be aware of its core values and stay constantly true to them (Beverland 2006).

Instead of just fulfilling their practical needs, people are looking for products that reflects their personal image and identity (Smith & Milligan 2015, 5.) Embracing values is already widely applied marketing, although companies often fail to live up to them thus ending up causing negative consumer experiences. Consequently, the negative

experiences have increased cynicism towards purpose driven marketing claims between consumers (Beverland 2009, 7). Kotler et al. (2010, 35) state three reasons for why the importance of purpose has risen globally: Firstly, both generational change and especially the recent financial fluctuations have ignited a shift in consumer values towards more conscious consumer behavior. Secondly, the rise of internet and new technologies have shifted the power structures from companies and market forces towards consumers, starting the new era of consumer empowerment. Lastly, the developed economies' value base has overcome a radical shift from resources to experiences. As a result, consumers are constantly seeking companies to fulfill their needs for values, empowerment and experiences that purpose driven companies are answering to.

Showing a credible consciousness of purpose, a *raison d'être* for company's existence, works as an amplifier of commercial value in the increasingly competitive world. People's motivations and attitudes in consumption, be it consumer products, business services or political parties, have overcome a global change. Consumers are looking to consume brands with an authentic sense of purpose, or work with companies run by intrinsically motivated, passionate people with a genuine interest in their offering. Consumers are eager to see brands contributing in the solving of the wider societal challenges in life. (Smith & Milligan 2015, 5.) Motivations are closely intertwined with companies' purpose (Pine & Gilmore 2007, 143).

In addition to increasingly choosing to buy from and work for companies that are openly sharing their values and staying true to them, consumers are progressively testing the authenticity of organizations. The judgements are not merely based on CEO's statements, but rather on testimonies of average customers and everyday customer touch points. (Smith & Milligan 2015, 6, 14–15.) In this regard, there is a growing demand to offer moral legitimacy and to pursue prosocial actions (Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1390) and companies should ensure the continuing legitimacy in the eyes of the consumers. It is generally frowned upon to exploit communities' values without actively showing the ongoing actions. (Beverland 2005a, 460.) The companies with a purpose driven by consumer insight and society demands are the ones gaining the strongest foothold. Purpose should be manifested in three ways: Firstly, through communication, secondly, in the way experiences that create value for target customers are delivered and finally in the way companies innovate in order to continue to be the brand that they want to be (Smith & Milligan 2015, 23–24, 57).

2.2.2 *Genuineness*

The second dimension of strategic brand authenticity is genuineness which indicates that a brand being true and transparent (Ililic & Webster 2014, 24.), keeping its promises and

staying true to its exposed values (Dwivedi & MacDonald 2018, 1390). Concurrently, being rebellious against societal rules and following one's inner nature rather than adapting to the masses is also seen as a form of genuine authenticity (Bai et al. 2009, 252). It is notable in the existing literature that the repletion of authenticity claims raises suspicions about the sincerity and legitimacy of businesses (Beverland, 2006). Brands should focus in genuineness of a brand and concentrate their strategies than enhance traits that include transparency and fulfilling promises. (Bai et al. 2009, 252.) Instead of claiming to be authentic, it must be shown in the actions.

In Image 1, the genuineness is demonstrated from the point of view of Oatly, a Swedish producer of plant-based product



Image 1 Oatly (2019) highlights its transparent intentions

In Oatly's website, true intentions, honesty and transparency are the epicenter of the company's promise. Oatly is encouraging its consumers and stakeholders to make judgments based on its actions rather than its verbal acclamations. Their objective is also clearly and transparently stated in their website.

According to Athawal and Harris (2018, 351), the pureness of the product, naturalness, sincerity and integrity can be subsumed in the brand authenticity. The consistency between the genuineness of offerings and the authentic communication is a crucial factor in

answering to the demand for transparency (Molleda 2010, 233). In the era of social media and word of mouth, the chances of survival are decreasing for inauthentic brands as consumer have started to occupy high faith in strangers within their community, and simultaneously their faith in companies is decreasing. Misrepresentations and false promises can be exposed globally overnight. (Kotler et al. 2010, 39.)

2.2.3 *Consistency*

One reason for brands in failing in delivering brand authenticity is inconsistency (Oswald 2012, 46). Schallehn et al. (2014) suggest that brand should be consistent and continuous. This means that a brand fulfills its promise consistently at all brand touchpoints and reflects consistently the essential brand core. This view is agreed by Smith and Milligan (2015, 14–15) who propose that delivering a unique customer experience consistently and intentionally throughout all brand channels and guaranteeing the appropriate brand culture is a way to ensure a long-term sustainable brand authenticity. Therefore, it is notable that genuineness and consistency work closely together.

The consistency and clarity of a brand's communication messages are relevant aspects in producing brand authenticity, whereas brand behavior that is inconsistent decreases the authenticity perception (Fritz et al. 2017, 328). As stated by Eggers et al. (2013, 346), all company activities and actions should reflect the enterprise's identity to ensure the concordance of the created image and the behavior of the organization. To better understand consistency, Spiggle et al. (2012) proposed that it should be divided two parts: internal and external. Internal consistency concerns the actions made by the organization, such as whether a brand is true to itself and acts according to its essential core, similar to genuineness. External consistency from its part takes into considerations the accuracy of the claims made by the organization and whether a brand is what it claims and appears to be. This means that the behavior and the claims of an organization (communication) must be correspondent with its identity, instead of fake, exaggerated or counterfeit.

Though consistency is closely tight to the actions and claims of a brand, it also includes the visual expressions of a brand. Authentic brands express style and aesthetics consistently in design, communication and all touchpoints. For example, Apple's has been able to show authenticity through consistently sleek, cool, functional and user-friendly design throughout its products and communication. Other way to signal legitimacy is the consistent fulfilling of brand standards in production processes, components, ingredients, and other attributes. Instead of changing fast in the market pressure or consumer fashion, authentic brands respect their original designs and develop slowly to reflect modern times (Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2008). Changing designs radically or suddenly might

confuse or even upset consumers and consequently lead to questioning the brand's authenticity (Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2001).

Alexander (2008, 558–559) states that stylistic consistency is rather a facilitator than an attribute of authenticity. It can be used to sharpen and encapsulate the authenticity claim and as a marketing tool to convey the authentic feeling from the production and the organizations core to the consumer. Athawal and Harris (2018, 364) suggest that brand managers should focus on the development of simple product line and projection of continuity regardless of the industry norms.

2.2.4 Product orientation

Moulard et al. (2016) argue, that contradictory to the current marketing management studies are claiming, product orientation may offer an advantage to the currently widely accepted core marketing principle, consumer orientation. Companies and brands that focus on interesting, inspiring and intrinsically motivational products are considered authentic compared to products that are designed to fulfil consumers desires. Beverland (2006, 257–258) also pointed out that some wineries have adopted the view that instead of adapting the product to the consumers wishes, consumers should adapt to the product, thus staying away from consumer-oriented activities, which is contradictory to modern marketing theory. As wineries are the experts on their product, they are the ones capable of deciding its final form.

Integrity, intrinsic affection for the product or company and a sense of moral virtue are stronger factors in brand authenticity than any economic agenda (Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2006, 2008; Napoli et al. 2014, 1091). Opposingly, attributes desired by external target groups that do not express the brand's true identity are considered as market-orientation and run the risk of creating inauthentic feeling for consumers (Schallehn et al. 2014, 194).

Moulard et al. (2016) propose that product orientation, such as focusing on products that are meaningful to the brand's decision makers and which they care and feel passionate about, apply to a brand management just like it has been studied in the music business. Moulard et al. (2016, 421) suggest that brand authenticity is *the extent to which consumers perceive that a brand's managers are intrinsically motivated in that they are passionate about and devoted to providing their products*, stating that product orientation would be the sole creator of authenticity.

2.3 Brand authenticity cues

As per the research of Grayson and Martinec (2004), interestingly both reality and fiction can be perceived as authentic, as long as the assessment of authenticity makes sense for the recipient providing an authentic experience. In conclusion, brand authenticity can be either real or based in fiction, as it is rather contrivance than a reality (Brown et al. 2003; Gilmore & Pine 2007). Bai et al. (2008) agree on this view by stating that authenticity can be constructed and used as a marketing strategy.

Prior academic research has presented several authenticity cues and researchers have offered insight into consumers' authenticity ascription to objects. Commonly, consumers make authenticity assessments based on factual, spatio-temporal cues (Grayson & Martinec 2004), inherent connections with an object (Napoli et al. 2014, 1091) or existential and self-enhancing means (Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1388). Table 2 represent in more detail the cues that are often linked to brand authenticity.

Table 2 Brand authenticity cues

Brand authenticity cues and their author's / source / origin	
Downplaying commercial motives	
Loving the doing	Beverland 2006, 257; Alexander 2009
Minimizing advertising campaigns	Beverland 2009, 7
Higher aim	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Non-commerciality (or innocence)	Bai et al. 2009
Craftsmanship	
Finest, natural materials	Napoli et al. 2014
Uncompromising top quality	Beverland 2006, 257
Method of production	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Craftsmanship	Napoli et al. 2014
Appearing artisanal amateurs	Beverland 2009, 7
Product orientation	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Tradition	Moulard et al. 2016, 421
Skills of a craftsman	Freathy & Thomas 2015
Heritage and history	
Heritage and pedigree	Napoli et al. 2014
Heritage and history	Beverland 2006, 257
Heritage, pedigree, historically provable facts	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
Heritage and legacy	Alexander 2009
Longevity	Athawal & Harris 2018, 347
Drawing on history and culture	Moulard et al. 2016
Tradition	Beverland 2009, 26
Sticking to roots	Beverland 2006, 257
Commitment to region, region as quality seal, origin	Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37
History	Freathy & Thomas 2015
Artistry	
Artists creative identity	Fine 2003, 55
Cooperation with artists	Bai et al. 2009

The construct of brand authenticity is complex and is premised on perceptions of downplaying commercial motives, craftsmanship, heritage and history, and artistry. By combining these dimensions, consumers make judgements about brands' authenticity suggesting that there are multiple routes to establish a brand authenticity (Napoli et al. 2014, 1091).

2.3.1 *Downplaying commercial motives*

According to Holt (2004), authentic brands run constantly a risk of becoming perceived as commercial. This view is line with Beverland's (2006, 252), who states that brands must appear distant from commercial consideration to be authentic. For example, producing brand extensions that reflect purely externally driven and profit-focused motives are quickly considered as inauthentic by loyal customers (Spiggle et al. 2012, 970).

To stay authentic, brands should remain detached from marketing pressures, commodification and mass production for mass consumption and similarly shun the potential segment of consumers who would consume the brand for questionable reasons. (Avery 2010). Companies that oppose exploiting the brand and resist pursuing vain commercial opportunities demonstrate authenticity by inner-directedness and defying external pressures (Avery 2010; Beverland et al. 2008). It is also common to minimize advertisement campaigns to downplay commercial motives (Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37).

Non-commerciality can be shown through intrinsic motivation, dedicated and passionate employees and brand decisions that avoids conflict with the brand's essence. (Avery 2010.) Low commercial motives, as meeting the intrinsic needs creative freedom can be articulated by centering in the values on passion (Athawal & Harris 2018, 355). A famous example of downplaying commercial motives is Patagonia's Black Friday campaign Don't buy this jacket (Image 2).

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



Image 2 Patagonia: Don't buy this jacket

In the advertisement placed in New York times in November 2011 to address the issue of consumerism and its effects on the environment, Patagonia calls for its clients to think before making a buying decision. Patagonia commented the advertisement claiming it to be *the test of our sincerity (or our hypocrisy), and will be if everything we sell is useful, multifunctional where possible, long lasting, beautiful but not in thrall to fashion.* (Patagonia 2011.) The message of the brands core value, sustainability, remains clear.

2.3.2 Craftsmanship

The skills of a craftsman, such as commitment in the production and the employed professional evaluation, are key components in authenticity assessment (Freathy & Thomas

2015, 185). Craftsmanship includes multiple concepts, such as using the fines and natural material and producing uncompromising top quality (Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017, 37). Hand-design methods (Athawal & Harris 2018, 360) and selectivity in raw material (Beverland 2005b, 254) are explicit trait of authenticity. In general, craftsmanship emphasizes mastery, expertise, inventive spirit (Athawal & Harris 2018, 355–356) and maintaining quality standards (Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1390).

Commitment to quality embodies both a quest to continually living up to expectations and a committing to consumers. Communicating uncompromising commitments to quality is a way to show authenticity which can be signaled through artisan skills, knowledge, time-honored traditions, investing in areas that improve quality (Beverland 2005b, 254) or emphasizing on innovative design and demonstrating expertise (Athawal & Harris 2018, 355). Quality commitment is a crucial factor also in brand extension, as inferior quality, varying production methods or overly inconsistent features risk both the extension and the umbrella brand to be perceived as inauthentic by consumers (Spiggle et al. 2012, 969).

One way to accentuate the value of creator's craftsmanship skills and differentiation from mass-produced products is the release of limited editions. The restriction on the production adds value and rarity to the product. (Bai et al. 2009, 252.) Limiting the amount of production by artisanal standards or distinctive, hand-crafted methods implicates the genuineness of a brand and connotes authenticity among commodified objects (Beverland 2006; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Avery 2010).

2.3.3 *Heritage and history*

Heritage offers an impression of authenticity and can be utilized in celebrating brand's individual history and unique standpoint (Beverland 2005b, 253; Athawal & Harris 2018, 347). Misiura (2006, 81–82) states that heritage is widely sought by all types of consumers which makes it an ideal component for branding. Heritage appeals to the aspirations, needs and motivations of forthcoming as well as already loyal customers. Thus, honoring traditions plays an important role in brand authenticity (Athawal & Harris 2018, 361).

Constructing a link between a brand and its past adds nuance to its meaning, thus simultaneously indicating reliability for consumers (Beverland 2005b, 253). Heritage can be communicated through various manners, such as historically provable facts, patent dates, associated events (Alexander 2009, 552) or less verifiable assertions and allusions of origin (Beverland 2005b, 253).

Enduring a brand with a rich history is a widespread tactic in the marketplace, and Levi Strauss and Co. is commonly mentioned as a prominent example. The jeans manufacturer was originally created in 1874, and 140 years later the company is still marketed

as the original jean maker and the creator of the modern jeans. Levi Strauss and Co. has been successful in maintaining its authentic brand and evolving in line with fashion trends without losing its iconic status. (Athawal & Harris 2018, 347.) According to Misiura (2006, 7) consumers are now more than ever looking for heritage in brands. Internet has been one of the substantial forces of this tendency, since it has enabled the global consumption of goods through from any part of the world. For example, consumers can purchase a French wine straight from the vineyard which will be delivered to their door. Alongside the internet, the growing tendency in global movement has enabled customers to confront various new experiences, such as foods and drinks and the rituals these goods require in preparation, consuming or sourcing. (Misiura 2006, 189.)

One way to point out authenticity is nostalgia. It is commonly considered to hold a close relation to the manifestation of heritage and in arousing positive aspirational emotions (Misiura 2006, 81). Nostalgia and heritage can be demonstrated for example by launching a tribute model of a classic or by accurately reproducing or recreating an original product (Athawal & Harris 2018, 362).

Demonstrating the region of origin is similarly an important factor in authenticity (Beverland 2005b, 254). Coming from a particular country or provenance creates a natural heritage that can be utilized for marketing purposes, as it may reflect consumers curiosity, willingness for adventure or savor of knowledge (Misiura 2006, 200, 207). Being able to trace a brand to a real place creates authenticity as opposed to it being placeless (Beverland 2005b, 255).

2.3.4 Artistry

Bai et al. (2009, 249) state that originality and self-expression are the two main regimes of authenticity since they have significant value in separating a brand from its rivals and appealing to the consumers who are looking for individuality. A brand is considered as an original, differentiated and particular concept that reflects its core identity, and this identity can be replicated in a form of market offerings. These brand replicates can be identical copies in a form of consumer-packaged goods or on the other hand varying pieces, such as artistic or entertainment offerings, used by artist as a dimension of their brand building. The originality and self-expression of the brand define its identity or authenticity aura. (Brown et al. 2003; Beverland and Farrelly 2010.)

Innovativeness and uniqueness are closely related to brand's artistry and creativity (Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1390) whereupon one manner to insert authenticity to a brand is to impregnate it with innovative and unique artistic elements. Artists' creative identities have the power to enrich brands with meaning (Fine 2003, 55). One way of implementing this is through visual elements, as younger generations are generally

adjusted to mediating their messages via images in constructing their identities in order to be associated with authenticity (Dwivedi & McDonald 2018, 1390).

Bai et al. (2009, 253) also note that it is possible to transfer an artist authenticity to a product or a brand. The individual spirituality of the creator can form a link of authenticity between the brand and the artist connected to it as artists' work contains their essence and expresses their authenticity.

Baumgarth (2018, 244) agrees to this and states that the art brand collaborations have effect on consumer evaluations of a brand and can produce preferences of loyalty since the abstract concept of authenticity becomes incarnate in the creative work. Hence, adding visual images by artist are an intuitive way for audiences to grasp the artist's spirit and originality and add authenticity to a brand (Bai et al. 2009, 253, 256).

2.3.5 *Appealing to lifestyle*

According to Bruhn et al. (2012, 567) the cultural fit between the consumer and the brand influences strongly on brand authenticity and supports the relevance of cultural proximity as a significant driver of delivering brand authenticity. Instead of concentrating in meeting barely the mundane market's needs, companies should concentrate on engaging with consumers by offering resonating brand meaning and appealing to more profound values, and let brand be absorbed in communities as they are (Beverland 2005a, 461).

The same process functions also on the contrary direction, as mentioned previously. As a way to identifying with a particular community, consumers regularly look for brands that can be used as marks of belonging to a particular community. While doing so, they grant authenticity to certain brands and similarly detract it from others. Similarly, choosing an incorrect brand may cause an opposing effect – it may mark a consumer out as an inauthentic member of the community, thus averting his ability to join the group or engage with others. (Beverland 2006, 21) In selecting brands, the brand choice depends on the shared histories of the consumer community and the brand (Beverland 2005a, 461). A low degree of brand authenticity implies a brand positioning which does not get with its identity, and therefore, the origin of the brand promise is attributed to external forces rather than to brand identity. (Schallehn et al. 2014, 194.)

American ice cream manufacturer Ben & Jerry's has been laudably resonating with the LGBTQ community as expressed in the Image 3.



Image 3 Ben & Jerry's I Dough, I Dough

To honor the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States' to allow same sex marriage, Ben & Jerry's renamed their Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream temporarily as I Dough, I Dough. This act reasserted the company's values and positioned it strongly in the minority culture. The importance of the cultural resonance is discussed further in the following chapter.

3 COMMUNICATING BRAND AUTHENTICITY

3.1 Consumption and identity

Individuals express themselves and their cultures by the consumption of goods (Wattanasuwan 2005, 179–180; Damien 2006, 149). People do not value products merely for their benefit as much as for what they symbolize; their value for consumers' identity. Consumers drape themselves with brands that embody their admired ideals and use them as channels of expression for who they want to be. Should a brand be successful in answering to particular values and aspirations idolized by a group of members in a society, it can eventually become a cultural icon. (Holt 2004, 3–4.) Since all consumption holds expressive meanings, people endeavor to incorporate desired brands and products into their self-creation while striving to resist the ones that are found undesirable. (Wattanasuwan 2005, 179–180).

Brand administrators are not the sole creators of brand authenticity (Beverland 2005a, 460). Managing consumers perceptions of authenticity is critical because perceived authenticity must follow consumers' mental frames of how things *ought to be* (Grayson & Martinec 2004) and cover the invisible factors in people's general perceptions (Bai et al. 2009, 253) to address the symbolic messages correctly and arouse resonance. The factors affecting on the authenticity perception are illustrated in Figure 4.

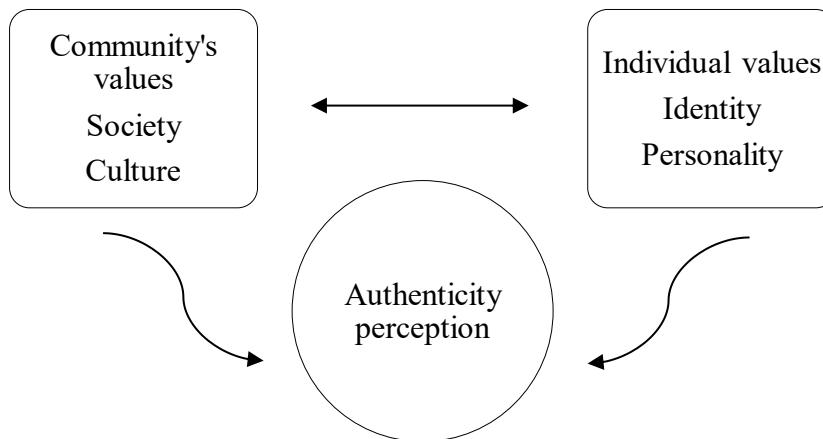


Figure 4 Factors on authenticity perception

It is imperative to comprehend that people perceive things and situations in a different way for their cultural background, environmental situation and lived experience. Other important factors in the authenticity assessment are the surrounding circumstances, individual judgement and identity. (Grayson & Martinec 2004, 296–297; Leigh 2006, 482.)

People's perception of authenticity is highly influenced by personal predilections (Grayson & Martinec 2004, 299). People's personal preferences are still not the only factors in the authenticity assessment. Being part of a social world allows external forces and social pressures to influence personal identity as well (Schallehn et al. 2014, 193).

An authentic claim is worthless without authentic communication. Communicating authenticity must capture the experiences, ambitions, and hopes of the involved segment of society that is aimed to engage, to avoid a clash a values and beliefs that may otherwise occur. (Molleda 2010, 234.) Hence, in selecting brands, the consumers' assessment of authenticity attributes depends heavily on the consumer community alongside with the personal preference. As a result, instead of endeavoring the direct or self-evident brand authenticity cues, marketing the brand authenticity can take an indirect route, such as infiltrating to a community and becoming a part of it. (Beverland 2005a, 461.)

For postmodern consumers, brands are building blocks in the process of creating authentic self and reconnecting to others in the continuum of place, time and culture (Holt 2004; Beverland & Farrelly 2010; Napoli et al. 2014, 1090). For consumers, consumption has formed an autonomous space of self-expression outside the societal or institutional pressures. Therefore, brands have the opportunity to offer authentic experiences in the current consumption culture. (Holt 2004.) As an example, the Swedish alcohol brand Absolut Vodka started bolstering the sexual minority culture already in the 1980s by supporting the community's events and values (Image 4).



Image 4 Absolut Vodka has shown support for the gay community over decades

Kiss with pride campaign was curated by Absolut to raise awareness of the illegality of same-sex relationships that continues being a global inequality issue (Absolut Vodka). In order to gain authenticity in the eyes of the members of the community, brands must

stay true to the community's origins and bolster the development and wellbeing of the community together with its members (Damien 2006, 151).

To establish authenticity, it is crucial to regard cultural and contextual factors as well as the predominant power structures and history (Freathy & Thomas 2015, 178). Danesi (2006, 91, 120, 126) states that the imagery produced by brands reinforces the pre-existing lifestyle models in cultures. To succeed in the market, besides being economically canny brands must also be culturally canny. Brand messages must be in sync with the target markets culture. If a brand is able to resonate with the culture's core desires, it will most probably gain a niche in the market, and by answering to universal needs, it can gain a global foothold. If a brand lacks internal structure and its message is inconsistent or irrelevant for the target segment, it will fail in touching the hearts and minds of consumers. (Oswald 2012, 46.)

When selecting brands, consumers' brand choices commonly depend on the shared histories of the consumer, the community and the brand (Beverland 2005a, 461). According to Bruhn et al. (2012, 568) the cultural fit between the consumer and the brand influences strongly brand authenticity and supports the relevance of cultural proximity as a significant driver of delivering brand authenticity. Instead of concentrating in meeting barely the mundane market's needs, companies should concentrate on engaging with consumers by offering resonating brand meaning and appealing to more profound values, and let brand be absorbed in communities as they are (Beverland 2005a, 461).

3.2 Semiotics

Communication is the symbolic activity between humans (Yakin & Totu 2014, 8). Since all experience is mediated by signs and communication depends on signs, it is crucial to understand their functioning mechanisms (Chandler 2007, 2). One way of sowing authenticity into brand communications is semiotics. Semiotic theory focuses structuring and operating the signs and sign systems (Yakin & Totu 2014, 8) and provides concepts and analytical models that allow the unraveling of signs into components and relating them to wider cultural entities (Seppä 2012, 128).

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems, and semiotic research focuses on how meanings are made and how reality is represented and constructed through them (Seppänen 2002, 175; Chandler 2007, 2; Yakin & Totu 2014, 8). For instance, a brand is a sign system that engages the consumer in a signification process. The meanings evoked by brand's assets, such as name, logo and visual cues, contribute directly to the brands semiotic value. (Oswald 2012, 44.) Since brands aim to resonate with consumers motivations and needs, they should construct these desires straight into brand communication (Danesi 2006, 17). With semiotics, brands can create clear, affecting and relevant

communication and fit the messages in the communication channels to align with the authentic brand message to reach the target consumers. (Oswald 2012, 1.)

Consumers use various cues to evaluate brand authenticity (Carsana & Jolibert 2018, 213) and it is essential in branding to indicate authenticity with adding authentic cues on the brand. This can be made through focusing on the real attributes of the brand, but it is noteworthy that some of the claims about the brand can be artificial (Beverland 2005a, 460) or rendered (Gilmore & Pine 2007). For example, in online settings these cues can be visual assets such as logo, graphics, multi-media, color, shape, layout, news, and other physical features (Rowley 2004, 134). Subsequently, practices of creating authentic experiences in an interplay of visual and verbal cues are introduced.

3.2.1 *Signs*

To better understand communications through semiotics and the formation of meaning, it is essential to understand the meaning of a sign. Traditionally, a sign is defined as *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, something which stands for something else. However, it is noteworthy that semiotics does not involve things that are referred as signs in everyday dialog, but rather everything that stands for something else. In a semiotic sense, all meaningful phenomena, including words, odors, flavors, images, acts, sounds, gestures or objects can take the form of a sign. (Chandler 2007, 2.)

The history of semiotics can be traced to two prominent figures, an American philosopher Charles S. Peirce and a Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. As these two roots of semiotics emerged almost simultaneously from different premises, some overlap and dissent of opinions in the theory is still reflected to semiotics. For instance, Peirce and Saussure both describe sign differently. (Seppänen 2002, 176; Danesi 2007, 27 Yakin & Totu 2014.)

Peirce is acknowledged as the pioneer of pragmatism doctrine in semiotics as he has developed grounds in the general theory of signs. One of Peirce's main principles contains the trichotomy of sign. (Yakin & Totu 2014, 6.) According to Peirce, a sign is anything that stands for something to somebody in its context (Mick 1986, 198; Fiske 2005, 64). This view of the construction of meaning is commonly described as a triangle which is founded on three parts, representamen, object and interpretant (Fiske 2005, 64) as portrayed in Figure 5.

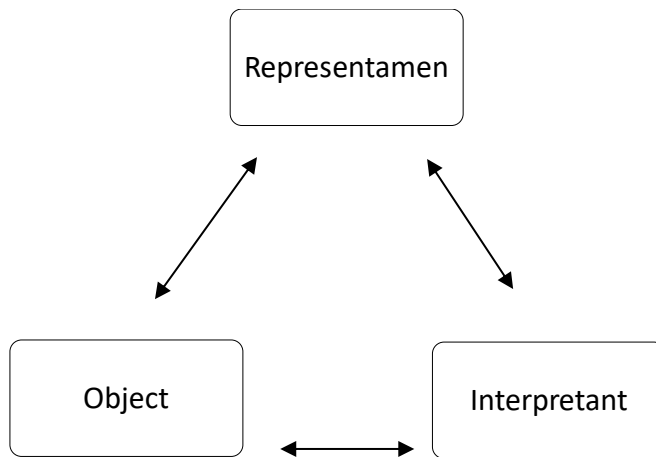


Figure 5 Peirce's view on semiotic elements (Fiske 2005, 64) or triadic semiosis (Mick 1986, 198)

A sign, or representamen, refers to another thing: its object. For example, a word *dog* (representamen) refers to a physical dog (object). Through representamen, anything discussable or thinkable, is represented to someone. In a way, representamen calls someone to interpret itself, creating a certain image of the object in the mind of the interpreter. (Fiske 2005, 63–64; Seppänen 2005, 109; Yakin & Totu 2014, 7). This image of and object produced by the representamen is called interpretant. The interpretant is the intangible concept created by the sign in the experience of its user, and it should not be confused with an interpreter (Seppänen 2002, 177). In this case, the interpretant would be an idea of a dog in the interpreter's mind. Interpretant does not refer to the interpreter nor is it merely an interpretation – it is defined as *the sign's transmutation into an inferred neural code*. (Mick 1986, 198–199.)

Yakin and Totu (2014, 7) concur to this view stating that the interpretant means any meanings about the object that are conveyed by the representamen that were previously unknown, abstract in nature and nonexistent in human perception. The relationship between representamen, object and interpretant is thus interactional. (Yakin & Totu 2014, 7.) At the end of the construction of the meaning, traditionally called *semiosis*, the interpretant can be transformed into a language or other symbolic code by which it is possible to be shared and transmitted within the social environment. (Mick 1986, 198–199.)

René Magritte's well-known painting *The Treachery of Images* (Image 5) can be utilized to exemplify Peirce's thoughts.



Image 5 René Magritte: Ceci n'est pas une pipe

In Magritte's painting, there is an image of a pipe with a text *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, this is not a pipe. Peirce would agree Magritte's statement and continue that in fact it is not a pipe, but a representamen of an object, a pipe. The idea formed in viewers imaginations while seeing Magritte's representation of a pipe would be called an interpretant. This interpretant of the painting would then be transmitted by words and shared with others.

Meanwhile, Ferdinand de Saussure provided a structuralist point of view to semiotics, or in his own words, semiology. (Yakin & Totu 2014, 6.) Saussure's view is different to Peirce's, but they both include similar elements. As a linguist, Saussure was first and foremost interested in the relationship between the lingual signs, particularly in spoken language. Saussure's idea of a sign is built on two components, signifier and signified. (Seppänen 2002, 177; Yakin & Totu 2014, 6.) The relationship between the components is demonstrated in Figure 6.

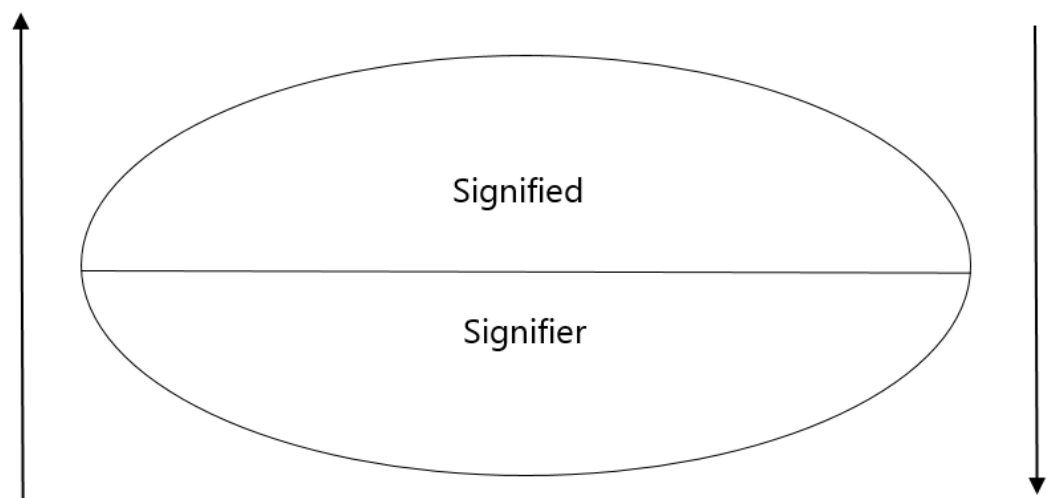


Figure 6 Saussure's model of the sign (Danesi 2006, 28)

Whereas Peirce's theory of sign emphasizes the triadic and trichotomy signification system, the principal concept of Saussure's sign theory is based on dichotomy or duality (Yakin & Totu 2014, 6).

Saussure observed, that when using a word, as an example *a tree* (signifier), the word in question produces an acoustic image in the brain and in consequence, a visual image of a tree (signified) appears into mind (Danesi 2007, 28). Signifier is the physical form of the sign, for example the written word car. Signifier refers to the signified, which is a kind of intangible concept, for example an idea of the car. In order to understand each other's signs such as words or writing, people must have similar understanding of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, for instance have a shared idea of a car at least partly. (Seppänen 2002, 177.)

Signifier refers to something that can be distinguished by human senses, something that exists explicitly in physical or material form, whereas signified is something literal and physically nonexistent (Yakin & Totu 2014, 6). Fiske (2005, 66–77) adds that the intangible elements are usually shared inside the same culture or language. The relationship between the signifier and signified is commonly called the signification system. Signifier and signified are closely entwined and work as complements for each other. They cannot be separated, as one aspect would not exist without the other. (Yakin & Totu 2014, 6.) Once the connection between the sign in its physical form and meaning is establish, it becomes bidirectional – the physical form implies the meaning and the meaning implies the physical form (Danesi 2006, 28).

It is evident that Peirce's object and Saussure's signifier resemble each other, as well as the interpretant and the signified. However, they are set in different semiotic systems and thus have differences (Seppänen 2002, 177; Chandler 2007, 31–32). According to Chandler (2007, 28) Saussure's theory gives more importance to internal structure of human minds. He emphasizes the cognitive thought process of people in constructing the physical and intangible signs taken from their environments or surroundings which includes the construction of linguistic signs in the language system that plays an important role in the communications and other function as human beings. Saussure's theory is suggesting that instead of reflecting reality, language rather constructs it. Language is not only used, or meanings are not solely given to things that exists in the real world, but also to things that are non-existent or abstract. Yaki and Totu (2014, 7) add that according to Saussure, a sign is a process or a phenomenon that never occurs in a coincidence or by chance. Signs are delivered intentionally, with a purpose and specific meaning. That is to say, a sign does not exist if it is not intentional.

As a philosopher, Peirce embraced logical thinking and formed his theories to describe the way human beings think or use their common senses or rationality. Peirce believed that people's thinking process happens through signs. This enables them to communicate

with each other and give meaning to anything that exist in their environment. To the contrary of Saussure's perspective, Peirce suggested that sign can be basically anything, as long as it represent something through the individual's thought and interpretation. Thus, signs exist even though they are not purposely meant or communicated. (Yaki & Totu 2014, 7.) In conclusion, signs can be used deliberately or unintentionally – in either way the receiver has an active role in forming the meaning.

3.2.2 *Icon, index and symbol*

Peirce distinguished three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols (Mick 1986, 199; Fiske 2005, 71; Chandler 2007, 44; Yakin & Totu 2014,6).

An icon is a sign that resembles an object (Mick 1986, 199; Fiske 2005, 71; Chandler 2007, 44). The most obvious and unquestionable icons are maps or pictograms, such as female or male signs on public toilets' doors. Onomatopoeia is an attempt to convert language into icon, as the word seeks to imitate the sound that people hear, for example in the case of *humming* or *murmuring*. (Fiske 2005, 71.) In the beforementioned Magritte's painting, the image of pipe would be considered as icon.

An index does not have intrinsic resemblance but has a causal relation to an object (Mick 1986, 199; Fiske 2005, 71; Chandler 2007, 44). One way to understand indexicality is to express it as a metaphoric statement *there is no smoke without a fire* (Seppänen 2002, 178–179). In this sense, a photograph is an index in the same way as animal paw prints – they both fulfill the requirement of a direct link to the target. The indexical nature of photographs should always be considered, since it easily leads to the idea that a photograph is a solid proof of the existence of its objects, even when that is not the case. (Seppänen 2002, 178–179.)

Symbol diverges from icons and indexes, because instead of resemblance or causal connection, it has a conventional relation to the object. Invariably, symbols require a participative presence of the interpreter to create a meaningful connection. (Mick 1986, 199; Fiske 2005, 71; Chandler 2007, 44.) Symbol's connection to its destination is based on a habit, agreement, or rule. For instance, words or letters are mainly symbols, the red cross is a symbol and numbers are symbols. There is no other reason for them to be understood apart from the power and rules inside our culture. (Fiske 2005, 72.)

It is significant to note that these different types are not categories, but rather features or stages that can occur at the same time in one sign. Typically, signs are simultaneously iconic, indexical, and symbolic. (Mick 1986, 199; Fiske 2005, 71; Chandler 2007, 44.) Per se, signs cannot be classified directly into types without referencing the purposes of their usage and taking their contexts into account (Chandler 2007, 45).

As mentioned in chapter 2.1, majority of the brand authenticity research uses terms indexical and iconic authenticity in explaining the difference of these two viewpoints. Indexical authenticity or indexicality distinguishes *the real thing* from its copies (Grayson & Martinec 2004; Athwal & Harris 2018, 349). A brand is seen as indexically authentic if it is believed to be the original, not a copy nor an imitation, i.e. the authenticity is incarnated in the object itself (e.g. Grayson & Martinec 2004; Beverland 2006; Bai et al. 2009, 253; Athwal & Harris 2018). Indexical cues produce a link with a trusted point of reference (Athwal & Harris 2018, 350) which makes them objective sources in providing an authentication of what the brand claims to be (Morhart et al., 2015). Secondly, iconic authenticity encompasses a projection from the consumer's point of view about how the brand *ought to look* or be, taking into account the perceptions that are guided by one's feelings and emotional impressions. (Grayson & Martinec 2004.) Instead of proving evidence or connections with a reference, iconic cues convey feelings and emotional impressions of something that influences a brand's perceived authenticity (Fritz et al. 2017, 327).

Similarly to the comprehensive nature of semiotic icons, indexes and symbols, iconic and indexical authenticity are not reciprocally exclusive. Even if perceptions might sometimes underline iconicity over indexicality and vice versa, each perceived cue has both iconic and indexical attributes. Thus, brands are commonly both iconic and indexically authentic. (Grayson & Martinec 2004, 298–299.) Morhart et al. (2015, 200) propose, that brand authenticity can be defined by the interplay of indexical authenticity, such as objective or incarnate facts, together with iconic authenticity, such as subjective mental associations by individuals or communities.

3.2.3 *Denotation and connotation*

Equally as important as understanding the meaning of signs, it is essential to comprehend the way signs are interpreted. In the academic literature, the interpretation of signs is usually divided into two levels: denotation and connotation. The literal meaning of a signifier is called denotation, whereas the connotation describes secondary or unconscious meanings. It is distinctive that people form meanings through the creation and interpretation of signs (Chandler 2007, 13). In a way, brands are purely mental constructs that are formed by culturally shaped images in consumers' minds. The more meanings a brand can build into the brand communication, the more probably it will be itself associated into the social mindset of the consumers. (Danesi 2006, 22, 37.)

Denotation resembles the dictionary meaning of a word as a simplified indicator of a concept or a literal translation of a sign to its meaning. For example, a logo functions merely as an identifier which distinguishes it from another brands at the denotative level. (Oswald 2012, 54–55.) It is rare to encounter literal messages in marketing

communications because even a naive or pure imaginary would immediately rouse a connection to naivety, hence germinating meanings and interpretations (Barthes 1977, 42).

The more profound level of interpretation is the connotative level, that includes cultural interpretation of signs (Oswald 2012, 54–55). Effectively, brands will have greater psychological power when they manage to create a higher number of connotations – that are the distinct interpretations of the brands and their advertisement perceived by people. (Danesi 2006, 22, 37.) Barthes (1977, 50) notes that is essential to understand that the connotations in the total image constitute discontinuous or scattered traits of the panorama. In general, the mental construction of meaning is highly unconscious (Danesi 2006, 22).

Brands can operate as a link between consumers and their traditions, rituals and values, and on the other hand provide valuable information about consumers and cultures. The social and cultural relevance of brands is evident. (Danesi 2006, 21.) Culture has high impact on connotations. For example, the interpretation of colors is usually under the influence of a cultural lens. On the other hand, connotations can be highly personal and arouse differently from a different perspective. Connotations endow signs with shades and nuances of meaning and are highly dependent on the message's context and receiver. (Oswald 2012, 54–55.) In other words, the interpretation is anchored in both the interpreter and in the specific culture in which the interpretation takes place. The components involved in the interpretation – the interpreter, the sign and other signs, the context, the culture, are all inseparably interlaced. (Beasley & Danesi 2002, 68.)

3.2.4 *Paradigm and syntagma*

Signs context is a substantial factor in the construction of meaning. Meanings in an absolute sense do not exist – from the semiotic point of view, meanings always occur in relation to other meanings (Danesi 2007, 26–27). Therefore, together with studying solely individual signs, semiotic is also interested in the cooperation and interplay of signs. This includes the signs' relation to other signs and the formation of the signs' collective meaning. Paradigm and syntagma are two different sign groups that together describe the relation between signs and determine how signs are organized. (Mick 1986, 197; Fiske 2005, Seppä 2012, 141).

Paradigm is a set of signs from which only one unit can be selected to reflect the whole group. All signs in a shared paradigm have something in common, they hold features that define them as members of a particular paradigm. At the same time, the units of the paradigm must be clearly distinguished from each other. (Fiske 1992, 81–82; Seppänen 2001, 181.) Thus, signs in the same paradigm have a distinct identity, but each character must be distinguished from other characters in the same paradigm at both the signifier

and the signified level. (Seppä 2012, 141.) For example, in choosing clothes for a person posing in a picture, a hat can be picked from the paradigm, of hats and a coat can be chosen from the paradigm of outerwear (Seppänen 2001, 181).

Syntagm from its part is a message composed of different signs chosen from varying paradigms. For example, a written word is a syntagm composed of letters, while a sentence is a word-built syntagm. (Fiske 2005, 83.) An outfit is a syntagm consisting parts of different garment paradigms, while inside the paradigm and individual piece of clothing may be replaced by another, as stated in the example of hats and coats. In every culture, a set of well-established customs and practices govern the syntagmatic compilation and compatibility of signs. For instance, people might consider that an evening dress should not be combined with running shoes. (Seppä 2012, 141–143.) The interrelatedness of paradigm and syntagm is demonstrated in

Figure 7.

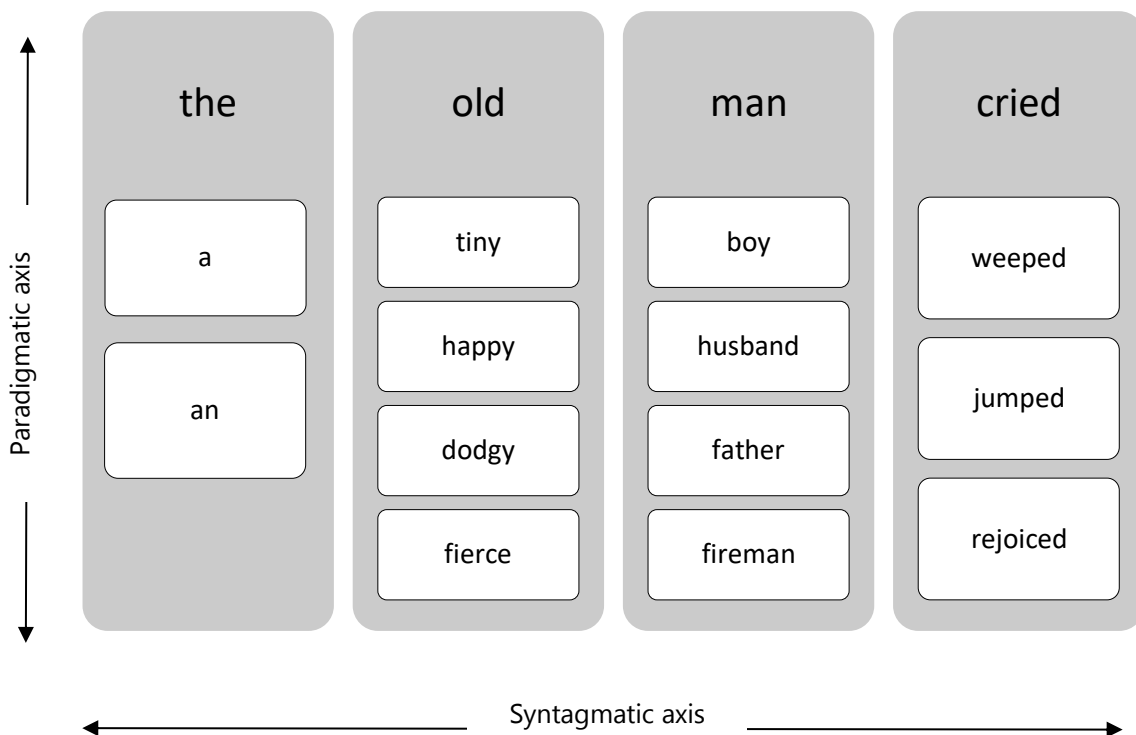


Figure 7 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes (adapted from Chandler 2007, 85)

A set of chosen signs from a paradigmatic axis shapes the meaning in the syntagmatic level (Mick 1986, 197; Chandler 2007, 85). In language, vocabulary forms the paradigm and sentence the syntagma (Fiske 2005, 81). From a consumer culture point of view, a family picnic can be a syntagma of choices that is formed from the paradigms of food, beverages, entertainment, apparel, participants and so forth (Mick 1986, 197).

It can be said that paradigmatic relations are contrastive (Chandler 2007, 85) as paradigmatic relations reveal oppositions and contrasts within a set of signs (Mick 1986,

197). Members of the paradigm are structurally replaceable with each other in a given context, and simultaneously the choice of one sign will always exclude the choice of another. Consequently, the selected signs and those that are left untouched are also paradigmatic choices that carry meaning via the selection process. Syntagmatic relations on the other hand are messages that reveal rules and conventions occurring in combining the paradigmatic choice. (Mick 1986, 197; Chandler 2007, 85.)

3.3 Storytelling

Earlier research has shown, that storytelling is a fundamental mean in conveying brand authenticity (e.g. Holt 2004; Beverland 2005a & 2009; Napoli et al. 2014, 1091). Stories are international, transhistorical and transcultural. They exist just like life itself. (Barthes 1977, 79.) They are ubiquitous and constantly used to outline, store and recall information and to comprehend the surrounding world (Escalas 2004, Gargiulo 2006; Miller et al. 2008, Torkki 2014) Stories affect in multiple ways. They empower the storyteller and connect people. With stories, it is possible point out differences in the world, create settings and engage listeners. (Gragiulo 2006.)

People have an innate inclination towards building memories and experiences in the mind in a form of a story. Stories can also help people in forming their identities. Thus, if a person has an engram of a brand story, the brand in question can eventually become a part of the person's identity. When a consumer identifies with the brand, it will print into the memory and the brand's story will become a story of the consumer. (Escalas 2004.) Some brands are saturated with stories that consumers find essential in constructing their identities and expressing themselves (Holt 2004, 3–4) or creating their authentic self and reconnecting to place, time, culture and others (Napoli et al. 2014, 1090). Gummerus et al. (2011; 2013) mention that compared to other marketing communication strategies, people are more willing to receive advertising in a story form since it is seen as less intrusive than other traditional ways. Simply put, storytelling and brand marketing are both based in the same starting point – emotions and values.

Storytelling makes a brand unique. It is an effective way in conveying brands values to consumers and supporting the core values in memorable ways. (Gummerus et al. 2013). Beverland (2009, 7) states that brand authenticity can be achieved through rich, multi-layered stories that feature brand heroes that stumble and triumph against unbearable odds. These brand stories should be embellished with vivid characters, colorful incidences and passion or immersed in tragedy and stupidity. Essentially, authentic brand stories are comprised by conflict. As any good stories, brand stories require setting, a place and a time. (Alexander 2009, 552).

Holt (2004, 3) argues that marketers usually see brands as a psychological phenomenon that stems from individual consumers' perceptions but forget that the collective nature of the perceptions is the key to eventually making a brand powerful. The brands that can transform their stories conventional and embed themselves into the everyday interactions will be continually reinforced. Should a brand story be compelling enough, it might attract media around it to listen and to tell it forward. When the story is told by media, it is considered more trustworthy by consumers. (Fog et al. 2005, 196.) In general, authentic brand stories share multiple authors, such as marketers, shareholders, consumers, and society (Beverland 2009, 7).

As mentioned earlier, consumers interpret numerous cues to evaluate brand authenticity. These cues can include both naturally occurring cues along with intentionally produced signs, as long as the cues are interpreted as authentic by consumer. Generally, these cues can take any form, from text, images or videos or other interactions with a brand, and as a consequence either an authentic or inauthentic experience is formed.

A story can be told in many ways, either through visual or verbal means. Yet still, the story would not be the same in case both systems are harnessed to work in conjunction. To some extent, text functions as an anchor to the image and similarly, illustrations can be used as anchors for text by reducing the signifieds. Together, verbal and visual cues provide a relay function by interweaving and complementing each other, eventually generating meaning simultaneously. This relationship constitutes a narrative, or a mental construct on receiver's mind. (Golden & Gerber 1990, 207–208). Text can also be used to identify the visual elements, as a denotative description of the image or guiding the signification process. Moreover, verbal and visual cues are always fragments of a larger syntagma, which enables the reader to choose some and ignore others. (Barthes 1977, 38–39, 41.)

3.3.1 *Metaphor*

Brands depend heavily on metaphors to communicate and to stimulate people's imagination (Holt 2004, 3). Metaphor is a figure of speech, a way to understand or experience one thing through something else (Seppänen 2002, 185–186) or a way to express something unfamiliar through something well-known (Fiske 2002, 122; Oswald 2012, 59–60). A metaphor is always distinguished from its literal meaning and is merely a figurative expression (Seppänen 2002, 185–186).

Metaphor includes two parts, the primary and the secondary subject. (Seppänen 2002, 168). The well-known subject is usually called theme and the new or unfamiliar a rheme. It is typical for metaphors to apply both similarities and differences simultaneously. It can be argued that it works in a paradigmatic way, as the theme and the rheme must have

sufficient resemblance in order to place them in the same paradigm, but at the same time they must have sufficient disparity. Both theme and rheme are thus parts of the same paradigm that can be only distinguished to different units. The characteristics of a theme will be transferred to the rheme by using a metaphor with associating their similar features. (Fiske 2002, 122–123.) While interpreting a metaphor, it is always crucial to be aware of the context. Metaphors are usually such a self-evident component of language and thinking, that they are commonly disregarded (Seppänen 2002, 185, 187) or *brushed aside*. An idea can be *hammered* into someone's head or a person can be as awkward as a *fish out of water*.

Metaphors contribute directly to the dimensions of brand meaning. They can communicate more than mere literal concepts and thus have an advantage over literal statements. They broaden the semantic field of an idea and communicate visceral and visual associations exceed mere facts as such. The rhetorical dimension of discourse has important implications for growing brand equity. Rhetoric cherishes the visceral connections between brands' and consumers by expanding brands' emotional dimensions and semiotic value. (Oswald 2012, 34.)

3.3.2 Metonymy

Metonymy is sometimes considered as a type of metaphor, but these two types can be distinguished from each other by their purpose of use. Whereas metaphor is based upon two things analogous similarity, metonymy works by the contiguity or associations between two concepts. When metaphor works by transferring features from one subject to another in different paradigmatic levels, metonymy works by associating meanings in the same level. In using a metonymy, a section is emphasized to represent an entity. (Fiske 2002, 127; Seppänen 2002, 191.) For example, it is metonymic to talk about a *crown* instead of royalty or refer to a *pen* instead of writing. (Fiske 2002, 127.)

Metonymies are effective tools in conveying reality, as they work in the same manner as indexes. They are only a part of what they represent. Still, they can be distinguished from naturally occurring indexes, such as the example of smoke and fire, because their selection rests mainly upon discretion. This arbitrariness of metonymies is usually well veiled or unheeded, which can cause them to be seen as indexes. In this case, the reality that is formed with metonymy will be considered as a truth, and it will not be questioned, even though it should be. (Fiske 2002, 128.)

On the other hand, a chosen metonymy often determinates which meanings are conveyed. For example, a photograph is usually seen as a metonymic sign, because it always represents a smaller part of a larger entity. (Seppä 2012, 191.) It is essential to note what kind of metonymy is chosen, because by interpreting the metonymy, the inspector forms

an idea of the reality that is left unsaid or restricted from the big picture. The chosen metonymy designates what kind of an image will be built upon it. (Fiske 2002, 127.)

4 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introducing mezcal

Mezcal is a distilled alcoholic beverage produced from fermented agave juice (García Mendoza 2010, 11; Valenzuela Zapata & Gaytán 2012, 1). Mezcal forms a part of Mexican culture and has deeply entwined roots in the country's history (García Mendoza 2010, 11). According to a recent archaeological investigation, the distillation of agave into an alcoholic beverage was known in Mesoamerican cultures for at least 25 centuries ago, and contrary to former beliefs, predating the arrival of Spanish conquerors (Goguitchaichvili et al. 2018). The history of mezcal is full of legends, flavors, and folklore, which is why it offers a unique setting for the study of brand authenticity.

The word mezcal itself originates from an indigenous Aztec language Nahuatl, consisting of words *metl*, agave and *ixcalli*, cooked or baked (García Mendoza 2010, 11; Bowen 2015, 2). In its original meaning mezcal referred to the food obtained cooking the stem of the agave plant which used to be the main livelihood in diverse pre-Hispanic cultures (García Mendoza 2010, 11). Eventually, the cooking of agave led to the discovery of the distillation process, and the meaning of mezcal changed to refer distilled agave spirits in general (Bowen 2015, 2–3).

Mexico is the country of agave, also known as *maguey*. These succulents have played a key role throughout Mexico's history (Illsley Granich 2010, 29). They have originated, evolved and put into use by humans as food, fiber and prime material for building houses for more than 8000 years. All the Mexicans are more than familiar with maguey plants; it is common to see them as ornate plants in parks, gardens, avenues or installed in pots outside houses. Outside the cities, they can be spotted alongside the roads, living undisturbed in highlands or grown in orchards surrounding villages. (García Mendoza 2010, 8.) Legends, myth and stories related to agave and mezcal are an essential part of Mexican culture. (Illsley Granich 2010, 19.)

At least 40 different types of maguey species are used in the mezcal production, either as single species varieties or combinations, resulting a distinctive blend to each region. Most maguey species have limited distribution and are found in only one state. The most widely used agave is *espadín* which is found throughout Mexico. (García Mendoza 2010, 11) It is notable that Mexico is essentially an arid country, and given the water crisis and climate change, it is worth reconsidering the value of maguey's capacity to adapt to conditions of low precipitation and environmental stress. In many communities, maguey and mezcal are the most important source of family income. Some mezcal producers are beginning to look for new schemes that combine the conservation of native magueys, including their sustainable management and trade. (Illsley Granich 2010, 25, 29–30.)

Mezcal is still prepared for ritual purposes. For instance, it can be used to propitiate rains during the hottest seasons as it symbolizes fertility, return of the rains and the annual renewal of life. (Coyle 2010, 38, 41.) In some parts of Mexico, mezcal is still commonly used for medicinal purposes to *alleviate the body or to cure the soul*. It is frequently used for headaches, flu, stomach pains or throat infections, and more rarely on post-partum pains, depression or even jinxes. (Ángeles Carreño 2010, 60.) It is also used in a variety of celebrations such as baptisms, weddings or funerals (Ruy Sánchez 2010, 47). The traditions and know-how transmitted and accumulated through generations make mezcal a resource that arouses the feelings of identity and community by symbolizing the experience the culture has lived throughout its history (López Rosas & Espinosa Ortega 2018, 1634).

The production practices of mezcal vary considerably. Most mezcal producers roast the agave *piñas*, pines, in pits in the ground that are covered with layers of dirt, stone, and fiber mats. This process takes several days and produces the characteristic smoky flavor of mezcal. Some mezcaleros cut or pound the piñas by hand in hollowed-out logs or on wooden pallets; others use a stone mill, *tahona*, pulled by an animal or powered by an engine. Some producers ferment their mezcal in pits dug directly into the ground, while others use more modern methods, such as wooden, plastic, or cement vats or even animal hides. Even though adding yeasts or other fermenting agents would speed up the process, most producers do not add anything during fermentation to produce natural mezcal. The length of fermentation varies according to the type of agave, the altitude of the distillery, the microclimate in the region, and the time of the year; depending on the conditions, fermentation can take a month. (Bowen 2015, 59–61.)

Bowen also notes (2015, 127) that the type of agave and the practices used to make mezcal still vary from region to region. Every decision, the variety of agave, cooking and mashing method, ingredients that are added (or not added) during fermentation, type of still, and water source, influences the taste of mezcal, producing mezcals that are both complex and diverse. The diversity of mezcal is its most essential characteristic. (Bowen 2015, 56–57.) Modern, well-equipped distilleries co-exist with the more modest, artisanal *palenques*, the outlets of master mezcal distilleries (Ruy Sánchez 2010, 47). Whereas the smallest distilleries produce below ten thousand liters of mezcal annually and operate only some part of the year, on the other end of the spectrum, an increasing number of industrial distilleries has commenced the mass production of mezcal. These distilleries operate at a huge scale with production capacities reaching 4.5 million liters per year. Instead of roasting the agave in the ground, industrial distilleries they cook the agave in masonry ovens or autoclaves. More commonly, they also add yeasts during fermentation and use column stills for distillation. Adding artificial ingredients to regulate the colors and flavors of the batches is likewise generalizing. (Bowen 2015, 59–61.)

In the early 1990s, the Mexican government took unprecedented steps to standardize mezcal production and take control over the thousands of producers (Bowen 2015, 127). Consequently in 1995, mezcal was granted the Appellation of Origin status from the World Intellectual Property Organization, with mezcal only being allowed to be produced and bottled in specific regions in Mexico. Other famous appellations of origin include, among others, Champagne, Prosciutto di Parma, Roquefort Cheese, Cuba cigars and Tequila, also an agave distilled beverage from Mexico. (Trejo-Pech et al. 2010, 117, 122 & 127.)

Regardless the efforts by Mexican government, building the reputation of mezcal as a quality liquor has faced difficulties in the past such as black market for the sale, adulteration of the product and forgery of bottles, labels and trademarks. The adulteration of mezcal left the reputation of this product tremendously damaged. (Tjero-Pech et al. 2010, 126.) During the Viceroyalty of New Spain, mezcal was prohibited due to its connection with pagan festivities and opposition to Spanish imports of brandy and wine industries. As a result, until recent decades mezcal has maintained a stigma of illegal origin and has been confined merely to the countryside for centuries. (Rasero 2010, 65.) In the past decades, mezcal was considered a poor-quality beverage or commonly adulterated cheap hooch but it is currently rising and becoming widely considered as an exclusive product with rapidly growing demand and consumption levels. (López Rosas & Espinosa Ortega 2018, 1645.) Currently, distilled agave spirits are globally one of the fastest-growing liquor categories. (Bowen 2015, 27.)

The standardization, industrialization and globalization of mezcal has not come without downsides. A segment of consumers fears that mezcal will become a commodified and alienated product that cannot be compared to its original form. To prevent the alienation, some consumer and producer groups have started to form a social resistance to uphold the cultural significance by sharing information in social networks and establishing artisan mezcal bars, *mezcalerías* (López Rosas & Espinosa Ortega 2018, 1645). Since the production mezcal serves a relevant role in maintaining the basic standard of living for many people, marketing strategies of these crafted products could have an impact on the welfare of entire communities (Domínguez Hernández & Hernández Girón 1996). In many communities, maguey and mezcal are the most critical source of family income (Illsley Granich 2010, 25), especially in the most impoverished areas of Mexico (Trejo-Pech et al. 2010, 134).

4.2 Qualitative research

Academic research methods are broadly divided into two main branches, quantitative and qualitative research. For quantitative research the main aim is to quantify different types

of research problems by generating numerical data or transforming data into usable statistics, whereas qualitative research is an exploratory way to gain understanding on new topics and provide insight for potential quantitative research. Both quantitative and qualitative research are umbrella terms for a wide variety of approaches and methods. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009; Saldaña 2011, 3–4.)

The purpose of this study is to describe how brand authenticity can be mediated through brand communication. Having in consideration the inherent experimental nature of brand authenticity and the research topic, qualitative perspective was a natural choice for this study. This approach was seen suitable, as the research emphasis is to form in-depth understanding on the relatively unknown phenomena. Qualitative research is most applicable in studies where the explanation and understanding of the phenomena and its influencers are essential and more noteworthy than specific measurements. (Carson et al. 2001, 77.)

Qualitative research is suitable for indicating exploratory questions such as how and why. Qualitative research methods can be used to obtain comprehensive understanding of the subject and describe how and why things occur (Carson et al. 2001, 77). Moreover, qualitative research is usually not restricted solely to shedding light for scientific purposes. On the contrary, oftentimes the intention is to revise the issue under study or to produce practically relevant knowledge for practical problems. (Flick 2007.) The results of qualitative research are commonly drawn from the salient findings of the data and generally they contain documentation of cultural observations, perceptions and comprehensions about the individual and social complexity. (Saldaña 2011, 4.)

For qualitative research, it is common to adopt a postmodern research perspective that suggest that there is no absolute truth, as a contrary to positivism. As truth depends on context and multiple perspectives, it is suggested that various truths may occur simultaneously. Thus, knowledge is constructed individually in the perceivers mind, instead of it existing outside of oneself already, waiting to be discovered. The goal of qualitative research is to gather insights and understanding about social life rather than predicting and controlling it. (Saldaña 2011, 23.)

The operationalization of the study (Table 3) demonstrates the interrelatedness of the purpose of the study, the sub-questions, theoretical frame and the chosen research methods. The purpose and the sub-questions are approached by combining both theoretical knowledge and observations from empirical research.

Table 3 Operationalization of the study

Purpose of the study	Sub-questions	Theoretical concept	Indicators
Describe how brand authenticity can be mediated through brand communication	What are the strategical level requirements for brand authenticity?	Brand authenticity Chapter 2.1 Chapter 2.2	Literature review
	What cues implicate brand authenticity?	Brand authenticity Chapter 2.3	Literature review
	What signs convey brand authenticity?	Brand authenticity Chapter 2.3 Semiotics Chapter 3.2 Chapter 3.3.	Data collection Content analysis Poetic inquiry
	How the different signs of authenticity can be interpreted?	Semiotics Chapter 3	Data analysis Content analysis Poetic inquiry

The table specifies which part of the study answers to each question. Simultaneously, the relationship between the chosen research methods and sub-questions are demonstrated. Since the earlier research focuses on brand authenticity from the strategic level, the answers to the first questions are answered mainly through the literature review. The analysis of the data is thus divided in two parts, semiotic content analysis and poetic inquiry, that support each other and the understanding of brand authenticity communication. This study focuses on both written and visual brand authenticity cues and therefore it is important to analyze both parties in conjunction.

4.2.1 *Mixed methods*

As the data comprises both visual and written material, this study was conducted in multiple phases, including data collection, semiotic content analysis and poetic inquiry. This research method is generally called mixed method. A mixed method study means mixing different research methods within in single study (Johnson et al. 2007, 123) to deepen the understanding on the research topic (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006, 165–166).

In mixed method research, it is common to mix either qualitative and quantitative methods or alternatively do the mixing within the research paradigm, such as mixing two quantitative research methods (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006, 162; Johnson et

al. 2007, 118–122). This study was conducted by mixing two qualitative research methods, semiotic content analysis and poetic inquiry.

Mixed methods offer multiple opportunities to researchers (Ihantola & Kihn 2011, 3). The aim of applying mixed methods is commonly the validation of the research results, complementing other methods and the research process, inspire the study with varying point of views or more diverse answer to the research questions and give more tool to interpreting the results (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006, 167; Johnson et al 2007, 122–123). However, the selection of a single research method or a combination of methods should always be premised on their theoretical relevance and fit with the research topic and data (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006, 162).

While choosing a mixed method research, the elementary questions that should be taken into account while planning the research are the role of the methods, order of the method and the purpose of the study. Depending on the research, the methods can be either parraller or sequential, one method can be dominant, or the methods can be equally emphasized, and the methods should always serve for a predetermined research purpose. (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006, 165–166; Ihantola & Kihn 2011, 3) In this study, semiotic content analysis was used in interpreting the visual signs while poetic inquiry emphasizes the textual data. In the following, the data analysis process and methodology are presented more specifically.

4.2.2 Data collection

As mentioned earlier, qualitative research can be conducted in multiple ways. Either way, each approach require data which can be in form of existing documents, interview transcriptions, focus groups or other interactions. The data collected and analyzed in qualitative research is commonly nonquantitative in character. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009; Saldaña 2011, 3–4.) The use and analysis of pre-existing secondary data is similarly common in qualitative research. Secondary data is originally produced for another purpose; however, it can be applied to other types of examinations to reveal unforeseen insight from afresh angle. (Eskola & Suonranta 1998, 118.) One way to conduct a content analysis is to have a sole focus on previously existing material, for instance by exploring a collection of internet sites. (Flick 2007; Saldaña 2011, 57.) If carefully studied and interpreted, website can reveal more than it contains at first glance (Saldaña 2011, 54–55).

For the study, a set of mezcal brands' websites were chosen as the data source. The websites provide extensive quantity of information about the brands and are focused on communicating directly to consumers and other shareholders. People form impressions of a brand solely based on websites (Shen et al. 2016) and they are considered as a key platform for online communication (García García et al. 2017, 140). Websites are a fast

channel for finding and offering both in-depth and quick information about a company and they have become an indispensable instrument for companies, as consumers expect to find a place where they are able to find an abundance of information about a business. (Belch & Belch 2015, 500, 523.) In addition, websites are globally accessible (Rowley 2004, 134) and offer information in different types, such as texts, videos and pictures.

In total of 49 mezcal brands (Appendix 1) were chosen by combining Mexican liquor store Prissa's product range (Prissa 2019) and the participants of a mezcal tasting event *Mexico in a Bottle* hosted in San Diego 2018 (Mexico in a Bottle 2019). This selection assured that both nationally sold and exported products would be included in the research and guarantee a more variable material. Only the mezcal brands with an official website were chosen for the study, and for instance brands with solely a social media account were excluded.

Both visual and verbal authenticity cues from the mezcal brands were collected with a pre-structured table as demonstrated in Appendix 2. In this part of the study, the data was merely collected and no emphasis on the analysis was made. In this study, the empirical data consist of purely secondary data, since the materials are collected from already existing websites including texts, videos and images. Brand values and messages are communicated through several elements of the web site, including logo, graphics, text, copy, color, shapes and layout (Rowley 2004, 135–136), hence all the noteworthy elements that comprises elements of authenticity were included in the data collection. As stated in prior human-computer interaction research, in order to effectively communicate in websites the design should go further than usability and focus on emotional, affective and aesthetic aspects of the viewers (Zhang et al. 2009). As the purpose of this study was to identify the visual and written cues that convey the feeling of authenticity, cues that diminished the experience were not collected or analyzed.

4.2.3 *Semiotic content analysis*

Content analysis is the systematic examination of data to analyze its apparent and latent meanings. Apparent meanings are the ones that are easily spotted from the surface of the data, for instance describing a photograph in written form stating that in the picture there is a man in a black leather jacket standing by a window. Latent meanings are more suggestive and filled with connotative and subtextual information. For example, the black leather jacket in a picture can symbolize a membership of motorcycle culture or hyper-masculinity. (Saldaña 2011, 10.) Content analysis is based on observation, where conclusions are made from all types of symbolical content and communications (Kolbe & Burnett 1991, 243; Krippendorff 2004, 18).

Kolbe and Burnet (1991, 244) assert that content analysis offers multiple benefits for research, such as allowing an unobtrusive assessment of communications and facilitating an empirical threshold for engendering original research evidence about the nature and outcome of specific communications. Additionally, they stress that there are weaknesses in the method. For instance, content analysis is relatively vulnerable to researcher biases which might influence verdicts made during the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The existence of researcher biases may affect a study's conclusions and contributions.

In qualitative content analysis, prior literature can be used to contextualize and reshape data, while simultaneously allowing the research answers to arise in the involvement with the data from the perception of presumed context. Emerging interpretations and answers are supported by incorporating examples from the data and literature about the context into the deductions, and by constructing correspondence or comparison. (Krippendorff 2004, 87–88).

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 97–99, 110–116) present that a qualitative content analysis can be either data or theory driven, or the analysis can be performed completely on a basis of a theoretical framework. A data driven content analysis is inductive study by nature, whereas a theory-oriented is more deductive. In a data-based content analysis the data is first examined and simplified as an entity, and subsequently formed into categories or subcategories, lastly creating theoretical concepts that can be seen emerging from the material. Commonly, in a content analysis guided by a theoretical framework, a defined framework formed from the pre-existing theory is presented before the analysis of the data to define the set of concepts or a specific theory of what is already known about the subject. The structure, or the framework for the analysis, can be formed strictly or loosely, giving more space for emerging ideas outside the current theory. This study is conducted with an existing theoretical framework on brand authenticity, as the pre-existing brand authenticity cues are harnessed for categorization criteria in the data analysis and the theory acts as guidance and affirmation for the interpretations extracted from the data.

The first stage of analyzing data is to ensure that all appropriate data has been collected. This entails the tracking down of patterns and consistencies. (Carson et al. 2001, 182.) In qualitative research, it is common that the data analysis of the data occurs simultaneously to the data collection phase as the data is received. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 135.)

A collection of mezcal brands websites were systematically explored with framework sheet based on the pre-existing theory on brand authenticity (Appendix 2). In this phase, the content of the data collected from secondary internet sources were analyzed through performing a semiotic analysis and categorization based on the theoretical framework. In research literature, the total body of data collected is frequently called corpus, which suggests that the gathered ensemble of data is not solely a massive assortment of

information but rather a living entity to analyze (Saldaña 2011, 26). Categorizing is a prominent analyzing method that can be applied to all sorts of data. The main activities in categorizing are distinguishing the relevant parts of the data corpus and comparing, naming and classifying the parts. Through this process, a structure is developed in the data, rearranging it towards a comprehensive understanding of the issue, the field, and finally the purpose of the study. Data collection and analysis are usually interlinked to profit further insights from the process. (Flick 2007.)

The authenticity cues found in the web sites were organized under different categories by utilizing the academic framework grounded in the brand authenticity. Content and semiotic analysis typically consists of correlating the physical form of symbols to what they stand for (Danesi 2006, 25–33) as besides the structural analysis of signs, semiotics can be used to identify how brand meanings are embedded the data in the forms of cultural myths, social organizations, and beliefs of the target market (Oswald 2012, 50). In this study, the previous research of semiotics was applied to analyse denotations and connotations as well as different types of signs that occurred in the websites. The connections of the signs to the Mexican culture were made to better understand the underlying levels of authenticity and cultural references.

4.2.4 Poetic inquiry

In addition to the semiotic analysis, a poetic inquiry was performed to form and reveal hidden authenticity cues from verbal messages and conjunction of visual cues appearing in the brands websites. Poetic inquiry is a form of documenting analytic findings is to strategically truncate relevant data into poetic structures (Saldaña 2011, 128). Underlying reason for the usage of poetic inquiry is that it can interact through language in ways that are not commonly accepted in more traditional qualitative research methods (Vincent 2018, 50). Poetic Inquiry appears across multitude of fields, recurrently in health care, anthropology, sociology and education, and there has been successful applications in advertising as well. (Vincent 2018, 54.)

The mode of poetry, the act of writing poems or analyzing through poems, is represented in the literature to expand perspectives on human experience (Vincent 2018, 51). Poetic inquiry can provide imagery, symbols, and metaphors for rich category, theme, concept, and assertion development from the collected data (Saldaña 2011, 128). Poetic Inquiry promotes criticality, can make explicit the position or reflexivity of the researcher, and allows for different perspectives to be considered through the artistic medium of poetry (Vincent 2018, 50). Poetic interpretation enables additional levers for scrutinizing and interpreting the data and resonating past the plain narrative lens. Employment of

poetic inquiry extends the self-understanding of the researcher and serves as an enhancer for the readers experience. (Downey 2016, 359.)

Poetic inquiry takes note of what words and phrases seem to stand out from the data corpus as rich material for reinterpretation (Saldaña 2011, 129). These phrases can then be grouped to clusters that are helpful in conveying the empirical individual interpretations, and clarifying how the researcher understand the theme, topic, or concept in the limited time, place, context and stance during the research. (Butler-Kisber & Stewart 2009, 4) Poetic constructions capture the essence and essentials of data corpus in a creative, evocative way. The elegance of the format attests to the power of carefully chosen language to represent and convey complex human experience. (Saldaña 2011, 128.)

In this study, the poetic inquiry was included in the data analysis. The collected data was carefully examined, the emerging themes of brand authenticity were categorized by using the existing academic research (Appendix 2) and formed into poetic representations alongside the visual cues. Through the collected poems, it was possible to demonstrate the arising insights from the data. Generally, creating sequences or poem cluster around a certain theme is considered as a powerful way of projecting a cohort of subtle nuances while simultaneously constructing a more overall view about a topic (Butler-Kisber & Stewart 2009, 4).

It is representative to qualitative research to analyze the research data in its unprocessed form, such as in raw text, rather than converted to another form before analyzing it. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 135-136.) In the case of brand authenticity cues, it became necessary to rearrange the data to make it possible to interpret the web sites effectively and precisely in the cultural context. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that the sections of texts used in the analysis were not altered from their original form, except the texts available in Spanish were translated to English. Furthermore, it is also characteristic for poetic inquiry to draw insights from the researcher's engagement with the material to create an emotional link and to enhance the additional interaction level that is experienced while working with the data. (Downey 2016, 360.)

4.3 Reliability and validity of the study

Reliability and validity are commonly used indicators in assessing the quality of research. They are usually associated with quantitative research but are similarly applicable to the evaluation of qualitative research as well. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 216.) Qualitative research entails several different traditions, which is why it is apparent that also different perceptions regarding the reliability and validity exist. In all research the aim is to prevent mistakes occurring, therefore the reliability and validity of a given research must be assessed. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 131.)

Validity of the study indicates whether the sub-questions and the research methodology are applicable to answering the phenomena under inspection. In order to be considered valid, the applicable research approach should be the chosen to answer the essence of the phenomenon. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 214; Koskinen et al. 2005, 254.) Hence, the functionality of the research methods is an essential component in the validity of the research as it can be assessed whether the research method in question were able answer to the original research purpose. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 216–217.)

Generally, the validity of the study can be examined from two perspectives, internally and externally. Internal validity observes the researcher's demonstrated comprehension on the research phenomena, framework and material, whereas external validity takes into account the possibilities of generalization of the interpretations and conclusions occurring from the research. Research is considered valid, when the interpretations, both internal and external, are not contradictive. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 214; Koskinen et al. 2005, 254)

Carson et al. (2001, 79) points out that significant validity factor in qualitative research transparency, which should be demonstrated throughout the research with precise and clear evidence. Transparency is expected furthestmost in the interpretation phase of findings, as clear descriptions and explanations are required to demonstrate why and how a given interpretation is processed. Linking the interpretation to prior theory and describing the process of interpretation should be taken into account to strengthen the validity of transparency. Hirsjärvi et al. (2004, 217) add that the assessment of validity in qualitative research is less unambiguous compared to quantitative research, as the qualitative research is commonly more unique and context related. Consequently, it is important that the validity is evaluated by justifying the choices made in the research throughout the process. For instance, the data collection and analysis methods should be described as precisely as possible as well as clarifying how the chosen methods yield the results that are relevant in correspond to the sub-question.

Reliability is used to assess the repeatability of research findings. It is often discussed in the assessment of the research results, such as the trustworthiness of the findings and the transferability of the study. Generally, it can be stated that study is reliable, if

consistent findings could be achieved repeating the research by someone else (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 216–217.) Trustworthiness in qualitative research is often discussed by the means of credibility, dependability and conformability. These dimensions can improve the trustworthiness of empirical findings through careful evaluation and application of prior theory at various stages of the study. (Carson et al. 2001, 77.) In most qualitative researches, an emerging struggle is the analyzers influence on the data collection and analysis, thus affecting the findings. Even though qualitative research is commonly considered as subjective, there are conducts to diminish the interpreter's influence. Nevertheless, the subjective traits are not solely negative or do not always affect the quality of the research undesirably as it is one of qualitative research's core features. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 35.)

In this study, qualitative research was conducted to gain new information on a new phenomenon. Content analysis through semiotics and poetic inquiry were chosen to bring out the answer to the purpose of the study. Because of the experimental nature and the viewers perspective and the assessment of authenticity are core characteristic in the context of brand authenticity, it is noteworthy that it is close to impossible guarantee the generalization of the research findings, as all experiences, including the assessment of authenticity are unique. Authenticity can be conveyed through multiple different pathways and it is always interrelated with the spectators personal and cultural background. As this study was conducted from one researcher point of view, the validity and reliability of this study could have been improved with conducting the analysis with a partner or a focus group. Nevertheless, it was prerequisite for future studies to identify the mediators of authenticity objectively through the academic framework.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Mezcal brands' authenticity signs

The researched mezcal brands' websites are riddled with brand authenticity signs. Some signs are easily associated to the corresponding authenticity cues, while others need more deeper analysis to form an association. Furthermore, no sign by itself creates brand authenticity but a combination of different cues forms the overall brand authenticity experience, thus the categorization is merely suggestive. Overview of the signs are collected and categorized in the corresponding brand authenticity cues in Table 4.

Table 4 Authenticity signs of mezcal brands

Brand authenticity cue	Visual and written signs appearing in mezcal brands' website
Downplaying commercial motives	Local kids, families, pure water, people working with a happy face, nature, supporting human rights, opposing Donald Trump, Protecting the environment, giving back to the society, emphasizing intrinsic motives, meaning of mezcal to the local pueblos, stories of families and communities about the importance of mezcal to their families and communities, being described as a project
Craftsmanship	Dirty palms, tahona, machete, smoke, wood, fresh water, sun, horse, mule, earth dug pit, agave, travelling long distances to hunt agaves, generations, facts sheets on how to recognize quality, detailed information of the production process, handwritten etiquettes, numbering of bottles and batches, pictures and videos of the production method, handmade bottles, stories of the maestro mezcaleros, stories of ancient working methods, hunting for the best ingredients, harvesting methods
Heritage & History	Agave, Day of the dead decorations, cempasuchil flowers, traditional shirts, sombreros, aprons and dresses, Acapulco chairs, colorful houses, Miguel Hidalgo, Emiliano Zapata, Virgen de Guadalupe, local handicrafts such as alebrijes and textiles, traditional mezcal cups, papel picado, local villages, pre-Hispanic symbols, maps, village name signs, aerial view of the villages, generations, family recipes, Mexican cuisine, Catholic symbols such as angels, crosses and virgins, history of mezcal, myths and legends about mezcal and agave, history of mezcal and agave, relating to pre-Hispanic gods, references to heaven and hell, historical events
Artistry	Crafts, art by local artist in bottles and websites, murals, considering mezcal as an artform, playlists, art exhibitions
Lifestyle	Tattoos, beard, parties, artists, rock music, guitars, leather jacker, ripped jeans, speakeasy, skulls. Balck, and white with bright accent colors. Camera, travel clothing, travel tips, bright colors. Traditional clothing, family values, families, villages, houses, dining tables, gatherings.

From the table, it is evident that the authenticity experience is formed in the interplay between the signs. In the following subchapter, examples of these signs are analyzed in more detail. The findings are also paired with examples of textual authenticity assertions to demonstrate the cohesion of the communication methods.

5.2 Mediating non-commercial motives

Downplaying commercial motives arises in multiple ways in mezcal brands websites. An initial observation that emerged is that the non-commercial motives were clearly and explicitly stated in written or verbal form, and merely supported in the imagery. Without the textual affirmations, the motivations would have been less visible. Textual affirmations of the non-commercial motives that often emerged from the websites are collected in Table 5.

Table 5 Poetic inquiry on motives behind the brands

<i>It started as a simple project</i>	Cinco sentidos
<i>a project with social impact</i>	Alipus
<i>It caused a vibration</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>reached a sacred place in our hearts</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>Realizing that mezcal was not known nor valued</i>	Amores
<i>It was our duty to share that experience</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>The passion and devotion to the roots of Mexico</i>	Amores
<i>Make it known all over the world</i>	Amores
<i>Developing a two-way connection</i>	Lalocura
<i>That goes beyond a simple transaction</i>	Lalocura
<i>We are part of nature</i>	Mezcal Koch
<i>The wood, the agave, the water</i>	Mezcal Koch
<i>To preserve the fauna and the flora</i>	Verde Momento
<i>We respect the earth</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>It is she who gives us the kindness</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>We try in some way to give back</i>	Mezcal Koch
<i>all those things she has given to us</i>	Mezcal Koch
<i>To support our friends</i>	Cinco sentidos
<i>We sow with small producers to distribute the wealth</i>	Verde Momento
<i>To promote and develop the traditional producers</i>	Alipus
<i>Learn from people who have elaborated mezcal during generations</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>Talents and traditions of the amazing people</i>	Cinco sentidos
<i>with rigor and esteem</i>	Cinco sentidos
<i>That was our journey</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>a long way of great perseverance</i>	Los Danzantes
<i>A project made with love</i>	Amores

The narrative arising from the poetic inquiry emphasizes the motives, values and integrity of the companies. Various mezcal brands, such as Cinco Sentidos, Alipus and Amores, describe their company as a *project*, diminishing the commerciality of the business and emphasizing the feeling of a bigger mission and intrinsic motivation behind the operations. By offering nobility and humbleness, brands can appeal to consumers feelings and engage them into expressing their own aspirations through consuming the brands.

The main goal is not set in money or economic growth, but rather in supporting the local communities by committing themselves in a type of a missionary work. The motivation is stated to rise from something else than money, commonly from intrinsic motives such as duty, devotion, love or passion. Commonly, respect towards the main raw material and the workers is emphasized.

Another factor is that the brands state to be beneficent – it is commonly emphasized that behind every transaction there is always something bigger such as development of the community or protecting the nature. In a way, downplaying commercial motives works as an amplifier for brands purpose. It can be used to communicate brands purpose in a concrete way – say that brands defined purpose is fairness, it can be shown through different actions reported in the page.

Since agaves are the core of mezcal production, most of the companies have included sustainability in their strategies in order to preserve continuity of the endemic succulent by choosing environmentally responsible production methods as seen in Image 6.

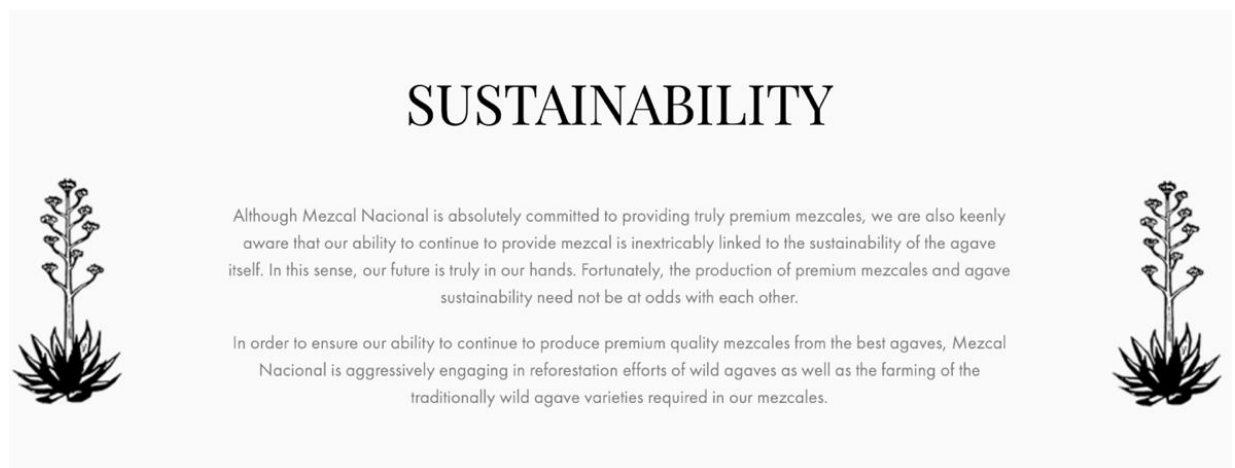


Image 6 Sustainability of Mezcal Nacional

Mezcal Nacional's written sustainability statement is illustrated with drawn agave plants. Without reading the full text, the viewer can quickly connect the word *sustainability* with the drawings of agave plants, thus the brand can deliver meaning effectively. In addition to the environmental sustainability, the companies' values to the local community is demonstrated with pictures of blissful community members, as seen in Image 7.

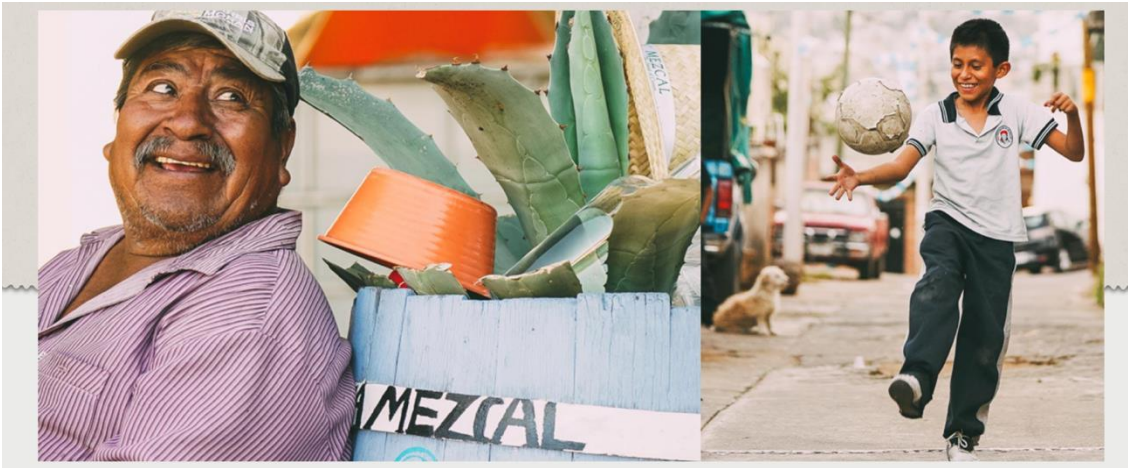


Image 7 Wahaka Mezcal demonstrates content community members

For example, the imagery of Wahaka Mezcal includes photography of the local townspeople presented next to a word *mezcal*, implying that mezcal induces happiness and benefit among the people. As Wahaka, the name of the brand, is the phonetic pronunciation of the state Oaxaca, it draws a picture of the brand being fully committed to the wellbeing of its community. These actions might include *distributing the wealth* or *helping our friends*, as Cinco Sentidos and Verde Momento state in their websites.

In conclusion, the downplaying of commercial motives of mezcal brands is observably rotating around the themes of mission, values, intrinsic motives, emphasizing the beneficiaries and the project nature of the brand (Figure 8).

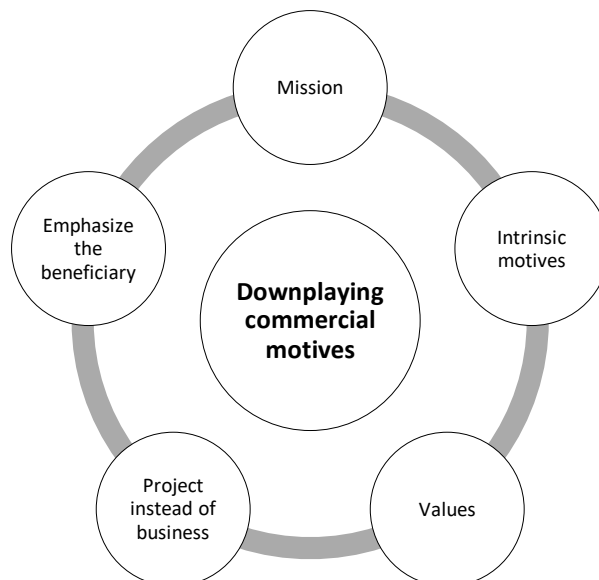


Figure 8 Signaling downplaying the commercial motives

All these themes can arouse simultaneously in one brand but emphasizing on one or couple of the aspects was more common in the case of mezcal brands. As mentioned

earlier, these themes are most visible in verbal form in text or videos, but they are frequently backed up with visual signs, such as pictures content people, nature, animals. In general, mezcal brands were quite straightforward in bolstering the non-commerciality.

5.3 Mediating craftsmanship

5.3.1 Production methods

Production methods are clearly visible in the brands websites, as demonstrated in Table 6. None of the brands examined for this study showed an industrial production method. On the contrary, clear majority of the brands emphasized the traditional craftsmanship, that has been passing on from generation to generation.

Table 6 Poetic inquiry: craftsmanship

<i>A gift that comes from the soul of our land</i>	Alipus
<i>Ingredients: Oaxacan sun, agave, time</i>	Ilegal
<i>No two productions can ever be exactly the same</i>	NETA mezcal
<i>On the steep precarious hillsides</i>	Bozal
<i>varieties of agave</i>	Bozal
<i>indigenous to the region</i>	Bozal
<i>grow wild</i>	Bozal
<i>absorbing the energy of their natural surroundings</i>	Santa sabia
<i>Producing flavors that are exotically intense</i>	Santa Sabia
<i>with rich earth tones and savory smokiness</i>	Santa Sabia
<i>something wild produces a far richer spirit</i>	Bozal
<i>Heavily sought after by the local mezcaleros</i>	Bozal
<i>Harvested by hand and machete</i>	Ilegal
<i>Selected manually,</i>	400 conejos
<i>one by one</i>	400 conejos
<i>Exceptional quality</i>	Mezcales de Leyenda
<i>prepared by great master mezcaleros</i>	Mezcales de Leyenda
<i>using their five senses</i>	Cruz de fuego
<i>integrating their experience</i>	Mezcaloteca
<i>born in the tradition</i>	Mezcaloteca
<i>from parents and grandparents</i>	Mezcaloteca
<i>Liquid alchemy</i>	Creyente

The emphasis on the know-how, expertise and passion for the production is commonly noticeable. The ingredient is described in mystifying manner, and the traditional working methods are treated almost in a saint way. The production method is described pellucidly,

having total respect and pride on the ingredients and the product. Generally, the process is often described with rich and creative words, such as *alchemy*, *ritual* or *magic*, giving even more mystical feeling on the production.

One clear sign of craftsmanship is imagery of hands or palms, either photographed or drawn, as demonstrated in Image 8 and Image 9.



Image 8 Bruxo: dirty palms

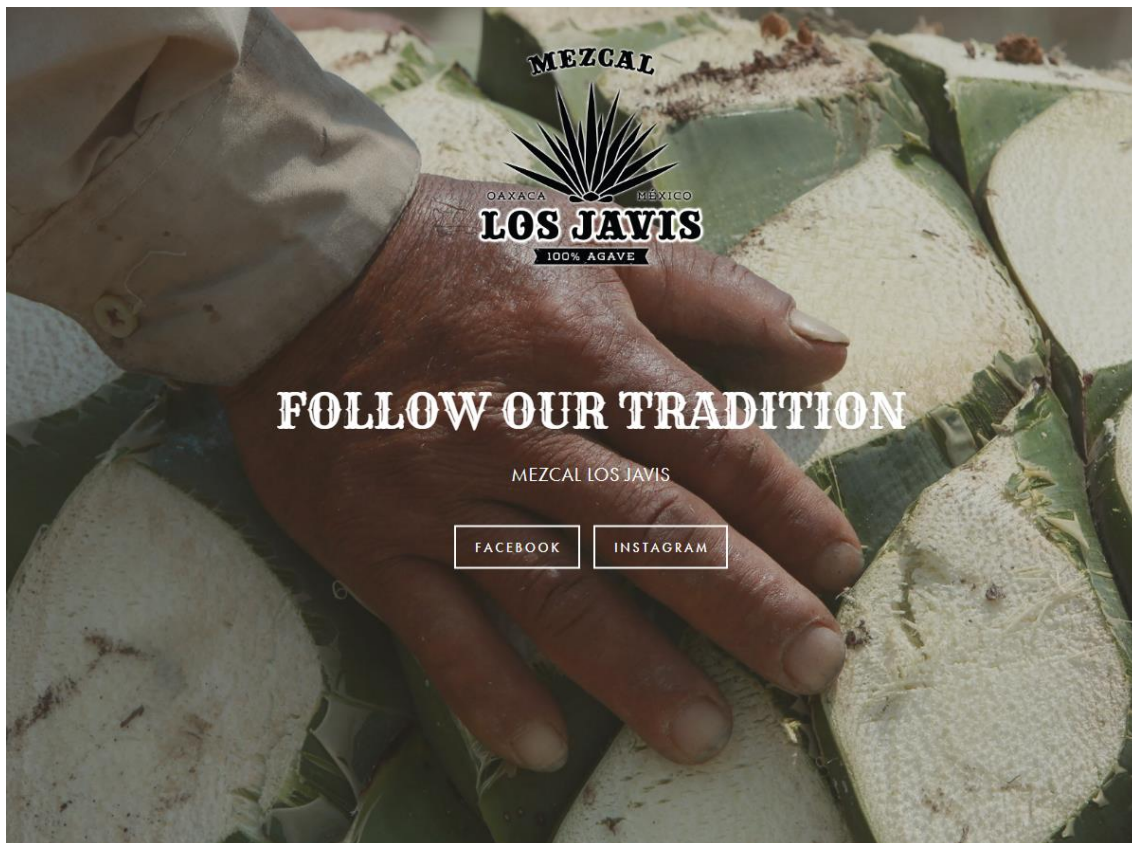


Image 9 Los Javis: Hands

Hands and dirty palms can work as an index of handmade work, as they implicate getting one's hands dirty while working. Dirty palms offer a feeling of naturalness and humbleness as the producer does not mind doing the dirty and hard work for the sake of the product. In addition to highlighting the handmade work, product orientation is commonly demonstrated with illustrations of traditional tools, such as utensils, as tahonas (Image 10) and machetes (Image 11).

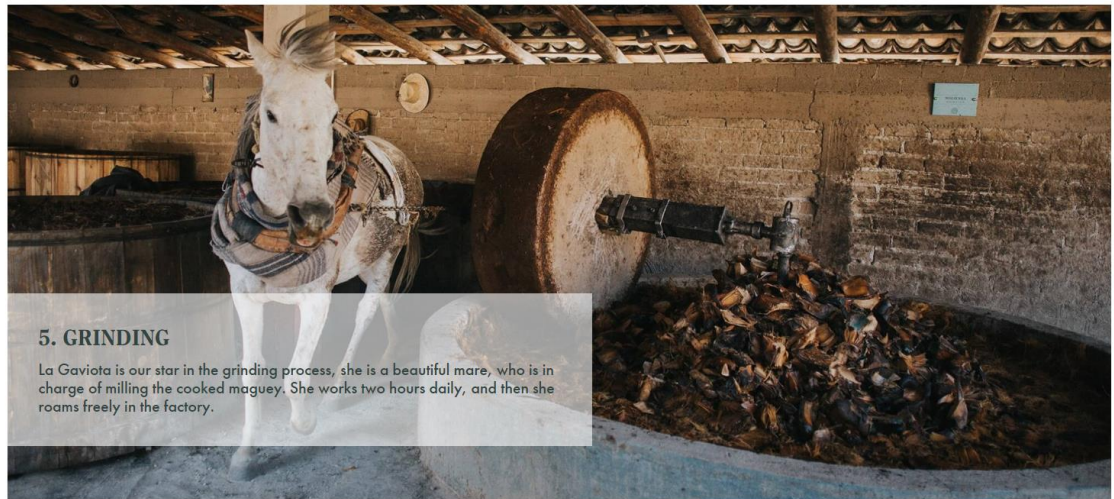


Image 10 Gracias a Dios: Grinding

Traditionally, after collecting, chopping and roasting the agave hearts, the raw material is grinded in a horse-pulled tahona. Gracias a Dios mentions that Gaviota, *the star of the grinding process*, has cozy working schedule.

The collection of the agave is commonly described as *hunting*, as the *jimadores*, the agave farmers and collectors must travel long routes to the distant highlands in order to find the ripe agaves and carry them back to the farm to the production. As harvested piñas can weigh between 40-90 kilograms, the collection of wild agaves is slow and long haul. The jimadores are commonly pictured and characterized with a machete, as shown in Image 11.



Image 11 Mezcal Gracias a Dios: Jimador with a machete

Machete is a conventionally used tool in agriculture, but it entails more connotative meanings. In Mexico, machete has a history as a weapon in civil wars and more recently in the clashes of drug cartels, thus signaling bravado, as though the bearer was going to engage in a war. As the culture is still strongly emphasizing the masculine macho culture, the machete is commonly pictured in the websites.

5.3.2 *Agave*

While examining Mezcal brands' websites, it is rather explicit that agave is the sole symbol of mezcal uniting all the brands. This notion is fairly self-explanatory, as agave is the main source and ingredient of mezcal and without it the beverage would be non-existent. The noteworthy part of this observation is the multi-dimensional and rich usage of this shared symbol.

Firstly, differentiation from rival brands can be seen in agave related cues, such as the emphasis on the agave species or its provenance. The agave types and mezcal production practices vary between regions which can thus be used as a differentiation tool for the products. Unlike the most commonly used agave, *Espadín*, which thrives throughout Mexico, majority of the agave species grow solely in certain regions. Therefore, the type of agave can be connected to a certain region; for instance, the *agave tequilana* which is usually associated with purely tequila production, is widely used in the western mezcal

regions to tie the brands closer to the place. Partly, it can be seen as a way to tying the qualities of tequila to mezcal.

Additionally, the agaves used in the production can be either cultivated or wild. The use of wild agaves is commonly emphasized by brands that produce limited edition collections as a way of highlighting the products scarcity and uniqueness, whereas the usage of more common and cultivated species reflects less originality. In the case of wild agave, the collection of the wild magueys is generally referred as *hunting*, and it is paired with imagery of long roads and distant highland which induces the feeling of hard work. The choice of the agave is commonly explained transparently (Image 12).

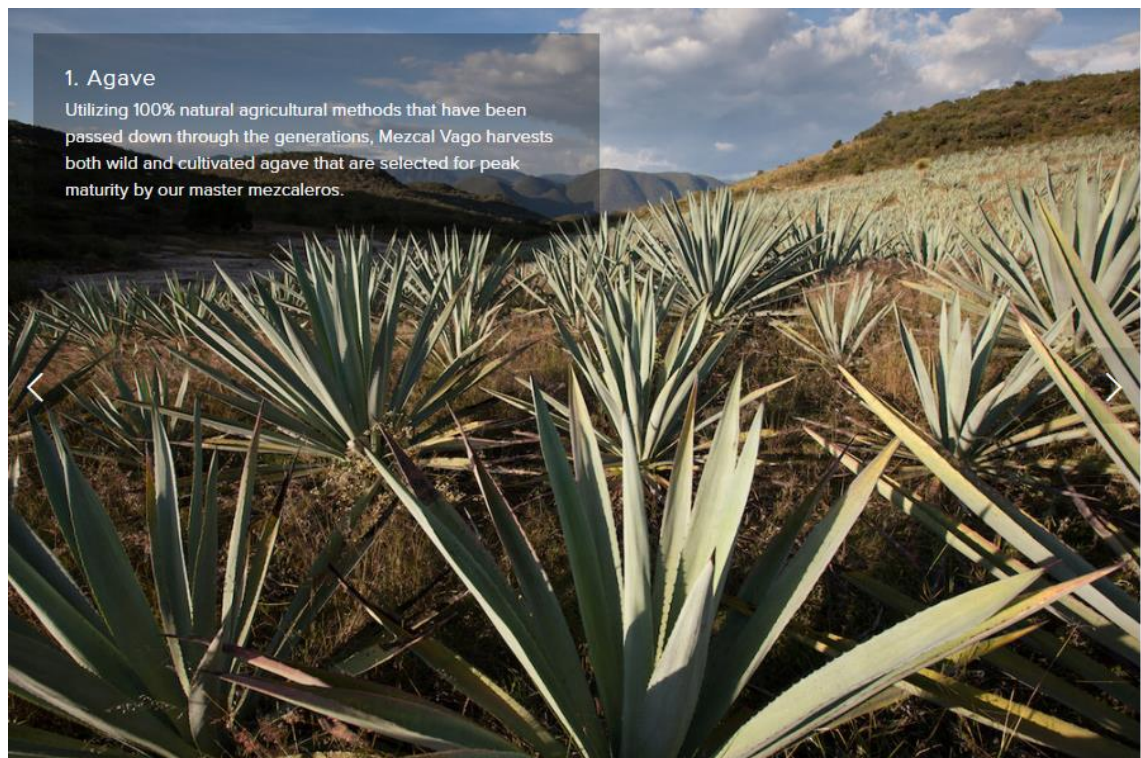


Image 12 Mezcal Vago: Agave

In Mezcal Vago's website it is explained how both wild and cultivated agaves are used in the making of mezcal. The emphasize is in the natural agricultural methods, that are passed down for generations. The craftsmanship is a process that runs through the production process.

In addition to the different regions, the agave types possess different qualities in flavor the same way as grapes do for wine or hops do for beer. The usage of different types is clearly distinguishable in the websites. For example, Santa Sabia is using powerfully the characteristics of different agave types in its communications while presenting its offering. The different agave types are described to have various affects to the mind of the consumers and references to psychoanalysis are made. These affects are described in Image 13 and Image 14.

THE FEELINGS OF MESCALS

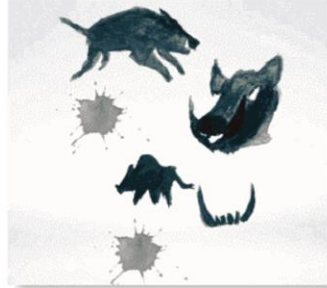


Image 13 Santa Sabia describes the difference feelings aroused by Mexicano, Jabalí and Tobala

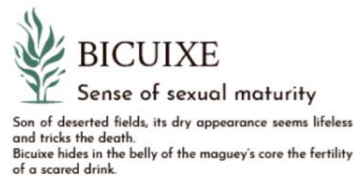
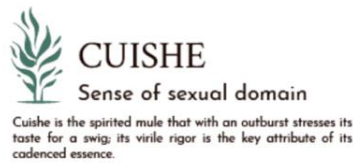
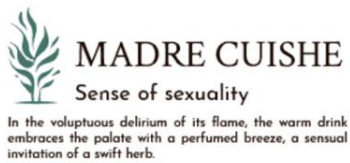


Image 14 Santa Sabia describes the difference feelings aroused by Madre Cuishe, Cuishe and Bicuixe

The maguey that are used to produce Santa Sabia mezcal are mystified and connected to the unconscious levels of the human minds. It seems to be generally received that maguey and mezcal enable humans to get in touch with the subconscious, or as Mezcal Papadiablo states, *it can help access our creativity source or simply get in line with ourselves to empathize with the world*. This mystification generates a feeling of deeper connection to the past and to oneself.

Aged legends and mythologies are reclaimed in mezcal branding at length, and an abundance of storytelling can be seen around magueys as well. To exemplify the

storytelling aspect, Mezcal Meteoro's has harness an old legend of a falling meteorite in to the core of its brand:

"Many years ago, according to the legend, a flash lit up the sky of the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca. There was a huge roar and then, the whole town saw the "little eyes of fire" falling all around. One of them made a small crater and the local Master Mezcal Maker decided to use it as a red-hot earthen oven to cook his fresh espadín agave hearts. And so, he produced the best mezcal the region had ever tasted. "How did you do it?", people asked asked him. The old man simply replied: "It fell from the sky...""

-Mezcal Meteoro (2019)

Shortly, it is told that a falling meteorite created a hole in the ground, which was then used as an oven for roasting the agave hearts in preparing mezcal. The legend of the Mezcal Meteoro is complemented with indexical evidence, such as photographs, as seen in Image 15.

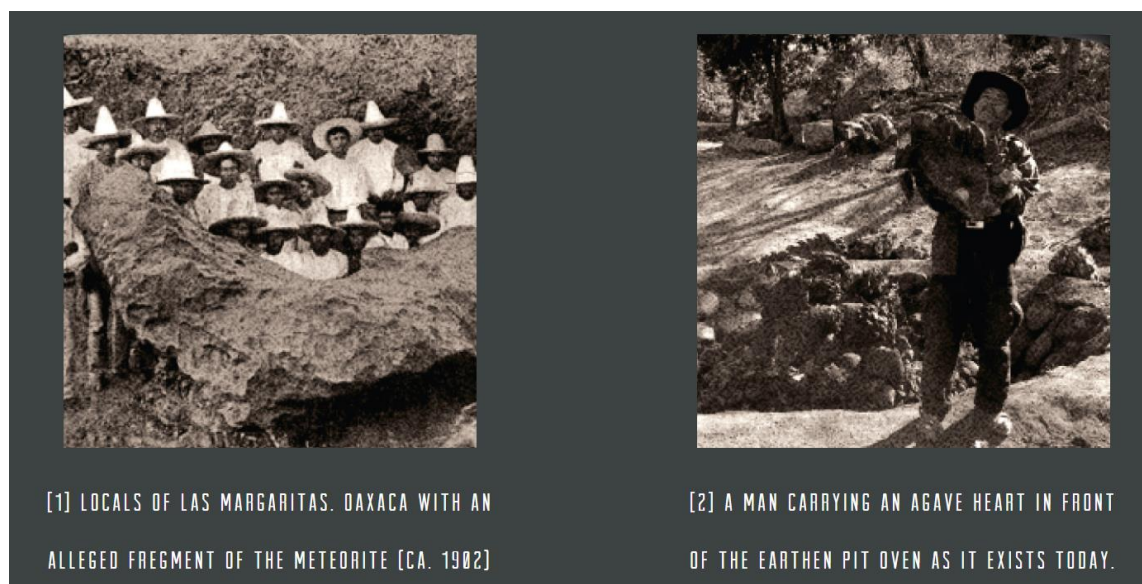


Image 15 Photographs serve as indexical authenticity cues of Mezcal Meteoro's legend

The photographs of the earthen pit and the meteorite in question can be seen to substantiate the truth of the matter and give more plausibility to the claims of the legend. The pictures are also acting as an anchor and tying the company to a place, Las Margaritas in Oaxaca. The same legend is also shown in Papadiablo's website (Image 16).



Image 16 Papadiablo: the creation of our magic mezcal

Papadiablo invites its consumers to engage with the history of the *magic mezcal*. Their communication is more stylized version and does not provide spatio-temporal evidence. The communication style is rather cartoonlike and resonates more with the viewers creative process.

5.3.3 *Maestro mezcalero*

Other indicator of craftsmanship are the *maestro mezcaleros*, the maestros of mezcal production (Image 17). Their commitment and traditions in the making of mezcal is used in the majority of the mezcal brands websites, and the process seems to be humanized through their life stories.



Image 17 Mezcales de Leyenda introduces the Maestro Mezcaleros

The maestros are generally pictured with traditional clothing, such as sombreros, in the agave fields or in small villages, without technologies or modern appliances in the rural backgrounds. The maestro mezcalero is usually inscribed in the bottle alongside detailed information about the farm, agave type, and even batch and bottle numbers that are handwritten in the bottles. This makes a closer connection with the consumers and producers.

Oftentimes, the histories of maestro mezcaleros are described from generation to generations, and commonly the whole family is some way related to the production process. It is common that men work as jimadores or maestro mezcaleros, learning the craft and passing it down from father to son at young age. The women of the families are usually involved in the bottling and etiquette process. It is made clear that the production of mezcal is an established factor in their lives which provides opportunities in the remote areas.

5.4 Mediating heritage and history

5.4.1 Mesoamerican symbolism

As legends, myths and stories are deeply embedded in Mexican culture, the references to mythology serve as an anchor to heritage, tradition, culture and storytelling. Magueys and mezcal are not an exception. Mezcal brands are rich in Aztec era symbolism, including rabbits, ancient Gods, jaguars, masks, lightning, moon, Quetzalcoatl, and other characters from age-old myths from the pre-Hispanic era.

One example of the application of mythology is 400 Conejos (Image 18) which refers to *Centzon Totochtin* in Aztec mythology.



Image 18 400 Conejos refers to Aztec mythology

Centzon Totochtin, which translates to 400 rabbits from Nahuatl, refers to a group of 400 spirits or gods of alcohol in the pre-Hispanic Mexico. The 400 rabbits were the children of the goddess of maguey and the god of fermentations. As it is common in the old civilizations to have designated Gods for different purposes, these rabbits were seen as patrons people engaging in alcohol consuming.

Another example from anchoring to the Mesoamerican culture is Los Danzantes, *The Dancers*, that uses the image of three masks in its logo (Image 19).



Image 19 Los Danzantes: masks

Mezcal Los Danzantes, claims to be *a drink that lives up to our roots and connects us with our Mexican identity*. In Mexico, masks are usually associated with traditional dances and ceremonies in the pre-Hispanic era. These masks are still prepared and used in communal ceremonies and carnivals and collected by art collectors or tourists. Usual themes in the masks are characters from the ancient myths and are commonly tied to certain regions. For instance, the mask on the right decorated with dots could be a representation of a traditional jaguar mask. Generally, jaguars have deep roots in the Mesoamerican cultures as they symbolize warriors and strength.

Besides the figurative links to the Mesoamerica, there is an abundance of written bearings to the past Table 7.

Table 7 Poetic inquiry: Written links to the past

<i>So much more than an intoxicating beverage</i>	Casa Cortes
<i>a direct connection to the spirits of ancestors</i>	Casa Cortes
<i>worshipped in ancient Mesoamerica</i>	Banhez
<i>the Gods gave to mortals the pleasure of this drink</i>	Santa Tierra
<i>the treasure of Oaxaca</i>	Cuish
<i>The traditional toast of choice</i>	Findencio
<i>ceremonial occasions</i>	
<i>baptisms, weddings</i>	
<i>town fiestas</i>	
<i>business dinners</i>	
<i>home remedy</i>	
<i>ritual, medicine, prayer and celebration</i>	Casa Cortes
<i>May the essence of Oaxaca shine in every corner of the country</i>	El Señorío
<i>Tap into an ancient culture</i>	Casa Cortes
<i>still deeply rooted to the cycles of the earth</i>	

As seen in Table 7 The beverages cultural and historical impact is oftentimes emphasized. Straight links to the ancestors are common, as well as the emphasis on the belonging to the special events from passing rites to business meetings. Generally, it is seen important to keep these traditions alive instead of substituting them with new ones – people are encouraged to be proud of their origins.

Additionally, the Mesoamerican roots are accentuated with short stories that are endemic in the mezcal brands communication. Santa Tierra has chosen to present an ancient story relating to the birth of magueys.

The history of mezcal comes from ancient times dating back to ancient Mesoamerica, which a legend that is counted as was, that the gods gave to mortals the pleasure of this drink.

This beautiful girl, lived in heaven guarded by a tzintzimitl, one of those stars that at all costs try to avoid that light overcomes the darkness; one of these beings was the grandmother of Mayahuel. But with all vigilance, Mayahuel fled with the handsome Quetzalcoatl to betray his love, sparking fury grandmother, who sent other tzintzimitl to give death to lovers, who had become the same tree. The branches that were Mayahuel, were destroyed by homing grandmother, was saved only Quetzalcoatl, who picked

up what was left of his beloved to bury and those branches, arose the great maguey.

-Santa Tierra

Passing on the legends and embracing the traditions are seemingly the core of mezcal branding. It ties to history of the people into the histories of the brands. In consequence, it is possible to form deep connections with the beverage, as well as with the brands who embrace the shared history.

The history of mezcal dates earlier to the history than most of the historians have been able to reach, which has provided a mythical and national status for the product itself. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning, that the status has been reached through age-old branding methods, word of mouth and storytelling, that are still desired in the modern marketing doctrine. To continue with this road, it is essential that the mezcal brands keep bolstering up the old myths and maintaining the unique essence of mezcal.

5.4.2 Proverbs

Another way to root a brand to a culture is the usage of proverbs. For example, Siete misterios uses local proverbs in their website, as seen in Image 20 and Image 21.

**“Si estás enfermo toma mezcal, si es enfermedad del corazón,
con mayor razón y si estas feliz y contento, pues para celebrar
toma mezcal.”**

Proverbio Oaxaqueño.

Image 20 Oaxacan proverb¹ (Siete Misterios)

¹ In English: If you are sick, drink mezcal, if it is heartache, even more reasons to do so. If you are happy and content, well drink mezcal to celebrate. -Oaxacan proverb

“Para todo mal mezcal, y para todo bien también; y si no hay remedio, litro y medio.”

Proverbio Oaxaqueño.

Image 21 Oaxacan proverb² (Siete Misterios)

These proverbs are a clear sign that mezcal is culturally rooted to the speech and commonly used among people in everyday interactions. Proverbs are generally shared experiences in communities that resonate with consumers in a deeper level. Thus, it is possible to get immersed in the culture with using them in the communications as the common language can create a strong tie between the brand and the consumer.

5.5 Mediating artistry

Mezcal brands channel artistry and creativity in multiple ways. It is shown through pictures, photographs, graphic design, videos, animations and music. One way to show artistic character is to add visuality in the product packaging as shown in Image 22 and Image 23.



Image 22 El Buho: Etiquette

² In English: For everything bad, mezcal, and for everything good, mezcal too; if there is no remedy, then take a litre and a half.

The flask bottle of El Buho Mezcal has a folkloric artwork which is provided by famed tattoo artist Thomas Hooper. The tattoo theme could be appealing to certain lifestyles that appreciate tattoo artforms.



Image 23 Verde momento uses visuality and art in the mezcal bottles

Similarly, Verde Momento applies different graphic designs and pictures into the bottles. Compared to El Buhos black and with tattoo theme, Verde Momento's pictures are more colorful, juvenile and are undoubtedly appealing to different target group and lifestyles. Both examples show strong visual consistency. Common way to bring out artistry is to add artwork in the products and in the case of mezcal brands, it is common to use visual effects on the bottles.

The connection to arts can also be made indirectly by supporting artists. This is possible for instance in bolstering artist and offering them space to present their artwork. In Image 24, an example of Ilegal Mezcal's art exhibition is presented in their website.



Image 24 Ilegal Mezcal: Art exhibition

Ilegal Mezcal offers and exhibition space in their location in New York. As described in the website, the aim is to *create a genuine, unique approach to their exhibitions by establishing a sense of community through the shared personal experience of art*. The support to the Ilegal community is shown through the exhibitions.

Murals are a typical artform in Mexico dating to the pre-Hispanic times. They are still commonly used for commercial or political purposes, and it is natural that mezcal brand have harnessed this creative way into their imagery. The use of murals by Cinco Sentidos is demonstrated in Image 25.



Image 25 Cinco Sentidos: murales

In the mural, a skeleton dressed in a poncho and sombrero is holding a pitchfork and machete and is evidently heading to hunt magueys. In the right side, a florescent of a maguie and a bat can be seen. The mural and the signs it features form together a strong cultural connection to the viewer.

Music is also present in the websites. It can be stated in the background music, or it can be used to express the brand's nature and personality in a concrete way. For instance, Banhez has added the auditive dimension to its website (Image 26).



"Musica Banhez: 002" is the second in our series of playlists.

This playlist mixes modern and vintage, and is tied together by a feeling.

A global mix, it reflects what inspires us to create, and what we'd happily listen to while sipping Banhez.

A standout album and track, Los Dug Dug's debut LP is one of the best records of its era and "Lost In My World" a timeless psychedelic classic. Listen with us.

Image 26 Banhez: Musica Banhez

To engage its consumers to a more multidimensional experience, Banhez introduces playlists to offer the authentic Banhez experience. As they describe, the playlist *reflects what inspires us to create*. Playlists can be a strong tool in connecting with the consumer, taking that the musical match is well received. Consumers are invited to listen the playlist together with the band, as an offer to get in touch with the inspiration behind the scenes.

As it is shown in the previous examples, artistry is a practical tool to reinforce the other authenticity cues. The more of these artistic traits are blended into the brand communications, the more creative and unique touch is achieved. It is noteworthy, that knowing the audience, or the target of the brand, is crucial in selecting the artforms and styles, to resonate with the correct consumer groups. The appliance of artistic communication methods reinforces the overall authentic experience.

5.6 Mediating lifestyle

5.6.1 Common cultural signs

Alongside Mesoamerican symbols that represent heritage and history, more modern allusions to the culture are made. While signs can be used in a subtle way, saturating the brand communication with multiple signs is equally common. Image 27 is a collage picture from Peloton de Muerte that presents an overview of the cultural symbols that are applied throughout the mezcal brands websites.

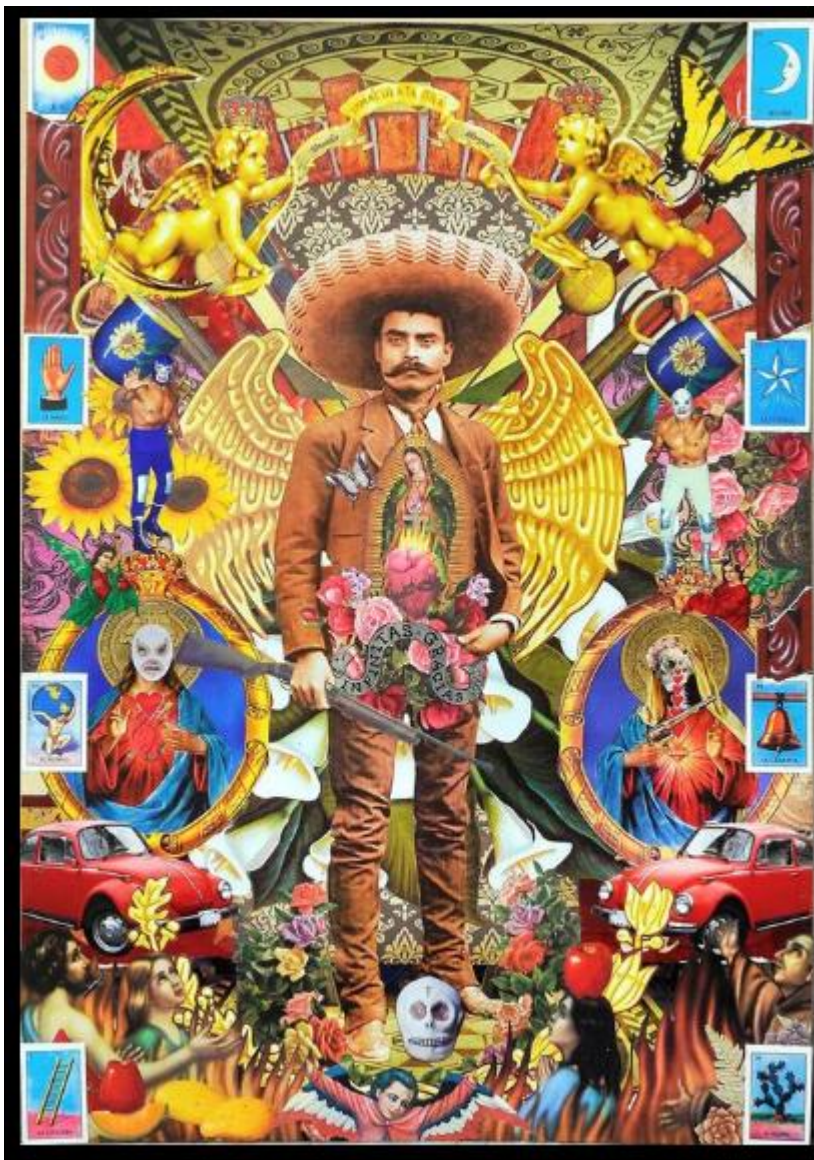


Image 27 Peloton de la Muerte: cultural symbolism

In the collage from Peloton de la Muerte, multiple symbols with denotative levels of culture can be distinguished. In the middle, there is a portrait of Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the peasant revolution and a Mexican revolution figure and common symbol of rebelliousness in Mexican culture. The picture of Monarch butterfly in the upper right corner symbolizes migration for their annual migration across the North America and are commonly used as a metaphor in the discussion of the Mexican immigration to United States.

Other distinguishable signs are Lucha Libre figures, that form a part of Mexican sports and popular culture. The playing cards on the left and right sides represent a traditional Mexican game *Lotería*, which is similar to bingo and a common game in school or parties. These signs tap into the nostalgic feelings of the culture, as they are familiar from childhood and popular culture.

5.6.2 *Rebelliousness*

Besides the authenticity cues considering the brand and Mexican culture, it is notable that these cues were commonly combined with elements that were closer to the consumers and resonating with their lifestyle and desires.

The mezcal myth can has had a major shift in the past decades from illegal, cheap beverage to an exotic, brave and proud of its origins and the trueness to itself, which is crucial in the scope of authenticity. Instead of hiding or covering the not so bright history of mezcal, it is harnessed in the branding. The illegal and underappreciated history of mezcal is mostly used as a point of reference, and the history and the former bad reputation are not hidden but embraced. For instance, the illegal background, indigenous history and the homemade hooch are in many cases emphasized. The rebelliousness and the true self are a part of the mezcal tradition.

This goes hand in hand with the Mexican underdog mentality. Since the Mayan and Aztec imperials and the Spanish Colonization, Mexico has been suffering of poverty and social problems. To this background, Illegal mezcal is connecting the illegal past of mezcal to defend the rights of immigrant children and transgender rights. As their slogan goes *the only thing that should be Illegal is mezcal*. The emphasis on the rock or punk lifestyles were clear in the imagery, as shown in Images 28, 29 and 30.



Image 28 Illegal Mezcal: rock lifestyle

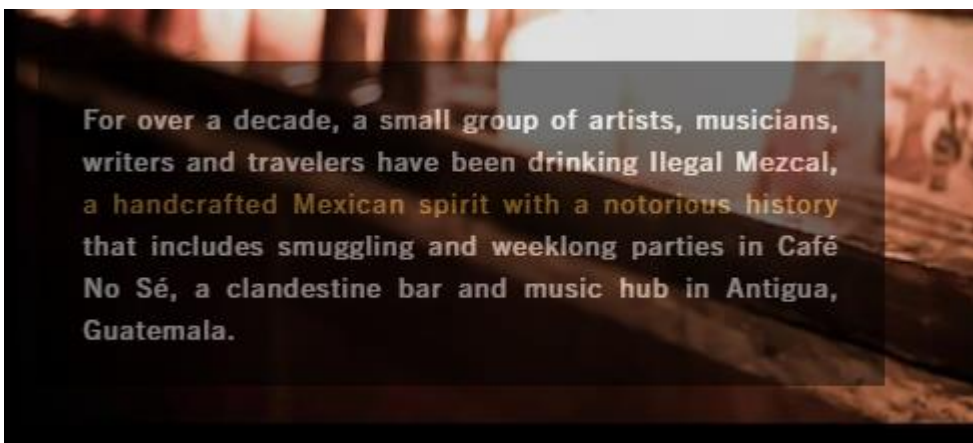


Image 29 Illegal Mezcal: appealing to lifestyle



Image 30 Peloton de la Muerte: punk symbols

This rock'n'roll or punk spirit is often emphasized with color such as black, white and red or black white and yellow, that goes traditionally in rock and punk culture. The feeling is topped with tattoos, beard, rock instruments.

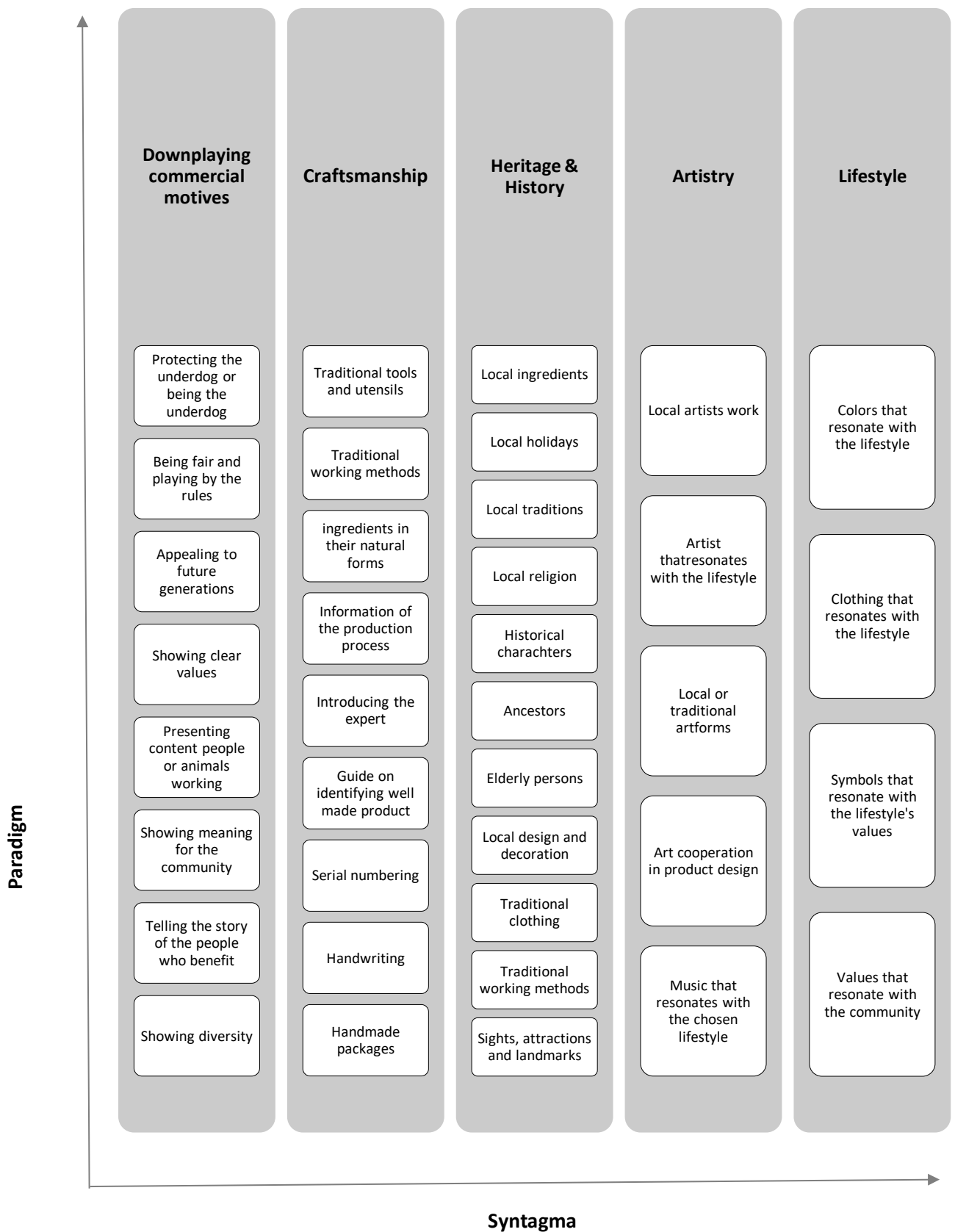
Other lifestyles that were visible in the mezcal brands websites were traditional families and travelers. In a similar way, these lifestyles were shown through colors, symbols and imagery. The traditional family values were usually pictured with natural colors and earthy tones, such as beige, brown and green. The imagery consists of villages and families. The travelers were approached with more colors, that are traditionally associated in Mexican tourism, or traveling equipment such as cameras and beach sandals.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Discussion on the findings

Based on the authenticity signs and communication methods of the mezcal brands, an authenticity syntagma and paradigm can be formed. The syntagma axis is based on the different authenticity cues, while the paradigm axis includes the different signs and messages that form the authentic experience. The paradigm-syntagma table can be used in multiple ways to plan or analyze the signs a brand wants to communicate. Combining different components from the paradigm and syntagma axis will create different types of experiences by choosing the ones that are corresponding the brand strategy and neglecting the ones that are not linked to the brand. Additionally, it is crucial to note that the paradigms are interrelated, and the authenticity syntagma is not as tight to fixed system as for example grammatical rules. In other words, it can be used in carrying creative ways. The brand authenticity syntagma and paradigm are presented Table 8 Brand authenticity syntagma and paradigmTable 8.

Table 8 Brand authenticity syntagma and paradigm



It is evident that the first axis, downplaying commercial motives is related to the brand values and purpose. Making these strategical level pillars of purpose evident and showing

the non-commercial motives in the brands communication and actions creates an authentic experience to the consumers. It should also be highlighted that the company is acting fair and not taking advantage or oppress its stakeholders or consumers. Additionally, functioning thoroughly with non-commercial motives requires inherent genuineness from a brands strategy. These findings are in concurrence with existing authenticity literature by exhibiting inner-directedness and defying external pressures (e.g. Avery 2010; Beverland et al. 2008; Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017). As mentioned, this paradigm is commonly shown through either written or spoken affirmations, and imagery is used to underline the claims. Without the concrete testimonies, it is uncertain that the message is received by the viewer.

Craftsmanship can be emphasized in multiple concrete ways, such as showing the traditional working methods, tools and utensils, as well as demonstrating full expertise in the quality of the ingredients and the professionalism and know-how of the producers. One notable way is also showing guidelines on how to identify a well-made product from bad or fake. These aspects of craftsmanship can then be underlined in the product design by offering handmade details instead of mass production in the packaging, and by using handwriting, signatures and serial numbering. At the strategical level, quality commitment is the key factor in performing in with a craftsman mindset – the production is not only concerned about the end result, but the process of getting there is an equally significant factor in the value assessment. As Gilmore and Pine (2007), Beverland (2005a) and Grayson and Martinec (2004) noted, the brand authenticity cues do not have to base on reality, but they can also be rendered and stylized, as long as they resonate with the receiving consumers.

The allusion of craftsmanship can be relayed through visual signs. Based on the findings, it seems that craftsmanship is an easily approachable rendering point for companies, as the connection to the authentic feeling can be created by excluding the non-traditional or mass-producing methods and restricting the imagery to that is not soaked in tradition. Through unilateral communication where the company is the sole creator and moderator of the communication, there is potential to skew the experience of authenticity. In the long run, this can inflict to the consumer loyalty, if the reality does not concur with the image.

History and heritage stem from cultural traditions, such as holidays, religion, ancestors and the elderly. The locality of a product can be underlined with local design, ingredients, decorations, or sights, attractions and landmarks. All these cues are bar none strictly tight to the brand or product, but merely formed together in the traditions of the culture and segued to the everyday life. The culture does not consist merely people in certain regional areas, as in the case of mezcal, but can be seen as a wider perspective. For instance, should a brand's consumers consist of members of a subculture or minority, the heritage and history of this point of view should be highlighted.

The authenticity cues can be bolstered in an artistic manifestation, as arts are generally considered as an authentic act. Regardless, it is essential to know one's audience in order to resonate in the right spot and be able to touch the possibly latent desires of the consumers. This can be done for instance in cooperation with local artist that represent the desires of the target consumer culture and by using local and traditional forms of art. There seems to be no limits in the artistic performances, as long as they are the right ones for the occasion and in line with the brands strategy and values.

To reach the lifestyle, it should be taken to account that consistency is the key factor in the brands strategy. The brand must meet its consumers values, aesthetics and communication methods constantly, and be able to deliver the authentic experience in multiple touchpoint not only for one consumer, but to the consumers culture and peers. The signals must be addressed into the deep, unconscious desires, for instance by provoking the community's shared desires. In a way, the brand needs to grow into and be adopted into the community of lifestyle than build its way inside it. The components in the lifestyle paradigm are commonly blending with the other paradigms, but it can also perform solo.

Brand authenticity communications is strictly tied to company's identity and must accordingly be entwined in the brand strategy. To fulfill an authentic brand experience, a fundamental commitment in the strategy is essential. This goes hand in hand with Hitzler and Müller-Stewens view (2017, 34–35) if companies' identity is reflected to the consumer consistently and correspondingly to its identity, as an end result an authentic impression will emerge. Evidently the strategic level must be carefully planned in order to perform in an authentic way. Brands must show purpose, genuineness, consistency and quality commitment, to fulfill the brand authenticity promise to consumers. Also, it is noteworthy that in accordance with the previous research, these aspects are interrelated and are not easily distinguished. Commonly the strategic level decisions support each other and work as pillars for communications.

It must also be noted that if a brand is performing authentically by its nature, the authentic experience might emerge without intention. This view goes against Gilmore and Pine's (2007, 102–104) argument that no business offerings are authentic by nature, as they are guided by commercial motives. The authenticity paradox is evident, as no company is authentic by merely claiming to be it – authenticity must be shown through actions. The situation creates a situation similar to Schrödinger's cat³ – a brand is both authentic and inauthentic until a consumer experiences it.

In conclusion, the creative elements of brand authenticity are key pillars in conveying an authentic brand experience to the consumers, but brand administrators are not the only creators of brand authenticity (Beverland 2005a, 460). Managing consumers perceptions of authenticity is critical as the perceived authenticity must follow the consumers' notion

³ In the thought experiment by Erwin Schrödinger, a cat is placed in a box along with poison. Until the box stays sealed, the cat is in a sense both alive and dead. (see e.g. Merz 2013.)

of how things ought to be (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) and cover the invisible factors in people's general perceptions (Bai et al. 2009, 253) to address the symbolic messages correctly and arouse resonance. Relevant and appropriate authenticity cues play an important role along with communicating about them in a relatable, engaging and inspiring way.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

The purpose of this study was to describe how brand authenticity can be mediated in brand communication. The topic was discussed by the point of view of signs and semiotics and previous academic literature on brand authenticity. The phenomenon was also inspected through a mixed method research by collating and analyzing brand authenticity cues and signs that convey authenticity. This study makes three theoretical contributions to the brand authenticity theory.

Firstly, it broadens the understanding of the brand authenticity phenomena and its definition. An overview of the current state of brand authenticity theory was performed and the concept of brand authenticity was examined further from the current research standing. In this study, qualitative methods were used to describe the multifaceted brand authenticity communication to form a perception of the phenomenon in depth. Reflecting on the existing literature, brand authenticity was defined as consumers' perception of a brand being true to itself and its consumers' aspirations throughout its actions and communication. It is notable that the authenticity can be both rendered, or it can occur naturally, which was also visible during the research. The findings are uniform with Beverland's (2006) and Gilmore and Pine's (2007) claims that consumers' perceptions of authenticity are formed in conjunction of stylized or fictional factors that companies claim to be authentic. This study is in concordant with the existing brand authenticity literature which states that instead of being merely an inherent feature, authenticity is rather a socially constructed assessment of a brand (see e.g. Brown et al. 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Holt 2004; Beverland 2005a & 2006; Napoli et al. 2016, 1201) where consumers play an active role in co-creating the authenticity (Leigh et al. 2006). Generally, authenticity cues can be divided into indexical and iconic, where indexical cues represent spatio-temporal evidence that are approved by authority and iconic cues represent the consumer perception and discussed if a brand is as is it ought to be.

The first sub-question of this research considered the strategical level requirements for brand authenticity. Commonly mentioned requirements were purpose (e.g. Eggers et al. 2012, Spiggle et al. 2012, Dwivedi & McDonald 2018), genuineness (e.g. Bai et al. 2009; Napoli et al. 2014; Morhart et al. 2015), consistency (e.g. Beverland 2006; Frizt et al.

2017; Napoli et al. 2014) and product orientation (Moulard et al. 2016). Purpose is comprised of the company's fundamental values. Besides the economic motivations that are strictly tight to businesses, brand authenticity is also inseparably connected to other motivations, such as political and societal goals, as people are looking for products that reflect their personal image and identity. Genuineness indicates that a brand is being true and transparent, keeping its promises and staying true to its exposed values. Consistency means that a brand fulfills its promise consistently at all brand touchpoints and reflects consistently the essential brand core. It also includes the visual expressions of a brand, such as expressing style and aesthetics consistently in design, communication and all brand touchpoints. Product orientations focusing on the products in an intrinsic way instead of compared to products that are designed to fulfil consumers desires.

These strategical level attributes were also visible in the study and can be reflected through the authenticity signs. For instance, purpose and genuineness are commonly reflected in downplaying commercial motives, and consistency and product orientation in craftsmanship. It was notable that the lack of strategic level planning produces inconsistent authenticity communication, or communication that might be irrelevant for the consumers.

The second sub-question was to identify cues that implicate brand authenticity. The theory was based on existing literature (see e.g. Beverland 2006; Alexander 2009; Bai et al. 2009; Napoli et al. 2014; Freathy & Thomas 2015; Moulard et al. 2016; Hitzler & Müller-Stewens 2017; Athawal & Harris 2018) where commonly mentioned brand authenticity cues were identified. All beforementioned cues were also found during the research and it can be reaffirmed that they convey an authentic experience for consumers. Downplaying commercial motives refers to brands appearing distant from commercial consideration.

Secondly, this study broadens the understanding of semiotic dimension of brand authenticity and brand authenticity communication. The third sub-question elaborates the semiotics signs that convey brand authenticity and the fourth questions discusses the interpretation of such signs. The brand authenticity cues can be communicated through signs that can be further interpreted in denotative and connotative levels proving that semiotics is largely applicable to the brand authenticity research.

Additionally, semiotic proved to be a good indicator in extending the understanding of cultural value that can be seen through signs and consumer cultures. With different brand authenticity signs, it is possible to create rich, multidimensional experiences with consumers and resonate with them in deeper levels. As Yaki and Totu (2014, 8) and Seppä (2012, 128) mentioned, semiotic theory provides concepts and analytical models that can be used in unraveling the hidden meanings of signs and relating them to wider cultural entities. It is notable to state that authenticity can be applied widely and in various ways into brand communication. It can be crafted into hidden subliminal messages or presented

explicitly throughout brand communication. Evidently, brand authenticity can be communicated in multiple ways. Symbolism and storytelling in visual imagery, text or video are strong tools in conveying authenticity.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory (Chandler 2007, 28; Yaki & Totu 2014, 7) signs do not occur coincidentally or randomly. Instead, they are always delivered purposefully with an intention. It can be argued that the brand authenticity signs are rather concordant with Peirce's view. Peirce (Yaki & Totu 2014, 7) suggested that signs exist even though they are not purposely meant or communicated, as long as the receiver finds meaning on them. Receiver has an active role in forming the meaning in the same way as a consumer has an active, though commonly subconscious, role in forming an assessment of authenticity.

Thirdly, this study contributes a syntagma-paradigm scale for brand authenticity shown in Table 8 that describes the relation between the authenticity signs and determines how these signs can be organized or combined (cf. Mick 1986, 197; Fiske 2005, Seppä 2012, 141). The scale presents the vertical and horizontal possibilities that can be applied in planning the brand communication strategies based on the earlier research on brand authenticity cues. Thus, it can be argued that this study expanded the conception of brand authenticity by applying the existing theory to new areas. As mentioned earlier, brand authenticity can be communicated in the interplay of visual and textual cues, that are interpreted by viewer and transferred into an authentic experience. By evaluating these cues, the viewer performs unconsciously an assessment of the brand thus allowing the authenticity.

6.3 Managerial contributions

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study provides important insight for marketing practitioners from the managerial perspective. Firstly, in choosing the correct position of the brand, brand administrators can utilize the brand authenticity paradigm and syntagma as a guideline to differentiate their brands from rivals by treasuring existing or desired authenticity cues and emphasize or nurture a consistent strategy. Although brand authenticity and its construction require long-term commitment, concentrating on the development of an authentic brand and the brand's core are proven to be successful positioning strategies for both existing and emerging brands, as companies endeavor to connect with customers in search of authenticity in an increasingly commercialized and staged world. The mere presence of authenticity cues, be it by enhancing or rendering, could influence customer loyalty and brand value.

Developing authentic brand and reinforcing the symbolic meaning for customers requires deep knowledge in the community that is sought after. Understanding the dynamics and construction of authenticity works as a tool for marketers to design and constantly deliver relevant and meaningful experiences for demanding customers. Additionally, the insights of this research endorse marketers to effectively communicate such practices. Thus, having acquaintance with these cues offers a benefit for corporation them into brand communication in strategic and tactical levels.

It is crucial to emphasize that brand authenticity cannot be produces superficially, and it requires strong absorption in the organization's reason for existence. As stated earlier, the strategic level requirements for a brand to be successfully authentic are purpose, genuineness, consistency and product orientation. Planning and having authenticity in the mind throughout the business operations is indispensable for achieving consumer perceived authenticity. Relevant and appropriate authenticity cues play an important role along with communicating about them in a relatable, engaging and inspiring way. It was notable that the lack of strategic level planning produces inconsistent authenticity communication, or communication that might be irrelevant for the consumers.

6.4 Limitations and future research

As any research, this study does not arise without limitations. Nevertheless, it can be used as a foundation for future studies such as quantitative research brand authenticity communications and the impact of these signs to consumer behavior. Additionally, its insights can be used as the base of researching and comparing the significance on the different cues.

For the experimental nature of brand authenticity, the assessments of authenticity we conducted merely from the researcher's point of view. In the future, more emphasize in larger entities of the consumers and their conception should be made to perform stronger foothold on theory. Since mezcal is inherently a product with cultural roots and a vast history, it would be important to study products that do not have established cultural background or heritage, such as technology or new product launches. Moreover, this study was conducted in the consumer environment and it is not directly applicable to business to business context without further research.

Furthermore, this study focused solely on brand communication through companies' websites. Granted that websites form a well-established base for online communication, the shift to more interactive communication has already happened. Consequently, the authentic communication in other platforms, such as social media, should be research in more detail. A light should also be shed to discussion that is happening between

consumers outside the direct brand environment. As the communication has shifted to the social media, it is more common that consumers are in a direct touch with the brand. Different touchpoints and communication methods should thus be approached. This study was limited to a unilateral brand communication that occurs in companies' websites. Social media and other brand communication venues were excluded, as the topic of brand authenticity communication is new and more knowledge on the communication theory was needed.

7 SUMMARY

Brand authenticity is a core element in the contemporary brand management. Regardless of its recent popularity among academics and businesses, the concept is still lacking a consensus reflecting the conceptualization of the definition and practices. Although there is a general agreement that authenticity is not only an attribute inherent to an object but rather a socially constructed interpretation or an assessment made by an evaluator, there is a continuous discussion on its definition and dimensions for its subjective and abstract nature.

This study aimed to arouse relevant and critical ideas about branding by exploring the actual and potential contributions of brand authenticity communication in the marketing practice. By researching mezcal brands, the purpose of this study was to describe how brand authenticity can be mediated in brand communication. This purpose was divided into following sub-questions:

- What are the strategical level requirements for brand authenticity?
- What cues implicate brand authenticity?
- What signs convey brand authenticity?
- How the different signs of authenticity can be interpreted?

The theoretical framework of this study consisted of two main chapters discussing the theories of brand authenticity and semiotics. In the first main chapter the prior research of brand authenticity was introduced alongside with the motives of the changing business environment and a shift in consumer culture. As people's perception of authenticity is highly influenced by personal predilections, personal preferences are still not the only factors in the authenticity assessment. Living in a social world means that there is a constant impact from external forces and social pressures on personal identity. Establishing authenticity remains culturally and contextually dependent construct that requires insight of the dominant power relationships as well as historical events and zeitgeist.

As one way of sowing authenticity into brand communications is semiotics, the second main chapter included the framework of semiotic theory. To better understand communications through semiotics and the formation of meaning, it is essential to understand the meaning of a sign. Semiotic theory focuses structuring and operating the signs and sign systems and provides concepts and analytical models that allow the unraveling of signs into components and relating them to wider cultural entities.

This study was conducted as a qualitative mixed methods study by combining semiotic content analysis and poetic inquiry. The data was formed by a collection of mezcal brands. With the aid of multiple research method, it was possible to study both visual and written authenticity cues that occur in the mezcal brands websites. This approach was

seen suitable, as the research emphasis is to form in-depth understanding on the phenomena. Mezcal was chosen as the research subject of this study for its deeply rooted history and recent global popularity. Mezcal is a Mexican alcoholic beverage obtained by distilling cooked and fermented agave plants. Mezcal is one of the vivacious remains of pre-Hispanic culture and one of the most widespread and historically rooted products of Mexico. In the past decade, an interest towards mezcal has risen substantially, thus shown in the growing rate of multinational companies investing in mezcal. Globalization has allowed the exchange of knowledge concerning the way of life and traditions from all over the world, naturally or paradoxically, many things tend to homogenize. Consequently, all those that maintain a unique essence anchored in deep cultural roots acquire exceptional value.

The first sub-question was concerning the strategical level requirements for brand authenticity. As brand authenticity is tied to the company's identity and must accordingly be entwined in the brand strategy. Purpose, genuineness, consistency and product orientation emerged from the prior academic research as predominant requirements for successful brand authenticity management. The second sub-question involved indicating the cues that implicate brand authenticity. Downplaying commercial motives, craftsmanship, heritage and history, artistry and appealing to lifestyle were identified as the main cues of brand authenticity. The first two sub-questions were explored in the literature review of the first main chapter.

In the following sub-question, the signs that convey brand authenticity were observed and the fourth, and last, sub-question discussed the interpretation of authenticity signs. Brand authenticity can be communicated in the interplay of visual and textual cues, that are interpreted by viewer and transferred into an authentic experience. By evaluating these cues, the viewer performs unconsciously an assessment of the brand thus allowing the authenticity.

By researching the mezcal brands websites, a syntagma/paradigm scale for brand authenticity was formed. The syntagma axis is based on the different authenticity cues, while the paradigm axis includes the different signs and messages that form the authentic experience. This scale describes the relation between the authenticity signs and determines how these signs can be organized and presents the vertical and horizontal possibilities that can be applied in planning the brand communication strategies based on the earlier research on brand authenticity cues. With the syntagma/paradigm scale this study expanded the concept of brand authenticity to new areas in the field of semiotics. Through semiotics, it was similarly possible to extend the understanding of cultural value that appeared in the authenticity signs and reflected in the consumer cultures. It is possible to create rich, multidimensional experiences with consumers and resonate with them in deeper levels by applying authenticity signs in the communication.

It is notable to state that authenticity can be applied widely and in various ways into brand communication. It can be crafted into hidden subliminal messages or presented explicitly throughout brand communication. Evidently, brand authenticity can be communicated in multiple ways. Symbolism and storytelling in visual imagery, text or video are strong tools in conveying authenticity. It can be argued that the brand authenticity signs are concordant with Peirce's view of signs existing even though they are not purposely meant or communicated, as long as the receiver finds meaning on them. Receiver has an active role in forming the meaning in the same way as a consumer has an active, though commonly subconscious, role in forming an assessment of authenticity.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study provided insights for businesses. Firstly, in choosing the correct position of the brand, brand administrators can utilize the brand authenticity paradigm and syntagma as a guideline to differentiate their brands from rivals by treasuring existing or desired authenticity cues and emphasize or nurture a consistent strategy. Concentrating on the development of an authentic brand and the brand's core are proven to be successful positioning strategies for both existing and emerging brands. The mere presence of authenticity cues, be it by enhancing or rendering, could influence customer loyalty and brand value.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that developing authentic brand and reinforcing the symbolic meaning for customers requires deep knowledge in the community that is sought after. Understanding the dynamics and construction of authenticity works as a tool for marketers to design and constantly deliver relevant and meaningful experiences for demanding customers and the insights of this research endorse marketers to effectively communicate such practices. It is crucial to emphasize that brand authenticity cannot be produced superficially, and it requires strong absorption in the organization's reason for existence. Relevant and appropriate authenticity cues play an important role along with communicating about them in a relatable, engaging and inspiring way. It was notable that the lack of strategic level planning produces inconsistent authenticity communication, or communication that might be irrelevant for the consumers.

In conclusion, the creative elements of brand authenticity were key pillars in conveying an authentic brand experience to the consumers, but it should be noted that brand managers are not the sole creators of brand authenticity. Managing consumers' evaluations of authenticity is critical as the perceived authenticity must conform to consumers' mental frames of how things ought to be and cover the invisible factors in people's general perceptions to address the symbolic messages correctly and arouse resonance. Relevant and appropriate authenticity cues play an important role along with communicating about them in a relatable, engaging and inspiring way.

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APPENDIX 1

Mezcal brands' websites

400 conejos <www.400conejos.mx>, retrieved 5.3.2019
 400 voces <http://www.400voces.com>, retrieved 5.3.2019
 Agua Maldita <http://www.aguamalditamezcal.com>, retrieved 5.3.2019
 Alípus <http://www.alipus.com>, retrieved 12.3.2019
 Amores <http://www.mezcalamores.com>, retrieved 12.3.2019
 Banhez <https://www.banhezmezcal.com>, retrieved 12.3.2019
 Bozal <http://www.bozalmeszcal.com>, retrieved 12.3.2019
 Bruxo <http://bruxomezcal.com>, retrieved 12.3.2019
 Casa Cortes <https://backbarproject.com/portfolio/casa-cortes/>, retrieved 16.3.2019
 Cinco Sentidos <https://www.drink5sentidos.com>, retrieved 13.3.2019
 Cobardes y Reyes <http://www.reyesycobardes.com>, retrieved 13.3.2019
 Creyente <https://mezcalcreyente.com>, retrieved 13.3.2019
 Cruz de Fuego Mezcal <https://www.cruzdefuegomezcal.com>, retrieved 13.3.2019
 Cuish <http://mezcalescuish.mx>, retrieved 13.3.2019
 Del Maguey <http://delmaguey.com>, retrieved 14.3.2019
 Derrumbes <http://mezcalderrumbes.mx/>, retrieved 14.3.2019
 Don Amado <https://delmezcal.com/es/>, retrieved 14.3.2019
 Dos Volcanes <http://www.dosvolcanesmezcal.com/>, retrieved 16.3.2019
 El Buho <https://elbuhomezcal.com/>, retrieved 16.3.2019
 El Señorío elsenorio.com, retrieved 16.3.2019
 Erstwhile Mezcal <https://www.erstwhilemezcal.com/>, retrieved 16.3.2019
 Espiritu Lauro <http://www.espiritulauro.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Fidencio <http://www.fidenciomezcal.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Gracias a Dios <https://www.thankgad.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Illegal Mezcal www.illegalmezcal.com, retrieved 17.3.2019
 La Luna Mezcal www.lalunamezcal.com, retrieved 17.3.2018
 Lalocura <https://www.mezcallalocura.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Legendario Domingo <http://domingomezcal.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Los Danzantes www.losdanzantes.com, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Los Javis <http://www.mezcallosjavis.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Marca negra <http://marcanegra.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Meteoro <http://www.cayodelcielo.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Mezcal Koch <https://mezcalkoch.com/>, retrieved 17.3.2019
 Mezcal Nacional <https://www.mezcalnacional.com/home>, retrieved 18.3.2019
 Mezcal Unión <https://mezcalunion.com>, retrieved 21.3.2019

Mezcal Vago <https://www.mezcalvago.com/>, retrieved 18.3.2019
Mezcales de Leyenda <http://www.mezcalesdeleyenda.com/>, retrieved 18.3.2019
Mezcalosfera <http://mezcaloteca.org>, retrieved 19.3.2019
Miel de Tierra <https://www.mieldetierra.com>, retrieved 20.3.2019
NETA Mezcal <https://www.netamezcal.com/>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Papadiablo <http://www.papadiablo.mx/>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Peloton de la Muerte <http://pelotondelamuerte.com/>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Rey Campero <http://www.mezcalreycampero.com>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Santa pedrera <http://santapedrera.com>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Santa Sabia <https://www.santasabia.com>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Santa tierra <http://www.santatierra.com.mx>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Santo Infierno <http://mezcal santoinfierno.com>, retrieved 20.3.2019
Verde momento <http://www.mezcalverde.com>, retrieved 21.3.2019
Wahaka Mezcal <http://www.wahakamezcal.com>, retrieved 21.3.2019

APPENDIX 2

Data collection chart

Mezcal brand		
Language		
Colors		
Visual authenticity cues <i>Signs</i> <i>(icon, index, symbol)</i>		Downplaying commercial motives
		Craftsmanship
		Heritage & History
		Artistry
		Lifestyle
Written authenticity cues <i>Storytelling</i> <i>Metaphor</i> <i>Metonymy</i>		Downplaying commercial motives
		Craftsmanship
		Heritage & History
		Artistry
		Lifestyle
Other notes		