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Mothers' Ruin and Madame Genève. The Troubled Past and the Shining Present of Gin. A Historical-Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

Although it is often claimed that authenticity is socially constructed, the dynamics through which this social construction actually takes place is still an under debated matter in the current literature. Especially in reference to the connection between a given product and a certain place and an identifiable time. Acknowledging this gap, this paper aims at providing a deeper understanding of the social construction of authenticity by focusing on a product that was not traditionally associated with attributes of authenticity (until recently): the gin. To do so we retraced the history of gin from the end of the 17th century to date, by applying the historical method of research in marketing (Golder 2000). Findings drawn unveil that the emerging authentic discourse in the current gin industry should be attributed to the controversial cultural significance that this product had and still has in England. We provide historical evidences allowing to consider gin as a "denied ensign of Englishness" that gave non English producers the possibility to propose their own authentic market offerings with a credible and non-contradictory cultural symbolism. Theoretical and managerial implications are provided.

1. Purpose of the paper and literature addressed

Authenticity is considered a cornerstone in contemporary markets (Thompson et al. 2006; Beverland 2005). In consumer research, the work by Grayson and Martinec (2004) is of paramount importance as it provides a theoretical guideline for the investigation of authenticity. Two forms of authenticity are identified: indexical and iconic authenticity. A product is indexically authentic when it is the real thing, the original. In contrast, it is iconically authentic if it is very similar or close to what is perceived to be indexically authentic (Grayson and Martinec 2004). While the notion of indexical authenticity resembles an objectivist/modernist approach to authenticity, iconic authenticity condenses the stances of subjective and constructive authenticity (Wang 1999). Iconic authenticity in fact relies on the assumption that even if the object is not objectively authentic, consumers perceive a certain authenticity because of the object's relevance to their identity project (subjective authenticity), or because marketplace forces attached authentic meanings to it in a credible way (constructive authenticity) as in the case of (e.g.) brand extension. By assuming that marketers create authenticity (MacCannell 1973), and that consumers can even perceive iconicity better than indexicality (Wang 1999), the empirical efforts to date are largely concerned with the identification of what material and symbolic cues consumers value when

distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic (Beverland 2006; Beverland et al. 2008; Ewing et al. 2012; Napoli et al. 2014), and in shedding light on how companies manage indexical and iconic attributes to favor consumers' authenticity perception (e.g. Beverland 2005; Beverland 2006; Alexander 2009). Amongst these cues, the connection with a past time and with an identifiable place are the most widely called into action (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Postrel 2003; Beverland and Luxton 2005; Beverland 2006; Beverland et al. 2008; Beverland et al. 2010; Mc Auley and Pervan 2014; Newman and Dhar 2014). We think that these are also the most taken for granted and under conceptualized cues, and for this reason we are developing this project. In constructivist terms, the "place" may not be narrowly intended as an identifiable geographically area. Rather, it may be considered inextricably connected to a past time as it encompasses also relevant socio-historical dynamics and events that contributed to institutionalize and historicize the place as such together with specific products, means of production, product styling, and commitment to quality (see Giddens 1984). From this perspective, past (a given history) and place (a given territory) are inextricably tied to each other as one gives meaning to the other.

Many scholars note that the notion of place is a specific genre of the national-ethnic discourse of authenticity, which results in the common acceptance that a specific product is legitimately associated to a specific place and vice versa (Postrel 2003; Jones and Smith 2005; Usunier and Cestre 2007; Maguire 2012). And in fact products and brands are often advertised drawing on the ancestral heritage of a place to reinforce their continuance of historic practices, such as means of production and product styling (Chhabra 2005), and to give them an iconic status of local significance that is often rooted at the national level (Holt 2004; Kravets and Öрге 2010). Research has shown that marketers draw on culture to transfer authentic meanings onto their products by making extensive use of national myths and symbols into their brand narratives (Peñaloza 2000; Holt 2004; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kravets and Öрге 2010; Kravets 2012). Through these narratives, marketers attempt to reinforce the relation between place and product as a source of authenticity (Jones and Smith 2005; Usunier and Cestre 2007; Maguire 2012), while preserving (intentionally or unintentionally) the cultural legacy of cultures and of their myths endowed with symbolic significance (Smith 1999).

If approached in this light, matters of authenticity should be analyzed by looking at the deep cultural dynamics through which specific cultural meanings emerge, become collectively cherished, are mythologized, narrated, commodified, and negotiated in the marketplace as representations of authenticity. One of our assumptions is that even indexical authenticity is the outcome of a process of co-construction among several actors, agencies, and communities. Despite it is often claimed that authenticity is socially constructed (Cohen 1988), there are a few studies posing sufficient attention to the dynamics through which this social construction takes place. Unveiling these dynamics requires one to delve into a historical account on the long-term construction of authenticity to demonstrate how brands' and products' meanings evolve time by time (Beverland 2006).

In addition to this gap, the literature to date appears to be mostly focused on luxury artifacts and on products that have a clear, uncontested cultural heritage (Gundlach and

Neville 2011; Maguire 2012). Insufficient attention has been instead devoted to other product categories that are less easily associated with connotations of heritage (Beverland et al. 2008, Alexander 2009), such as mass-market products, and others for which the connection with a past time and a given place is not quintessential.

Acknowledging these gaps, the objective of this study is to unravel the historical dynamics through which authenticity was and is socially constructed by focusing on a product category that a) does not have clear cultural roots, b) has never been marketed as a luxury item until recently, c) is historically characterized by negative nostalgic records and negative cultural myths, and d) is recently booming: the gin.

Although the origin of gin should be attributed to the Dutch, its cultural roots must be traced back to England. Romantically nicknamed "*Madame Genève*" at the end of the 17th century after the Dutch name for the juniper berries used to flavor the drink, in England it suddenly came to be known as "*Mothers' Ruin*", becoming the opium of the people before opium itself took on that role in the next century.

The troubled history of this spirit throughout modern England's history can be considered as one of the reasons why English producers did not maintain a strict control on the cultural paternity of this product allowing non-English producers to propose their own market offerings with a credible and non-contradictory cultural symbolism (Dillon, 2002; Salmonson, 2012; Williams 2014). In recent years, the gin market has been affected by a dramatic rise of gin brands that embraced revivalism, wisely mixing tradition with the contemporary meanings of gin consumption to satisfy the consumer's quest for authenticity.

2. Research methodology

The methodology applied in this research consists in a deep historical analysis of the gin history from its beginning to date by following the historical method proposed by Golder (2000). Historical methods have been suggested when the aim of the study is to unveil the social construction of long term phenomena in marketing that cannot be grasped otherwise (Humphrey 2010). We thus collected, interpreted, and presented evidences from the past (including paintings, novels and other cultural representations), to understand how issues of authenticity in the gin industry evolved throughout the centuries. The retrospective analysis is then completed by the analysis of the recent evolution of the gin industry. To this aim, we considered aggregate data at the industry level from 2001 to date to unravel the dynamics through which the gin industry evolved. We then analyzed multiple cases of old as well as newly established brands to unveil the salience of the authentic discourse in brand narratives and to understand how companies portray their authenticity in such narratives as previous studies did (e.g. Beverland et al. 2008; Visconti 2010). Websites and other representations of the brand through which authentic attributes and claims of authenticity are brought into being, e.g. brand names, labels, bottles, print ads, and others, were considered as primary sources of information.

3. Main findings

The critical analysis of the history of gin allowed isolating several negative myths and historical contingences that have been interpreted as the main reasons that made it possible for contemporary gin makers to perform mechanisms of cultural appropriation, generating what is currently called “ginaissance” and the emergence of the authenticity discourse in the gin industry. We provide historical evidences allowing to consider gin as a “denied ensign of Englishness” layered in a controversial cultural significance in which its current image of sophistication co-exists with historic connotations of drunkenness, poorness and despair. The recent dynamics affecting the gin industry, and findings drawn from case studies instead revealed how producers are using attributes of authenticity into their branding narratives. In particular we show that, besides the most frequently used attributes of authenticity (e.g. methods of production), gin makers purposefully glean from the troubled past of the gin, developing narratives characterized by a romantic, nostalgic, mythic ethos, as well as by thick nationalistic overtones. In particular, we unveil a practice of authenticity narration that can be framed within three interrelated mechanisms (see Smith 1999). *Rediscovery* of “ethno-history”, through which producers attempt to preserve the cultural meanings behind the product encompassing identity and culture. *Reinterpretation* of the past, through which producers make the aspirations of the present appear authentic, natural and comprehensible, often interpreted in a specifically national light. *Appropriation*, thorough which producers deploy mechanisms of appropriation of product’s symbolism, to convey an image of authenticity.

4. Research and managerial implications

Findings drawn in this research have several research implications. Methodologically, the adoption of an historical research method has shown that if approached longitudinally, issues of authenticity follow a non-linear trajectory invisible if investigated with other methods of enquiry. This method is hence suggested in those empirical efforts in which authenticity is approached in a constructivist fashion. In addition, at least to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in which authenticity is studied by focusing on a product category in which authenticity is not self-evident and on a product that is culturally controversial.

Managerially, findings drawn can be of help especially to those marketers wishing to emphasize attributes of authenticity of products that are less easily associated with connotations of heritage and pedigree. In particular, the mechanism of rediscovery, regeneration and appropriation of cultural meanings identified, offers practitioners a suitable schematic framework they can follow to intensify the brand’s and product’s connection to time and place.

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