



# What makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers? A semiotic approach

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## Abstract

In this article, the purpose is to develop a consumer-focused understanding of authenticity within corporate heritage research. Our research question is as follows: “What makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers?” We employ Peirce’s semiotic concepts of icon, index and symbol to analyse consumers’ perceptions of the Finnish corporate heritage brand Fazer, founded in 1891. Our study shows that childhood memories, consumer experiences and expectations as well as shared social conventions make the corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers. Thus, our research empirically advances the understanding of authenticity as socially constructed. Importantly, our study highlights the temporal dimension of this construction and advances the current knowledge on corporate heritage brands by showing that uniqueness, credibility and consistency over time are key dimensions of corporate heritage brand authenticity assessments. This understanding is fundamental for corporate heritage management practice, especially for developing the strategic positioning of corporate heritage brands in the markets by harnessing the assessments of authenticity.

**Keywords** Authenticity · Corporate heritage · Corporate heritage brands · Corporate image heritage · Peirce

## Introduction

Marketing interest in authenticity has existed for some time (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Beverland 2006; Alexander 2009; Gundlach and Neville 2012; Akbar and Wymer 2017; Napoli et al. 2016). As argued by Grayson and Martinec (2004), humans have strived for authenticity for hundreds of years. Authenticity in branding, in particular, has emerged due to consumer demands for authentic products and services, especially in times of change and uncertainty (Turner and Manning 1988), when searching for something to rely on that offers continuity (Fritz et al. 2017). Continuity refers to a time dimension within branding, which has come into focus in the emerging stream of corporate heritage research

over the last decade. In corporate heritage research, it is proposed that three key precepts—trust, authenticity and affinity—underpin salient corporate heritage brands (Balmer 2011a) and that firms/brands that communicate a corporate heritage identity should increase consumer perception of their authenticity and trustworthiness (Blombäck and Scandeliu 2013), which consumers value (Balmer 2011a, b; Hudson 2011; Hudson and Balmer 2013; Wiedmann et al. 2011a; Balmer and Burghausen 2015). Accordingly, authenticity is proposed as one of the key strategic competitive advantages that companies can gain by including corporate heritage as an element of their corporate brand identity strategy. However, no empirical studies have verified this proposal; the crucial question of how to acquire authenticity in corporate heritage branding therefore remains. We take this challenge and ask, “What makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers?”

In this study, we aim to develop a finer-grained understanding of authenticity from a consumer perspective within corporate heritage research. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have focused on consumer perceptions of authenticity *vis-à-vis* corporate heritage. We follow Peirce’s (1966) semiotic concepts of icon, index and symbol to address the various shades of authenticity in the field of corporate

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heritage brands. Peirce's works are especially relevant in terms of research about authenticity because he delved into how people distinguish what is truthful or real and what is not (Merrell 2000; Grayson and Martinec 2004). His work thus provides a relevant foundation for exploring how consumers assess authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004) and, in particular, to explore this phenomenon in the setting of corporate heritage brands (Hudson and Balmer 2013).

We collected qualitative data from 56 interviews pertaining to how consumers perceive Fazer, a Finnish company that was originally founded in 1891. The informants were asked to freely answer the open-ended question, "What comes to mind when you hear Fazer?"

Our article contributes to current knowledge by offering views on consumer understanding of authenticity among corporate heritage brands. Our study shows that childhood memories, consumer experiences and expectations, as well as shared social conventions, make the corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers. These findings are supported by Braun-La Tour and colleagues' (2007) proposal that people's earliest and defining experiences have an important influence on their current and future preferences. Adding to their proposal, our findings indicate that these experiences also have an authenticity dimension, and as Pecot et al. (2018) suggest, this might especially concern familiar corporate heritage brands.

In particular, our research advances the understanding of authenticity as a social construction, empirically detailing that uniqueness, credibility and consistency over time are key dimensions of corporate heritage brand authenticity assessments. Thus, our study contributes to consumer-oriented corporate heritage research by enriching the understanding of corporate image heritage (Rindell 2013, 2017) as an authenticity dimension. This role of authenticity is important for companies to consider when designing corporate heritage strategies so that they meet consumers' expectations in an interesting and relevant way (Rindell et al. 2015).

In the remainder of this article, we proceed with an overview of corporate heritage brands per se, and authenticity, showing how authenticity has been recognised in corporate heritage research. Next, we present Pierce's semiotic approach, followed by an outline of the methodology and a report of the results. The conceptual framework and implications for managerial practice are then discussed. Finally, we present our study's limitations and proposals for future research.

## Corporate heritage research

Particular attention to heritage emerged in the marketing domain in the context of research on monarchies as corporate brands (Balmer et al. 2006). Urde et al. (2007, p. 4)

subsequently conceptualised the concept of brand heritage as "a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly, in its organisational belief that its history is important". Rindell et al. (2015) further developed Urde and colleagues' (2007) proposal by adding the consumer perspective as a relevant dimension to consider. Urde et al. (2007) also argued that a brand's past could be made relevant for the present and prospectively for the future, providing a basis for distinctiveness in positioning. The notion of heritage itself covers three time frames, since—from the perspective of the present—it captures all that remains relevant from the past and maintains it for the future (Balmer 2011b). However, according to Pecot and De Barnier (2017), brand heritage is merely a representation of the past, not the past itself. Therefore, although all companies have histories and many even have heritage, only some set heritage at the core of their brand identities and strategies (Urde et al. 2007), especially at corporate level.

In the corporate brand canon, Balmer (2011b) conceptualised corporate heritage institutions as possessing enduring and meaningful identity traits. These traits are meaningful because they create bilateral trust between organisations and their internal and external stakeholders (Balmer 2011a). In the corporate heritage identity framework proposed and further refined by Balmer (2011a, b), bilateral trust is central to corporate heritage identities and depends on authenticity from the organisation's side, i.e. the perseverance of salient corporate heritage features, and affinity from the customer and stakeholder perspective, i.e. the heritage identity remaining meaningful to them (Hudson and Balmer 2013).

Moreover, Balmer (2011a, p. 517) implicitly suggests that authenticity has a time dimension, arguing that "authenticity captures the notion of preserving the enduring identity traits of corporate heritage brands". This question therefore arises: how do customers and other stakeholders perceive authenticity *vis-à-vis* corporate heritage brands? With some exceptions, only a handful of studies within corporate heritage research are consumer focused. For example, brand heritage has been shown as an important driver for customers' perceived value of a brand, which has a relevant impact on consumer responses (Wiedmann et al. 2011a, b; Wuestefeld et al. 2012). Focusing on customer satisfaction, Balmer and Chen's (2017) study further supported the utility of the notion of corporate heritage/corporate heritage brands. Rose et al. (2016) proposed that brand heritage had a positive impact on purchase intentions, especially for consumers with a low promotion focus, and enhanced positive emotions, trust and brand attachment. According to Pecot et al. (2018), brand heritage signals quality and commands a price premium, especially concerning brands with which consumers are less familiar. In a subsequent study, Pecot et al. (2019) found that brand heritage enhanced brand credibility and personal nostalgia. Orth et al. (2019)



studied package designs for [product] heritage brands and found that lower continuity designs created confusion among customers, which in turn damaged a brand's heritage identity. Rindell (2013, 2017) conceptualised the time dimension in branding research from a consumer perspective as image heritage in order to understand how consumers' past perceptions of a brand would influence their present image construction processes and future expectations. Thus, similar to corporate heritage identity (Balmer 2011b), corporate image heritage also captures three time frames, since an element of the "then" exists in the "now" of consumers' image construction processes, guiding future expectations. Her study was conducted at the corporate level; hence, corporate image heritage refers to "an individual consumer's company-related images constructed over time, which act as a frame of reference for the consumer when interpreting company actions in the present time frame" (Rindell 2013, p. 205) for future expectations. While these studies are recognised, there remains a research gap in understanding the relation between authenticity and corporate brand heritage from the consumer perspective. We propose that consumers' corporate image heritage may reveal what makes a brand authentic for them.

## Corporate heritage and authenticity

Previous studies have stressed the importance of authenticity for corporate heritage brands (Balmer 2011a, b; Hudson 2011; Hudson and Balmer 2013; Wiedmann et al. 2011a; Balmer and Burghausen 2015), but this issue continues to be largely unaddressed. This is unfortunate since authenticity has increasingly been recognised and explored in the marketing domain as an essential aspect of brand management (e.g. Belk and Costa 1998; Peñaloza 2000; Beverland 2005; Leigh et al. 2006; Derbaix and Decrop 2007; Rose and Wood 2005; Chronis and Hampton 2008; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Hede and Thyne 2010; Gundlach and Neville 2012; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Fritz et al. 2017).

The word "authentic" is generally associated with "genuineness" and "truth"; sometimes, it is also used to describe something that is thought to be not a copy or an imitation (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Researchers' perspective on authenticity has generally been influenced by their ontological position. On the one hand, from a positivist stance, an artefact's authenticity rests on its "real" objective features. From this perspective, what is true and what is false can be easily understood and distinguished (Visconti 2010; Alexander 2009). On the other hand, interpretive researchers view authenticity as not an inherent quality but a socially constructed concept, an assessment made by evaluators in particular contexts (Bruner 1994; Cohen 1988; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh et al. 2006). Furthermore, an

important individual role in the construction of authenticity has been recognised, where one's belief is a critical aspect of judgements about authenticity (Kniazeva and Belk 2010).

## A semiotic approach to authenticity

Grayson and Martinec's (2004) seminal work on consumers' assessment of market offerings' authenticity has become highly influential in marketing research. Their approach was based on Peirce's semiotic theory, which is foundational to modern semiotic thought (Mick 1986). Peirce's taxonomy of signs has generated dozens of different classifications, with the best-known ones addressing the semiotic relation between signs and objects: symbols, indexes and icons (Santos 2013).

In Peirce's (1998) definition, *symbols* are signs that refer to what is represented by virtue of a conventional law. Language is a prime example of symbols (Peirce 1998). Peirce also coined the term *index* to characterise a sign that refers to an object by some correspondence of fact (Peirce 1998). Hence, factual and spatial-temporal links exist between the sign and the object. For example, signs such as handprints are regarded as directly linking with the person who left the mark (Grayson and Martinec 2004).

Finally, Peirce (1998) coined the term *iconic* to refer to something being similar to something else. In other words, an icon is a sign that refers to something, as it resembles what the object is expected to be. Perceiving something as an icon requires some previous knowledge or expectation, which creates opportunities for comparison.

Based on this semiotic taxonomy of signs, Grayson and Martinec (2004) empirically identified two types of authenticity: indexical and iconic. In the first kind of authenticity assessment, consumers should believe that some sort of factual and spatial-temporal link sustains the authenticity of what is being judged. In the second kind, iconic authenticity is based on the match between consumers' expectations and their actual observations. Thus, even if no clear factual links sustain authenticity, consumers can believe that their experience is authentic, as long as it feels like their expectations of authenticity are being fulfilled. It is important to note that iconic and indexical authenticity are not mutually exclusive (Grayson and Martinec 2004). In practice, the judgements based on these two kinds of authenticity assessment can and often overlap.

Previous studies (e.g. Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh et al. 2006) have started to shed light on how authenticity is constructed by consumers. However, there remains much potential to continue developing a detailed understanding of this matter (Athwal and Harris 2018). As Gundlach and Neville (2012) stressed, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how consumers assess authenticity, thus



directing marketers to make key decisions that may affect their brands' authenticity.

In the corporate heritage domain, and to the extent of our knowledge, no study has empirically addressed how consumers evaluate the authenticity of corporate heritage brands. We expect that consumers may perceive corporate activity and offerings as authentic if these resonate with their expectations from a company based on how they have experienced it over time, that is, their corporate image heritage (Rindell 2013, 2017). However, how consumers evaluate the authenticity of corporate heritage brands remains unaddressed. With this study, we tackle this gap. Hence, in this article, our purpose is to develop a finer-grained understanding of authenticity from a consumer perspective within corporate heritage research. This is the essential question that drives our work: What makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for consumers?

## Methods and empirical setting

In this study, we adopt an interpretive approach where authenticity is considered socially constructed, an assessment made by evaluators in particular contexts (Bruner 1994; Cohen 1988; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh et al. 2006). Due to the lack of previous studies that connect authenticity with corporate brand heritage, our present study is explorative in nature (Patton 2015), following a qualitative approach. With our data collection being inspired by Rindell's (2013) study on image heritage, our research follows an open-source perspective where the respondents may reflect on their views on the company based on any experience from any source over time that they relate to the company. This means that sources of influencers other than the company are considered.

The corporate brand chosen for this study is Fazer, a Finnish family-owned company. We selected Fazer as our case study based on purposive sampling (Stake 1995), due to its theoretical aspect fitting the goals of this research. Fazer was founded in 1891 as a French–Russian café in the centre of Helsinki, Finland. In 1895, the company started to produce candies and chocolates and have continued since then as the number one chocolate brand in Finland. As stated on the company's home page, “Consumers feel that Karl Fazer Milk Chocolate is the deepest reflection of the Fazer brand. Its relation to consumers has grown strong and special over generations. For many successive years, Karl Fazer has been valued as Finland's top-rated [brand]” (Fazer 2020).

The company emphasises its corporate brand heritage on its packaging, website and advertising. For instance, the logo uses the founder's signature Karl Fazer in cursive golden letters and the phrase “since 1891”. The company also uses the slogan “Taste sensations since 1891” as its overall brand

promise. Balmer (2011b, 2013) suggests six characteristics that identify corporate heritage organisations: omnitemporality, institutional trait consistency, tri-generational hereditariness, augmented role identities, ceaseless multi-generational stakeholder utility and unremitting management tenacity. Hence, Fazer emphasises its heritage in many ways on its homepage, packaging and communication and can be considered a corporate heritage brand.

The empirical material consists of 56 semi-structured interviews, which the interviewers started by collecting demographic variables (age and gender). The informants were then asked to elaborate on their overall perceptions of the brand by answering the open question, “What comes to mind when you hear Fazer?” It was emphasised that they could freely elaborate on how they perceived the company, with minimal intervention by the interviewer. With this high degree of freedom, the aim was to help the informants express their subjective understanding of how they perceived the company. Follow-up questions concerning authenticity were posed if the respondent did not touch on authenticity; however, this seldom happened. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Table 1 presents an overview of the whole dataset, consisting of the interviewees' demographic data and the number of interviews. The informants comprised 34 females and 22 males, whose ages ranged from 19 to 61, with 71% under 30 years old.

## Data analysis

The empirical material was first analysed in an open manner (Alvesson and Sköldböberg 2009). All interviews were transcribed and repeatedly read by us (the two authors) independently. Table 2 illustrates the stages in the data analysis.

We both made and subsequently refined general descriptive notes to highlight relevant aspects of the analysed material, within the research purpose. Overall, with these notes, we aimed to identify recurrent themes that related to how consumers assessed the brand over time. Rindell's (2013, 2017) work on image heritage was important in framing the analysis on consumers' assessment of Fazer over time. Examples of the identified themes include “childhood memories”, “quality chocolates” and “family-related

**Table 1** Overview of the data set

Age range	Female (61%)	Male (39%)	Total (100%)
19–29	25	15	40 (71%)
30–45	3	3	6 (11%)
46–61	6	4	10 (18%)
Interviews	34	22	56



**Table 2** Stages of data analysis

Analysis	First stage	Second stage	Third stage
Type	First-order analysis (informant-centric terms)		Second-order analysis (researcher centric concepts)
Purpose	Identify how consumers assess the brand	Identify how consumers assess the authenticity of the brand	Theorise about how consumers assess the authenticity of a corporate heritage brand
Approach	Analyse how respondents express their views on the brand and its authenticity		Reflect upon and theorise from the themes and categories identified earlier, through the sensitising lenses of theoretical resources on semiotics and authenticity, as well as brand authenticity
Main theoretical resources employed	On interpretative content analysis: Miles and Huberman (1994) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009)  On image heritage: Rindell (2013, 2017)		On semiotics and authenticity: Peirce (1966, 1998) and Grayson and Martinec (2004)  On brand authenticity: Leigh et al. (2006), Balmer (2012), Bruhn et al. (2012), Hudson and Balmer (2013), Morhart et al. (2015) and Napoli et al. (2013)
Results	Themes that describe how consumers view the brand	Categories that describe consumers judgements on authenticity	Types and dimensions of authenticity in consumers' assessment of corporate heritage brands

invocations”, among others. These themes resulted from interpretive content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) and pertained to the first order of analysis (see Gehman, et al. 2018) to cover the entire dataset. After our initial independent analysis, we met and compared notes, discussing the refinement of the themes. A reflexive process that entailed a constant critical stance on the way that the themes were assigned pervaded our analysis. At the end of this stage, we both agreed on the themes attributed to the empirical material.

At the second stage, working together with the empirical material in hand, we discussed the identified themes and searched for the particular ways that the respondents expressed their views on authenticity. In this reflexive process of analysis, brief descriptions of how the respondents addressed authenticity were built on the themes and further elaborated and noted. The descriptions led to a set of categories that described the ways that consumers assessed authenticity. Examples of these categories include “still the original company”, “blue colour as the true one” and “typical Finnish brand”, which reflected the patterns identified in the empirical material.

At the third stage, one of us (the authors) employed Peirce’s (1966, 1998) semiotic theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of symbols, icons and indexes, to analyse the categories identified previously. Each of the three concepts was used as a core sensitising lens to delve into the patterns identified in the categories. After the first drafts with the semiotic analysis were ready, they

were shared with the other author. This stage involved bridging the interpretation of the data from the first-order to the second-order level of analysis, where theorisation started to unfold (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). For this theorisation, other theoretical resources (see Table 2) were also employed. In the end part of this stage, both of us met again and through recursive cycles of discussions and refinements of analysis, constructed the interpretation that ultimately led to this study’s findings, presented in the next section.

## Findings

This study’s findings are presented under the three main dimensions of the authenticity of the brand Fazer, as expressed by consumers. One focal underlying logic that pervades these dimensions is temporal continuity. Authenticity is regarded as something with a temporal nature; Fazer is authentic now because it continues to be a brand with some characteristics that come from the past. Importantly, consumers regard the brand authenticity in the present with a prospective outlook, in the sense that Fazer seems to be envisaged with a relevance that is enduring.

The verbatim quotations below are chosen on the grounds that they best illustrate the finding under discussion, rather than the fact that the informants collectively represent the full range of ages and both genders in the sample.



### **The brand is authentic because it continues to bear connections with its original roots**

As expressed by consumers, the first dimension of authenticity refers to the brand Fazer's connection with its roots. The consumers envisage the brand as authentic by remaining as the original one. This is evident when they highlight the company as the initial one, with the family that owns it as also primordial. These connections are deemed relevant for the judgement of authenticity, as can be analysed in the following interview excerpts:

[The company] was founded in the late 19th century in Finland; it is a family business that makes chocolate of high quality (female, 23 years old).

I consider it an old family company with [a] history (female, 57 years old).

The original founder is even mentioned as bearing a connection with the actual brand, revealing the relevance of this connection.

I actually do not know from where I first received the information about Fazer being an old family-owned company, founded by Karl Fazer in 1891, but it feels like something I have been aware of for quite some time (female, 25 years old).

However, and importantly, the brand seems to be regarded as still being from its original place. The factory continues to be central in this connection. The following excerpt illustrates this, when a consumer recalls a visit to the factory almost 40 years ago.

At school, we visited Fazer's factory [37 years ago]. Back then, they already had visitors there; it was a big thing (female, 47 years old).

Also, in terms of the connection to places, a coffee house in the centre of Helsinki is the original starting point of the brand's history. Whether or not the actual coffee shop is in the same place as the one at the end of the nineteenth century, it continues to be regarded as the original place of the brand, attesting to its authenticity:

Me and my boyfriend had our first date at the Fazer Café in Helsinki... it was his first visit to Finland, and he wanted to see something pure Finnish. That's why I took him there (female, 25 years old).

Hence, overall, consumers regard the authenticity of the brand Fazer as a connection to its origins. This emerges from multiple aspects. First, it is envisaged as a relation to persons: the founder who gave his name to the brand and the family that remains the owner of the company. Second, the connection to places—the factory and the first coffee shop, as well as the city of Helsinki and the country of Finland—is

also taken into consideration by consumers in their assessments of authenticity. A material relation exists here; the brand is physically connected to a geographic place and to particular places and buildings that in their materiality are regarded as the origins of the brand.

### **The brand is authentic because its products/ activities continue be references in the markets**

The second dimension of authenticity assessments pertains to the brand's market presence. Fazer became associated with and recognised by producing and selling chocolates. The brand's heritage in the markets is its capability to offer chocolates of the highest standard that consumers became accustomed to enjoy through the years. Fazer chocolates set a standard in the markets in the past and continue to be regarded as a standard in chocolates by consumers. Thus, over time, Fazer chocolate has become an exemplar or an ideal of the product in the chocolate category, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

I don't eat a lot of chocolate, but if I want chocolate, I will directly think about Fazer (male, 25 years).

Chocolate, among other things, but mainly chocolate (male, 38 years old).

Fazer Blue [chocolate] is the one and only for me (female, 57 years old).

The brand Fazer's recognition in the market is further acknowledged by the informants, not only to themselves, but as widespread in the country:

Fazer is a good and visible company, which manages to bring its brand image out—everyone knows about Fazer; it is the Finnish chocolate pride (male, 22 years old).

Some consumers even take this ideal of Fazer as a chocolate maker as the worldwide standard:

Fazer Blue. It's the best chocolate in the world (female, 49 years old).

Finally, consumers regard the relevance of the brand and its products clearly in the present, assuming that the standard of the past is somehow updated currently, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Traditional quality, modern at the same time (female, 23 years old).

The Fazer brand has the chocolate bar as its quintessential product—the one that earned its recognition in the markets. It is idealised as Fazer's authentic product and is perceived as the one that set the market standard in the past and continues to do so, against which it can be judged what a chocolate bar should be. Fazer continues to excel in what it has been



doing for a long time, so it is credible in its current market activities. The product comes from the past but continues to be relevant in the present. The product and the brand are authentic; the product is still the one that consumers expect to find. And this expectation has also a prospective outlook: it is something that is not finite in the present and that will seemingly continue to exist in the future.

### **The brand is authentic because it continues to represent what it used to represent**

The third dimension of assessments of authenticity relates to what the brand represents. Basically, Fazer is regarded as authentic because it represents what it used to represent. More precisely, and on the one hand, consumers seem to envisage the brand now as they regarded it in the past. Memories of Fazer in times with the family are brought to the present, and those memories and the feelings they evoke continue to make sense now. The following are interview excerpts regarding this aspect:

Fazer is a brand that has been with me throughout my life. The earliest memories I have about Fazer are from my childhood. I would say I grew up with Fazer's products. ...at home, we always had a few boxes of Fazer chocolate. ... on Saturdays, we usually were allowed to have some Fazer chocolate (female, 25 years old).  
When I think about Fazer, my childhood comes to mind. Fazer has always meant something fun and makes me think of the Finnish landscape (male, 28 years old).

Furthermore, the brand represents a "good" past with the family. It represents a good memory and the country of origin as well:

If someone would ask me of typical Finnish things, one would be Fazer Blue (female, 21 years old).

On the other hand, the brand's meaningfulness in the present and its ability to unlock the past are related to the consistency in the communication of the brand. Fazer's product packages assume relevance in this regard. As illustrated in the following excerpts, colour is one of the most important signs of the brand that comes from the past to the present.

As far as I can remember, Fazer has had the blue colour as a theme (female, 49 years old).  
Chocolate. I also think about a nice dark blue package (male, 56 years old).

Furthermore, this consistency of the communication and signs of the brand is clearly valued by some consumers:

They have always kept the same logotype, which looks quite old. Also, under the logotype, 'since 1891'

always appears on the chocolate bars. I think Fazer brand managers are willing to promote the history of the company (female, 24 years old).

Overall, consumers seem to regard the communication of the brand as portraying it in an authentic way. Brand consistency is maintained from the past to the present and into the future; signs of the brand have endured over time. Importantly, the values representing the brand continue to be the same. The brand is authentic also in this regard. Country and family figure prominently as vested by the brand; Fazer represents these and continues to evoke them for the consumers. Thus, the brand is perceived as authentic now because it is the same as in the past. But this sameness is at the same time made anew in the present, thus being more than nostalgia, and rather assuming a renewed importance by the meaningfulness that it continues to bear. The past is brought to the present not simply as a memory, but also as an expectation into the future. The valued aspects that are personally assumed as important in relation to the brand are relived and re-appreciated by consumers in the present.

## **Discussion**

In this article, we examine "what makes a corporate heritage brand authentic for customers". Hence, we study authenticity *vis-à-vis* corporate heritage from a consumer-focused view, an approach that had not been reported previously. The data have been analysed with a semiotic approach, and the findings are discussed next. Since this section gives many practical examples, we hope it also inspires practitioners.

### **Uniqueness as a dimension of indexical authenticity in corporate heritage brands**

One major contribution of our study lies in the three inter-related dimensions of authenticity we have identified. *Uniqueness* is the first dimension. In our empirical setting, the assessment of the links between the current company and its original roots emerges as a relevant dimension of authenticity. Our work shows that a corporate brand is regarded as authentic if it is somehow understood as still bearing continuity from its origins. The characterisation of these origins—often claimed by a brand that communicate its company's place of origin and year of foundation—sets the brand as distinct from others and thus unique. Thus, this provenance locates the historical origins of Fazer, establishing a unique spatio-temporally situated past (see Burghausen and Balmer 2014a; Balmer and Burghausen 2015), which our study empirically demonstrates to be central in consumers considerations about authenticity. The temporal beginnings of the company and the significance of the corporate



origins (Burghausen and Balmer 2014a) co-substantiates the uniqueness of its heritage and assumes a prominent role in the consumers' assessments of authenticity of corporate brands.

A concern with the connections between a corporate brand and its origins fits within the view on indexical authenticity as originally proposed by Grayson and Martinec (2004) and subsequently addressed in several studies (e.g. Leigh et al. 2006; Hudson and Balmer 2013). Based on the findings, we propose indexical authenticity as a relevant aspect of assessments of authenticity and detail how it is envisaged by consumers in the context of corporate heritage brands.

### **Credibility as a dimension of iconic authenticity in corporate heritage brands**

The second dimension of authenticity judgements is based on the assessment of a company's current operations correlating with the consumers' expectations, built over time, about the corporate heritage. In other words, consumers use their image heritage (Rindell 2013, 2017) to evaluate how a company should ideally be and act at present. In an organisation, such as Fazer, that offers its products to the markets, this ideal is related to the products themselves. Fazer's chocolate bar is idealised as the standard against which the market category should be regarded.

As our study shows, products form an important part of the heritage in the corporate heritage brand, and a company's heritage is often prominently embedded in its market offerings (see Santos et al. 2016). Thus, what consumers expect the company to "look and feel" is commonly articulated in or around its market offerings (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Hudson and Balmer 2013; Santos et al. 2016; Balmer and Chen 2017). Consumers do make assessments of quintessential properties of corporate brands through their products and the possible verisimilitude with an ideal type stands as central in assessment of iconic authenticity (Hudson and Balmer 2013).

If consumers' expectations are satisfied, then the authenticity of the corporate heritage brand will be judged favourably, and the current corporate activities will be regarded as credible or plausible. Accordingly, we name this dimension of authenticity judgements about corporate brands as *credibility*. Balmer (2012) has early emphasised credibility as an imperative in the management of corporate brands and has related it to authenticity. Thus, our findings support Balmer's (2012) proposal. Brands activities should not only be acceptable but also believable (Balmer 2012) in order for being authentic in reflecting the firm's identity and to overall endow the corporate brand with credibility.

In essence, this judgement of authenticity is related to iconic authenticity, as proposed by Grayson and Martinec

(2004)—authenticity as fitting the expectations idealised by consumers as the right ones. There is thus a verisimilitude between consumers' expectations and actual observations what consumers expect and what they find (Grayson and Martinec 2004). However, our work presents iconic authenticity in a particular way, apart from other research. In some previous studies (e.g. Leigh et al. 2006), it is stated that iconic authenticity is what consumers expect to see. This is true to a certain extent although iconic authenticity is not only based on what a person expects something to look like but also on how the company is experienced holistically over time. This resembles corporate image heritage, as defined by Rindell (2013; 2017). According to Peirce (1998), icons are associated with experiences processed through one's senses. Thus, in the context of corporate heritage brands, consumers can expect different things, and if their expectations match their observation, it leads to iconic authenticity assessments.

In particular, as Santos et al. (2016) have argued, the materiality of products enables the embodiment of the tripartite timeframe of past, present and future in an immediate and tangible way, potentially fostering a sense of authenticity in the setting of product heritage brands. Our study further demonstrates that the materiality of products also enables sensorial experiences (the visual gaze, the taste) that are employed to assess corporate brand heritage authenticity. Materiality enables an unmediated experiential comparison between expectations constructed over time and the encounters with the brand in the form of products and their packages. Relying on their senses and their memories, consumers establish assessments of what is authentic or not. The past is thus brought to the present and materiality authenticates the veracity of heritage (Balmer and Burghausen 2019; Rindell 2013, 2017). The brand is authentic if it continues to be credible, that is, if the current products and activities of the brand continue to be experienced as exemplar, an ideal of the market category.

### **Symbolic authenticity in corporate heritage brands**

Finally, the third dimension of authenticity judgements is based on the representations of the brand. What has the corporate brand come to symbolise over the years? What values does it represent for consumers? Closely embedded in this ability to continue being meaningful is the consistency of communication over time. Some aspects of a corporate brand's identity might become associated, by convention, to the brand itself. The assessments of authenticity in this regard take into account these associations and their consistency over time.

Through repetition and consistency over time, some signs thus become symbolically tied to the brand and assume meaningfulness for consumers. As our study shows, consumers value this consistency (e.g. the colour blue symbolising





Finland) as an important dimension of authenticity. Some sort of continuity in identity was previously suggested as essential in the framework of institutional corporate brand management (Balmer et al. 2006; Urde et al. 2007; Balmer 2011b; Burghausen and Balmer 2014b). Our study empirically details this perspective from the consumers' side.

The nature of symbolic authenticity is based on the idea of convention. Symbolism is derived from signs whose relation to their referents results from shared conventions or rules (Santos 2012). In Fazer's case, the brand has come to represent Finland and its families' gatherings over time, providing a tight emotional linkage between the customer and the corporate heritage brand.

The nature of symbolic authenticity is that signs become shared and accepted by a specific referent through repetition over time. Symbolic authenticity lies in the strength of meaningfulness for consumers. Signs need time to become symbols—widespread and shared. Only then does the connection between symbols and the company become established over time, as well as what the company has come to represent.

As our study shows, the consumers assessment of Fazer's authenticity embraces precisely what the brand represents, and this symbolic dimension is naturally related to its identity. Fazer's corporate heritage enables an augmented role identity in terms of customer relationship with the brand (see Balmer and Chen 2017) because the brand accomplished a cultural significance that makes it to represent a meaningful and tangible link with the past of consumers. Furthermore, Fazer's augmented identity came, over time, to encompass associations to Finnish identity, something that was notably built. The colour blue of Fazer packages of chocolate, for example, is also the colour of Finnish national flag.

It is important to note that consistency in communication is not simply a matter of repetition, but rather emerges from a tension between sameness and difference. What the brand communicated in the past is still brought to the present, but not exactly in the same way. The packages of Fazer chocolates, for example, from the present day, are not the same of 60, 30 or even 10 years ago. However, some characteristics bear continuity, the colour blue, the brand's taglines and even the founder's signature on the logo. Thus, the tension between continuity and change (see Burghausen and Balmer 2014b) is especially evident here. As Burghausen and Balmer (2014b) have detailed, the conflation of past and present, old and new, and traditional and modern underlies the paradoxical similarity and difference in the identity of corporate heritage brands.

These tensions can be regarded within the notions of relative invariance/trait constancy of corporate heritage brands (Balmer 2011a, b; 2013). Fazer represents the country and quality family time in the past, but not under a static prism. Rather, the brand Fazer continues to be

symbolically meaningful by being the same from the past but different from this past. The brand is from the past, but it is no longer the past, because the past is gone. However, the brand stands out in time and continues to exhibit (generically) the same signs and values, as in the past. Fazer continues to represent what it has been representing in the past.

It is important to emphasise that the brand communication of Fazer evolved over time, as the consumers also evolved and continued to live their lives into the future, going through different experiences, in distinct contexts. Clearly, we have here omnitemporality (Balmer 2011a, b; 2013) that is the defining characteristics of corporate heritage brands. Our study shows that omnitemporality can also be envisaged from the consumer's side (see also Balmer and Chen 2017), particularly in terms of assessment of authenticity. The symbolic nature of authenticity, as revealed by our study, is especially fruitful in this regard.

Finally, and importantly, in their assessments of authenticity, Fazer's consumers seemingly expect that the brand remains meaningful: there is no foreseen predicament that the symbolic associations to Fazer will change in the future. And this is because there seems to be no anticipation that the brand is going to be different (or even might be) in the future, since it was not different in the past. Symbolism is endowed with this fluidity: representations will continue to hold the same meaning in the future (Santos 2013). In a way, over time, Fazer authenticity in terms of symbolism derives from having accomplished a legitimate position (Van Leeuwen 2007) as representing some values (Balmer and Chen 2017), in this case pertaining to Finnish national identity and the related associations of having been present in family life over generations. Table 3 provides an overview of the analysis and the findings.

Although iconic and symbolic authenticity judgements can often overlap in practice, different logics set them apart. On the one hand, iconic authenticity judgements are essentially connected with a perspective of the ideal. Iconic authenticity is thus proposed as follows: ideally, what would a company as an organisation—and its products—be, look like, eventually taste and feel, and how would it be experienced, based on its corporate heritage? Hence, it is a question of ability and qualities that (ideally) characterise a corporate heritage brand. On the other hand, symbolic authenticity is related to aspects of the company's activities that become widespread in the marketplace as representations of a specific corporate heritage. Therefore, the key aspect of symbolic authenticity is repeated representation that becomes a convention. This perspective expands those of previous studies (e.g. Leigh et al. 2006) by empirically detailing this difference between iconic and symbolic authenticity, enriching the branding literature on authenticity through the lenses of Peirce's (1966, 1998) seminal works.



**Table 3** Overview of the semiotic analysis and findings

First-order findings		Second-order findings		Empirical evidence
Consumers' judgements	Type of authenticity	Dimension of authentic city	Characterisation of the dimension of authenticity	
The brand is authentic because it continues to bear connections with its original roots The brand is authentic now because it comes directly from the distant past	Indexical authenticity: space-temporal connections attest authenticity	Uniqueness	The corporate brand is authentic if it remains linked to its original roots. These links make the corporate brand clearly distinct from others and thus unique	“When I was young, I went to the Fazer factory. We got unlimited candies. I will always remember this experience. I was 12 years old and it was during a school trip” (Male, 25 years old) “Fazer is an old Finnish company established by Karl Fazer” (Female, 51 years old)
The brand is authentic because its products/activities continue to be references in the markets The brand is authentic now because it continues to set a standard in the market as it did in the past	Iconic authenticity: observations fit expectations idealised by consumers as authentic	Credibility	The brand is authentic if its current activities match consumers' expectations (built over time) about the company (i.e. its products) in the markets. The brand is authentic if it continues to be credible; its current products and activities remain exemplar, an ideal of the market category	“I think [Fazer] it's highly revered in Finland. It's held up to high standards by people” (Male, 30 years old) “For me Fazer produces the best chocolate in the world...” (Female, 23 years old)
The brand is authentic because it continues to represent what it used to represent The brand is authentic now because it is the same as in the past	Symbolic authenticity: judgements are based on shared conventions that are established over time and through repetition and serve as a template for consumers' judgements	Consistency	The corporate brand is regarded as authentic if it remains meaningful to consumers—if it continues to be consistent in the values that it represents and in how it represents them	“It feels like a Finnish brand. I think Fazer is the brand most Finns buy. (...) If someone would ask me of typical Finnish things, one would be Fazer Blue” (Female, 21 years old) “The brand is well-established, traditional and trustworthy and people are loyal to it. Finns are proud of it” (Male, 23 years old)



More broadly, our research findings partially corroborate those of studies on brand authenticity but expand them in a relevant way. Bruhn et al. (2012) identified uniqueness as a dimension of consumers' authenticity judgements, and Morhart et al. (2015) and Napoli et al. (2013) identified credibility as another dimension. Finally, Morhart et al. (2015) and Bruhn et al. (2012) also mentioned consistency as an important aspect of brand authenticity. However, our work presents a more concise and integrated framework than those of previous studies and empirically details how each of the authenticity dimensions is regarded by consumers. Furthermore, our research offers a nuanced perspective on authenticity as a social construction, imbued with personal memories and expectations, as well as with shared symbolic aspects, that sustain consumers' assessments. The temporal dimension of authenticity judgements is highlighted in our study, shedding light on the dynamic nature of these processes. Finally, this study advances the current knowledge on corporate heritage brands by unveiling the particular ways that consumers assess the authenticity of such brands.

### **Corporate heritage, omnitemporality and authenticity**

Corporate heritage brands are omnitemporal and embrace three time frames: the past, the present and the future (Balmer et al. 2006; Urde et al. 2007; Balmer 2011b). Furthermore, corporate heritage brands present an apparent relative invariance despite continuous change over the years (see Balmer et al. 2006; Urde et al. 2007; Balmer 2011b; Santos et al. 2016). Concurrently, our study shows that omnitemporality is central to how consumers regard corporate brands with heritage.

In our study, we find that authenticity is a key dimension of consumers' corporate image heritage. Consumers look for the distinctive character of a heritage brand in the present based on connections to its past. Furthermore, expectations of what the corporate brand ought to be and ought to do in the present and in the future show the importance of individual customer experiences over time in judging authenticity. Finally, another important insight from our study is that consumers value consistency when assessing authenticity. In turn, consistency is related to omnitemporality; consistency cannot be found without continuity over time in the identity and communication of corporate brands.

Our study supports and empirically advances what Balmer (2011a) has proposed: maintaining authenticity is a process built upon the relationship of the corporate heritage brand with its community. To maintain authenticity there must be a dynamic process between the organisation and the market, where managers should be clearly aware of their organisation's key identity traits (Balmer (2011a)). As our study shows, consumers do construct their interpretation

over time of what is meaningful to them regarding the corporate heritage brand identity. It is by relying on this interpretation that they evaluate the authenticity of the brand.

Furthermore, the authenticity of the corporate heritage brand can be envisaged as a promise (Balmer 2011a). The concept of iconic authenticity is especially relevant in this regard: the promise of the brand—from the organisation side—relates essentially to the expectations about the brand that consumers construct, over time. Alignment is thus essential to maintain authenticity (Balmer 2011a) and the concept of iconicity important to understand it.

The symbolic dimension of authenticity we are proposing in this article is also important in relation to the role of corporate heritage brands in the construction of national identity. Balmer and Chen (2017) have shown that the augmented role identity of the Chinese brand TRT is highly significant in terms of link to the nation's past, contributing to the satisfaction of the consumers also because of this relevance and meaningfulness. Our study has strengthened this perspective by demonstrating similarly that Fazer has this role in Finnish society and that this corporate heritage brand is assessed as authentic also because of its tangible, living nature and its relevance in the history of the country.

Ultimately, and as Hudson and Balmer (2013, p. 355) have suggested, the authenticity of corporate heritage brands "is determined by consumers who must subjectively perceive quintessential properties in the brand" and our study does clearly show how consumers construct their understanding of these properties based on their corporate image heritage and through the prisms of the three types of authenticity we are proposing. Our work thus empirically co-substantiates and expands the literature on corporate heritage brands, offering a more nuanced understanding on how these brands can be regarded and managed.

In essence, the concepts of indexical, iconic and symbolical authenticity (Peirce 1966, 1998) are found to have a utility in providing a finer-grained understanding of authenticity in relation to corporate heritage (Balmer et al. 2006; Balmer and Burghausen 2015). In particular, the semiotic approach, as articulated here, enables scholars and managers to gain a deeper understanding of authenticity dimensions of corporate heritage brands—based on what consumers perceive as relevant—in order to communicate accordingly (Balmer et al. 2006).

### **Management implications**

For managers, the practical implications refer to the question, "What do certain customers perceive as authentic in a company's corporate brand heritage?" In essence, findings show that customers require a clear correlation between the current company and its original roots for being perceived as



authentic. Timelessness is also required in the sense that customers expect the company to follow what the corporate heritage brand has become to symbolise and represent over the years. This requires some degree of consistency—not repetition per se—but as a tension between sameness and difference. The corporate image heritage framework is valuable as a tool for distinguishing corporate strengths and weaknesses, as well as identifying opportunities related to customer perceptions of authenticity in a specific market, thus allowing for communication approaches that are relevant and interesting for consumers. In this study, childhood memories, a valued corporate brand heritage and being a domestic brand have made the corporate brand authentic for consumers. Moreover, this semiotic tool/framework allows an analysis of the intersection of corporate brand heritage (representing company actions) and consumers' corporate image heritage (depicting consumer views of the company's past, present and future). This could help optimise the balance among these past, history and heritage elements (Rindell et al. 2015; Burghausen and Balmer 2014a) in relation to authenticity. The findings suggest that a deeper understanding of authenticity is relevant for corporate heritage management practices in terms of strategic definitions, legitimacy claims and value proposals for consumers in certain markets. For companies as such to be considered, corporate heritage traits encompass omnitemporality, institutional trait consistency and augmented role identities (Balmer 2013) to be conceived of as authentic.

In conclusion, our article presents a more descriptive and prescriptive set of dimensions of authenticity than previous studies, paving the way for future research. In particular, we advance the application of semiotic theory in the research about authenticity, providing a much needed finer-grained view that results in the identification of symbolic authenticity as a new type of authenticity that we expect to be useful for future studies.

## Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its setting that of an explorative approach; it represents only one corporate heritage brand in the food industry. Therefore, other markets and corporate heritage brands could also be studied with the same semiotic approach. Although the brand Fazer can be found in many European markets and is known as “the Finnish chocolate brand”, it could be interesting to study corporate heritage brands from a cultural viewpoint. The corporate heritage brand Fazer can be considered familiar (Pecot et al. 2018), and other dimensions of authenticity (e.g. symbolic authenticity) might be interesting to study among non-familiar corporate heritage brands. Such an approach might shed light on possible internationalisation strategies for non-familiar

corporate heritage brands. As can be realised from our study, the importance of childhood experiences is evident in familiar corporate heritage brands in the food market. Our findings also support Braun-LaTour and colleagues' (2007) study on car brands and Rindell's (2013) study on a retailer brand. Notably, the majority of the informants are under 30 years old; therefore, other age groups could be in focus as well. For example, future studies could utilise findings in neuroscience for a broader understanding of how childhood experiences direct brand preference, especially among corporate heritage brands, among different age groups. Our findings also provide grounds for a quantitative approach to studying authenticity in corporate heritage brands.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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