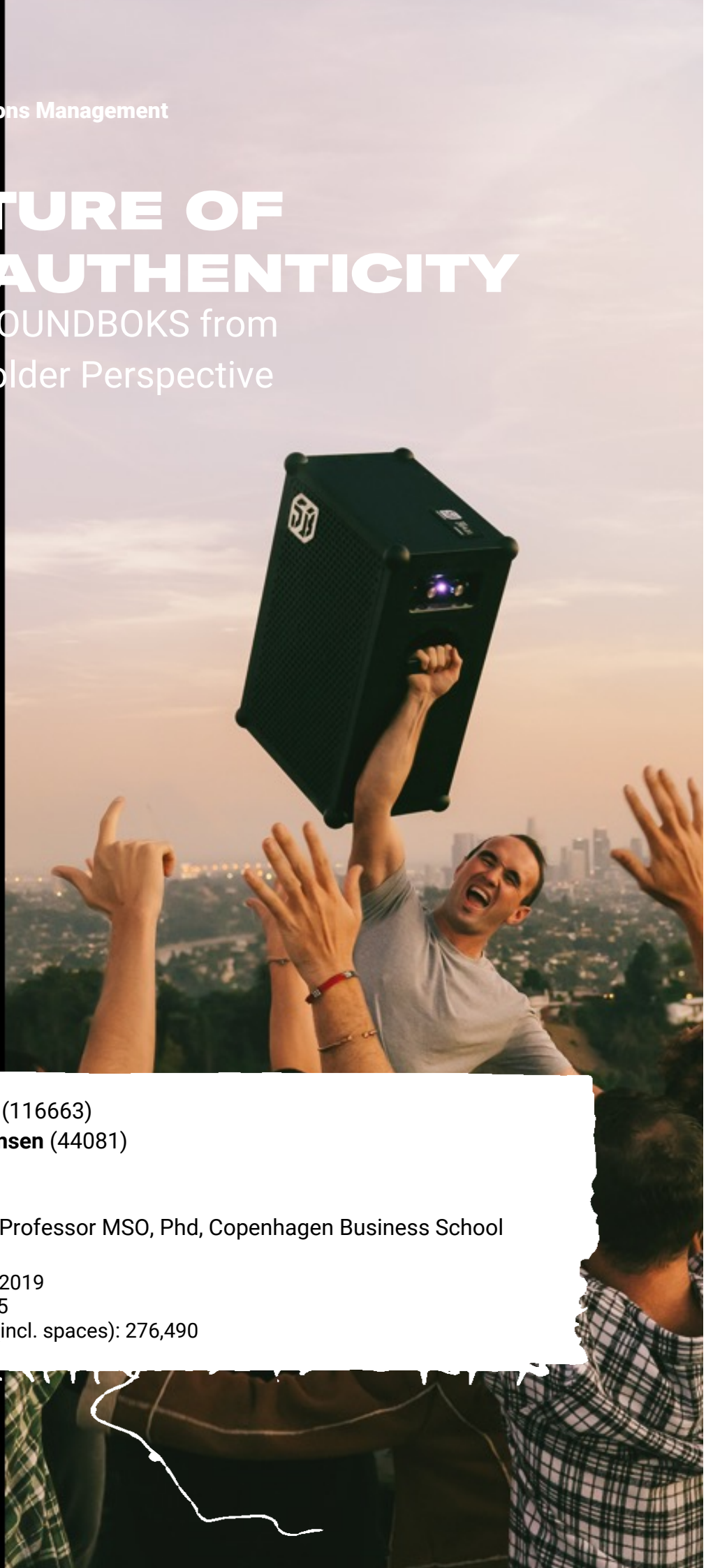**MSc Brand and Communications Management**
Master's Thesis

THE NATURE OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY

A Case Study of SOUNDBOKS from
a Multiple-Stakeholder Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Within the postmodern era, several scholars have identified a quest for authenticity among consumers due to an apparent shallowness of the material culture in a commercial society, where consumers become a pawn in a big capitalistic game. Also, brand authenticity is found to have a significant influence on the choice of brands among postmodern consumers. Within a postmodern context, it is thus vital for brands to adapt to this quest for authenticity in order to stay relevant and compelling to the consumers.

Current literature has studied the subject of brand authenticity from either an outside-in perspective or an inside-out perspective. However, research suggests that postmodern branding is influenced by a wide variety of stakeholders, which enact and co-create brand meaning within the brand's stakeholder ecosystem. Thus, in order to fully understand the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions, the phenomenon must be understood from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. As a result, the thesis at hand seeks to shed light upon this knowledge gap based on the following research question:

How can we understand the nature of brand authenticity from a postmodern perspective and which dimensions are the main drivers of authenticity from a multiple-stakeholder perspective?

The present thesis takes a social constructionist stance, thus study the research question from an inductive and qualitative approach. With a point of departure in a case study of SOUNDBOKS, this thesis collected empirical data from three independent sources: 1) internal stakeholders, 2) external stakeholders, and 3) a netnographic study of both brand-generated and consumer-generated social media posts. The data from both internal and external stakeholders were collected through semi-structured interviews with a total of 13 respondents (seven internally, and six externally) to gain a thorough understanding about their perception of brand authenticity in terms of the SOUNDBOKS brand. Furthermore, data in the netnographic study were collected and studied in order to understand the actual behaviour and interactions between the stakeholders. Through a thematic analysis, ten global themes, and 27 underlying organising themes were identified based on an open coding approach. These were used as supporting findings regarding the nature of brand authenticity, and the underlying dimensions, in the case of SOUNDBOKS.

The study suggests that the nature of brand authenticity within postmodernism is understood as a co-creational and iterative process, where the link between the stakeholder's self-identity and the

brand is socially negotiated and reflected. Based on the findings the mediation of brand authenticity is two-fold; hence 1) brand authenticity is 'negotiated', or 2) brand authenticity is 'mirrored'. It is thus suggested that the nature of brand authenticity is considered to be a negotiation between multiple stakeholders with individual identities and subjective perceptions. These multiple stakeholders further reflect, i.e. 'mirror', their self-identities in the brand through self-relevant and authentic information, hence embracing authenticity as an existential concept. In this context, the key dimensions which are negotiated and mirrored among the multiple stakeholders are further found to be; '*the personality of the brand*, '*the culture of the brand'* and '*the purpose of the brand'*.

The thesis at hand thus present implications for both theory and practice, as it provides new knowledge regarding the nature of authenticity in a postmodern context. Moreover, the identified dimensions mediating the degree of authenticity in a postmodern brand, help brand managers to understand how to become more authentic, from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. Thus, the study provides insights into the concept of brand authenticity, and how it can help create strong brands within the postmodern era. The present thesis should thus be seen as an inspirational, yet insightful, study, which lays the foundation for further research within the field of brand authenticity.

Keywords: Brand authenticity; Postmodernism; Co-creation; Brand management

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INDTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Authenticity is a phenomenon that has gained increased interest within the last decade and has become a central component in postmodern branding. The motivation behind studying authenticity from a postmodern perspective is further grounded in Gilmore and Pine's (2007) theoretical statement: *"authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and as cost overtook availability"* (p. 32), thus indicating the importance of brand authenticity today. In this regard, Beverland & Farrelly (2010) further claim the authenticity of a brand to be fundamental for postmodern branding, as the postmodern society is characterised by a lack of authentic brands and an increased demand for authenticity among the consumers. Postmodern individuals have thus become increasingly dissatisfied with the apparent shallowness of the material culture in a commercial society, where consumers become a pawn in a big capitalistic game. Consequently, marketing academics have noticed this demand for authenticity among consumers, and has led to researches in multiple contexts including *luxury wines* (Beverland, 2005b, 2006), *food* (Beer, 2008), *tourism* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999), *subcultures of consumption* (Leigh et al., 2006), *reality shows* (Rose & Wood, 2005), *advertisements* (Beverland et al., 2008), and *retro brands* (Brown et al., 2003). Consequently, in order to comply with the increasing demand for authenticity, brands have begun to use the phenomenon as part of their communication strategy. Although, this is considered to be challenging as the concept of authenticity is argued to be subjective and fluid, making it indefinable and hard to grasp (Beverland, 2005a). Organisations which are able to create authenticity within their brand have the opportunity to differentiate themselves and gain competitive advantage (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This opportunity provides an increased interest and relevance in understanding the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions.

In order to investigate the nature of brand authenticity, this thesis takes a point of departure in a case study concerning the SOUNDBOKS brand. This brand has within half of a decade grown to be one of the most successful start-ups in Denmark. Thus, the motivation behind the choice of the academic field and the empirical case bounds to a genuine interest and curiosity about how postmodern brands can become authentic, and how to understand the nature of brand authenticity.

Despite the increased demand and interest in authenticity the field of research still possesses vast blind-spots. The majority of current literature has studied the subject of brand authenticity from either an outside-in perspective or an inside-out perspective, thus disregarded the dynamics and interactions within the process of developing authenticity. The present paper addresses this

limitation by including multiple stakeholders in the study, thus gaining an understanding of each stakeholders' influence on the brand authenticity of SOUNDBOKS. The SOUNDBOKS case thus serves as an illustration of how to understand the nature of authenticity within the postmodern era seen from a multi-stakeholder perspective.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

From an empirical perspective, the thesis at hand examines, how multiple stakeholders within the postmodern era perceive the nature of a brand's authenticity. With a point of departure in the empirical case of SOUNDBOKS, the present thesis wishes to relate the empirical results to the academic field, in order to contribute with a multi-stakeholder approach of brand authenticity within a postmodern context. Consequently, the following research question directs the present thesis:

> **How can we understand the nature of brand authenticity from a postmodern perspective and which dimensions are the main drivers of authenticity in a multiple-stakeholder perspective?**

With the first part of the research question, the thesis seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how the nature of brand authenticity is perceived from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. In this regard, 'the nature of brand authenticity' is understood as the process, wherein, brand authenticity is created and mediated. The second part of the research question seeks to understand the underlying 'brand authenticity dimensions', which is affecting the authenticity of a brand. Moreover, the research question introduces the notion of a 'postmodern perspective', which in this context is understood as the discourse from which brands and consumers are presumed. Additionally, the 'multiple-stakeholder perspective' is addressed as the internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS, hence the internal being the founders and employees and the external being the consumers. Consequently, the goal is to gain an increased understanding of the concept of brand authenticity and how to manage it from a postmodern perspective.

1.2 DELIMITATIONS

This thesis sheds lights upon brand authenticity from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. However, in terms of the stakeholder ecosystem, the thesis at hand delimits the term 'external stakeholders' to only include the customers. Moreover, the internal stakeholders are narrowed down to solely focusing on employees and founders. Thus, the study does not take other stakeholders' (e.g. investors, board members, press media, ad agencies, suppliers) understanding of the brand into account.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The following section is dedicated to outlining the structure of the thesis, and, furthermore, present each chapter of the present thesis. The thesis is divided into eight chapters, which provide valuable information in order to answer the research question at hand. In this regard, figure 1 outlines the structure of the thesis:

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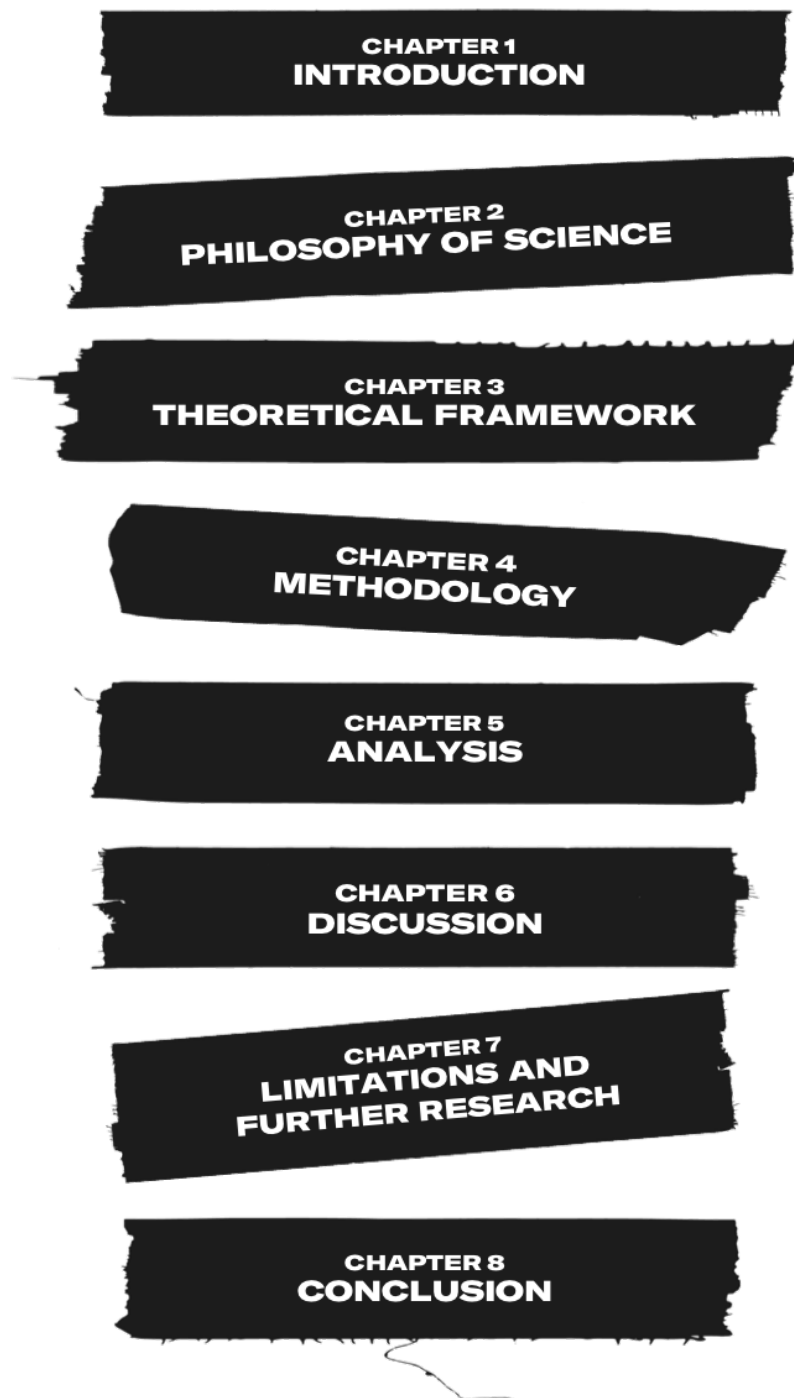
Figure 1: Structure of thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

The initial chapter of this thesis introduces and actualises the motivation and interest of the chosen research question. In this regard, the problem statement and the scope of the thesis will be introduced. The case study is furthermore presented in order to understand the choice of case, hence SOUNDBOKS, and further gain thorough knowledge about the company.

Chapter 2: Philosophy of Science

The second chapter elaborates on the chosen research philosophy, in order for the reader to understand the fundamental basis and scientific position of the research. In this regard, this section discusses the concept of social constructivism to clarify how this scientific position can help answer the research question at hand.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

The third chapter presents the theoretical framework, and, thereby, sheds light upon the knowledge about the concepts of postmodernism and brand authenticity and further how these are interrelated. Consequently, this section seeks to understand brand authenticity from a postmodernist point of view.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The fourth chapter outline the methodology of the thesis, elaborating on the methodological choices when conducting an exploratory study. In this regard, the qualitative method of doing semi-structured interviews and netnography, in three inductive thematic analyses of the SOUNDBOKS brand, will be elaborated and discussed.

Chapter 5: Analysis

The fifth chapter provides insights into the data collection and further accounts for the analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with internal and external stakeholders. Moreover, the findings of the netnographic analysis, including brand-generated and consumer-generated social media posts, are illustrated and described.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The sixth chapter discusses and substantiates the empirical findings from the analysis and compares these findings to the existing theories presented in the theoretical framework. This thesis thus presents a nuanced understanding of brand authenticity and sheds lights upon the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions.

Chapter 7: Limitations and further research

The seventh chapter takes up the limitations of the research, and, thus, propose a direction for further research within the field. Furthermore, the managerial implications are proposed in order to understand the management of brand authenticity.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The final chapter concludes and answers the research question in order to provide a holistic understanding of the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions.

1.4 THE SOUNDBOKS CASE

This section will seek to present the case company used throughout the present thesis, in order to understand why this particular case was chosen and how it can support this study.

The thesis at hand will take a point of departure in the brand, SOUNDBOKS, as it in less than a decade has achieved steady growth and success within the postmodern society. The approach of SOUNDBOKS has a high focus on the duality and the dynamic between brand and consumers, which the present study will seek to emphasise in relation to brand authenticity. The case company will thus function as a reference point in order to understand the multiple stakeholder perceptions of brand authenticity related to SOUNDBOKS.

SOUNDBOKS is a young Danish start-up company, which was founded in 2015 based on a discovered market gap and demand for durable and loud festival speakers. Today, the company has around 50 employees and have sold over 25.000 SOUNDBOKS speakers in over 40 different countries (SOUNDBOKS, 2018). The SOUNDBOKS brand has roots in the Danish music festival, Roskilde Festival, as the idea for the company arose from the demand for a speaker which were able to survive in this particular festival environment. Consequently, the founders decided to manufacture the most durable and the loudest speaker on the market. SOUNDBOKS has previously communicated brand statements such as "*Throw real parties anywhere*" and "*Loudest battery speaker in the world*". However, within the last year, the SOUNDBOKS brand has initiated a revitalisation of its brand. As such, the brand purpose is expressed through the tagline; "BREAK THROUGH THE NOISE", which today is perceived to be much more than just communicating physical attributes. The brand has included aspiration and a unique culture in its brand purpose, meaning that it has become a trifold brand vision combining the physical, social and mental attributes of the brand. Thus, this revised understanding of the brand purpose is, thus, an attempt for SOUNDBOKS

to extend the purpose onto a more emotional perspective. As a result, the creative ambition for the revitalisation of the SOUNDBOKS brand is to express the SOUNDBOKS product as the catalyst for breaking down mental, social and physical barriers.

By incorporating the emotional and aspirational aspects into the brand, SOUNDBOKS strive to become more than just a product. In this regard, the CMO of SOUNDBOKS, Josh, states that *"last year it was decided to really solidify ourselves as a lifestyle brand"* (Interview 4; l. 49-59), which he later specifies by saying that *"we are a barrier-breaking brand"* (Interview 4; l. 135). In order to communicate this revitalised and distinctive brand purpose towards their consumers, the brand has adapted to the notion of brand authenticity.

René: "We are talking about how we can resonate authentically and how we can build trust and belief in the brand from the consumers" (Interview 7; l. 322)

The brand management of SOUNDBOKS is, thus, grounded in authenticity and is argued to be thought into all of their brand activities. Brand authenticity is, thus, interesting to study from SOUNDBOKS' perspective in order to establish which factors and dimensions that emphasises the creation of authenticity. These dimensions will function as a reference point to investigate the multiple stakeholder perceptions of brand authenticity related to SOUNDBOKS, in order to understand how the stakeholders determine the authenticity of a brand.

Arguably, the SOUNDBOKS brand is a compelling case for this present thesis, as it is a brand focusing on brand authenticity, and further has achieved steady growth and success within the postmodern society. The SOUNDBOKS case is hence a single-case study, serving as an illustrative in order to understand brand authenticity from a real-life case. The specific methodological considerations behind the single case study are outlined in chapter 5.

PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2: PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

To conduct a scientifically valid and reliable analysis, it is found essential to establish a common ground and a fundamental understanding of how knowledge is acquired and generated. This establishment is done through the lens of a scientific paradigm, which Saunders et al. (2016) defines as the fundamental belief system or world view that guides the research, in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways. Therefore, the following section will provide the reader with a basis of the scientific method employed throughout this thesis, in order to understand the foundation upon which the conclusions are drawn. In this regard, the theory of science is a systematic study of how scientific knowledge is produced, justified and used in society (Holm, 2018). One way to proceed this is with use of the "Research Onion" proposed by Saunders et al. (2016). This implying going through the layers in the right order: 1) research philosophy, 2) research approach, 3) research strategy, 4) choices, 5) time horizons, and 6) data collection techniques and analysis procedures (ibid.). In the following chapters, the research onion will function as a framework for our research reflections.

2.1 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The paper at hand wishes to investigate the postmodern consumption and the importance of brand authenticity. Moreover, the thesis seeks to understand how brand authenticity is created, in the perception of consumers, by analysing the social processes through which consumer create brand perceptions. Consequently, the social constructivism is deemed most applicable and most related to the desired outcome of the thesis as well as the chosen theoretical framework.

Within subjectivism, social constructivism is a theory which states that knowledge and other aspects of the world are in its core not completely real, they only exist as individuals actively place it in reality through social agreements. Constructs such as nations, money and brands would not exist in the absence of human society, in its core money is pieces of paper that have no value other than what society has assigned to it (2018). In continuation, Burr (2003) argues that *"it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore, social interaction of all kinds and particularly language is of great interest to social constructionists"* (p.4). As a result, reality and knowledge is not a product of objective observation of the world, but the social processes and interactions between individuals. Reality is created through interactions within a community and through the way the individuals express reality; in other words, reality has no existence outside or independent of our lignification of reality (Holm, 2018).

Gergen (1999) argue that, in its core, social constructivism is based on four assumptions that affect the assessment of both the object and the scientific work itself: 1) there is no necessary relation between the world and our concepts, 2) our descriptions of reality originate from social relations, 3) we shape our future through our understanding of the world, and 4) reflecting on our understanding of the world is vital for our future well-being (Holm, 2018, p. 144). Thus, these four assumptions will be explained in the following paragraph.

The first assumption proposes that there is no relation between the world and our concepts (Holm, 2018, p. 144). Underlying this, language is not considered to be a picture of the world but is instead a social convention (ibid.). In social constructivism, language is incapable of mirroring the world *'in itself'*, because language is metaphorical (Gergen (1999) in Holm, 2018, p. 145). Hence, we can only understand what language refers to in reality by translating it to a literal meaning. However, according to social constructivists there exist no such thing as *'literal meaning'*; hence language does not refer to reality (ibid.). Thus, the way that we identify and understand an object requires cultural background knowledge of what the object is, and what its function is (ibid.). The world we live in is, therefore, the sum of all our language games, that is collectively constructed through communication (ibid., p. 146). In other words, according to social constructivists, the only world that exists is the one we construct together.

In line with this, Gergen's (1999) second assumption is that our understanding and description of the world is not individual but rather collective, as a natural consequence of language uniting us (Gergen (1999) in Holm, 2018, p. 146). Following this, the point with the money example is that money is only valuable because we continuously ascribe value to it through playing the language games (Holm, 2018, p. 147). This is, as well, the truth about, e.g. both "private thoughts" and "the physical world", as both are made from the same material: language (Holm, 2018, p. 148). To elaborate on this, social constructivists would argue that our "inner" self is not especially private as it reflected in the collective concept of self (ibid.). Thus, people typically talk about where we grew up, where we work, and what our aspirations are for the future. In its essence, people construct their identity based on a narrative structure, that is very similar to films and books (Holm, 2018, p. 148). Thus, the social constructivism reduces identity to inherit nothing "private", but socially constructed.

The third assumption proposes that how we understand the world shapes our future (Holm, 2018, p. 148). Although not every social constructivist agrees on it, some emphasise that we are not aware of the social construction of ourselves and the world around us, like the narrative construction of identity that is, unconsciously, based on social conventions (ibid.). However, when identity is,

unconsciously, constructed according to conventional patterns, it becomes nearly impossible to change. In opposite, others have suggested that by critically reflecting on language, one can change it, and thereby the world (ibid.). This argument underlines Gergen's (1999) third assumption, as different understandings of the same problem lead to widely different horizons of understanding, and so to what one can and ought to do (Holm, 2018, p. 149). In opposition to traditionalists, who would argue for the most traditional discourse, by the use of "facts", the social constructivists would argue for the premises taken for granted (ibid.).

The final assumptions argue that reflecting on our understanding of the world is vital for our future well-being (Holm, 2018). Social constructivism, therefore, serves as a basis for understanding different point-of-views, and to articulate new social realities (ibid.). For example, identity politics, especially in the USA, has been much inspired by the social constructivism, as it is greatly concerned with changing how groups are talked into being in society (ibid.). The idea is that by changing the language, we can strengthen life conditions and self-respect within a group by increasing the surrounding society's respect for them (ibid.). According to Holm (2018), this illustrates the biggest strength of social constructivist science, as it makes it critical of different ways linguistic interaction with one another creates and sustains a shared social reality (p. 150).

Social constructivism is, therefore, a product of the cultural and intellectual backcloth of postmodernism, reflecting a critical approach involving questioning and rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism, thus the existence of one absolute truth (Burr, 2003). The postmodern era is further a fundamental part of the thesis and will be elaborated in more detail in section 3.3.

In order for this thesis to work within the social constructivist paradigm, it is deemed crucial to understand the perception of reality in which knowledge is created (ontology), and further how knowledge is created within this reality (epistemology).

2.1.1 ONTOLOGY

"Knowledge is sustained by social processes" (Burr, 2003, p. 4)

From a social constructivist perspective, social interaction between individuals shapes reality. However, reality still exists even if it has not been articulated, but the reality only become valuable and meaningful to individuals when it is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). What is considered as 'real' is not based on objective identifications, but rather based on individual and

subjective opinions, which are constructed through social processes. Consequently, value is not perceived as a stable and constant construct, nor is it seen as an absolute truth separated from the human mind; value is created in the interaction between individuals. The social constructivist approach thus enables an interesting angle in order to understand the value of brand authenticity and its direct influence on brand image. Authenticity is thus perceived as a social construct generated through interaction among consumers as well as the interaction between the company and consumers. However, concepts such as brands, authenticity, image, value, etc. have, from an ontological perspective, no meaning a priori, but only exist when we acknowledge it, thus affecting how knowledge is created within this reality.

2.1.2 EPISTEMOLOGY

According to Edwards (1997), the epistemology of social constructivism rests on the notion that *"as soon as we begin to think or talk about the world, we also necessarily begin to represent..."* (p. 437). As such the social constructivist epistemological approach is perceiving all knowledge as socially constructed. The search for 'true knowledge' is not relevant for the social constructivist, who is solely perceiving the work of the researcher as determined by social factors and are instead more interested in how knowledge is constructed (Wenneberg, 2002). In that regard, researchers are interested in understanding social interactions as well as processes between individuals, in which language is a key research area (Burr, 2003). According to Gergen (1999), the language is a fundamental construct in social constructivist research as it is the interactive tool which is used to create knowledge. In other words, the world is the constant collective reproduction of reality through the language, as that is the tool which is connecting individuals (Holm, 2018).

Consequently, the research practices must take a greater interest in language and symbolic systems, since the effects and use of these are of central importance to social constructionists (Burr, 2003). Lastly, social constructivists stress the importance of processes, meaning that knowledge is not perceived as an object individual possess, but it is instead a series of social processes between individuals. Hence, knowledge is a result of the negotiations between people (Gergen, 1985).

As a result, the paper at hand conforms to the scientific philosophy of social constructivism and embraces the perception of reality as a construct based on social processes relative to culture, history, and context. Therefore, within this thesis brands and the concept of authenticity is social constructed entities, which is anything but constant over time. Moreover, access to reality for the researcher is dependent on interpretations rather than objective truths. Objectivity is perceived as

an impossibility as it is a necessity to encounter the world from some perspective, and thus the theories and hypotheses generated about the world will arise from assumptions embedded in that perspective (Burr, 2003). It is simply not possible for an individual to defy humanity, hence avoid viewing the world from a position or perspective, which is what characterises objectivity, meaning that the investigation includes subjective and theoretical bias.

Consequently, within the social constructivist paradigm, the researcher must handle the process as a co-production between the researcher and the people being researched. This co-production is particularly essential when utilising the qualitative research approach, as the participants can describe their views of reality which enables the researcher to more thoroughly understand the participants' actions (Lather, 1992). However, due to the subjective and theoretical biases within this philosophy of science, the concepts of reliability and validity, which is fundamental in positivists research, becomes inappropriate for evaluating the quality of the research from a social constructivist perspective (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). As a result, this research method is used to illustrate a phenomenon; however, it is unable to provide a window to 'the truth' (Gergen, 1985).

2.1.3 A HERMENEUTIC TOUCH

As researchers, within social constructivism, are unable to avoid viewing the world from a specific perspective or position, the thesis at hand draws links to the hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic scientific theory argues that own knowledge and experiences cannot be disregarded, as the creation of knowledge builds on the researchers' pre-understanding of the world (Holm, 2018). Therefore, the interpretations of the authenticity concept will to some extent be affected by the authors' individual experiences with the phenomenon. Current interpretations and knowledge are thus based on chains of individual experiences and perceptions from the past (Gadamer, 1999).

Interpretivists epistemologies can in one sense be characterised as hermeneutic because it emphasises that one must grasp the situation in which human action acquire meaning in order to say one has an understanding of the particular situation (Schwandt, 2000). Thus, the notion of 'a hermeneutic touch' within a social constructive study is deemed compatible as both share similar traits within the tradition of interpretivism, hence view human action as meaningful, and from an epistemological point of view, share the desire to emphasise the contribution of human subjectivity to knowledge (ibid.). Thus, within the interpretivism perspective, the researchers may have to, as a methodical requirement, "participate" in the lifeworld of others (ibid.). Hermeneutics, as the study of interpretation, is further concerned with socially defined meanings which following the hermeneutic circle looks specifically at the relation and dependency of the interpretation of individual acts in a

whole (Holm, 2018). The whole is, thus, in this context argued to be a socially constructed reality. In continuation, hermeneutics is useful given that meanings are not free-floating but instead created within social systems which are referential and dynamic (ibid). It is then up to the researcher to analyse these meanings and interpretations from, e.g. a discourse, semiotic or narrative perspective.

As a result, the conclusions of this thesis is characterised as subjective, meaning that the findings do not apply to different contexts. Moreover, it is not given that the findings can be replicated by other researchers in similar contexts, as the interpretation and the pre-understanding of the world can be different among researchers (Gadamer, 1999).

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The earlier chapter elaborated on the research philosophy in the research project at hand. The use of the theory may or may not be explicit in the design of the research, although it will usually be made explicit in presenting future findings and conclusions (Saunders et al., 2016). The chosen research philosophy, thus, raises an important question concerning the design of the research project, whether it should use the deductive approach, in which one develops a theory and hypothesis (or hypotheses) and design a research strategy to test the hypothesis. Or the inductive approach, in which data is collected, and theories are developed as a result of the data analysis (ibid.) insofar as it is useful to argue and attach the research approach to the research philosophy selected.

2.2.1 INDUCTION: BUILDING THEORY

The goal of the thesis at hand is to acquire an understanding of the nature of brand authenticity, and the underlying dimensions. This research purpose calls for an inductive approach, which bases conclusions and generalisations on empirical data (Saunders et al., 2016).

Therefore, the task is to make sense of the interview data collected. Following this, the analysing these data will result in the formulation of theory concerning the research question at hand (Saunders et al., 2016). Alternatively, the inductive reasoning may discover that there are exists competing reasons for the perception of brand authenticity that may or may not be related to the experience with the brand. Thus, the theory would follow data rather than vice versa (i.e. as with deduction) (ibid.). Historically, the deduction has its origins in research in the natural sciences (ibid.). However, the inductive approach stems from the social sciences from the 20th century, that led social science researchers to be wary of deduction. The foremost critic was that the deductive approach made cause-effect links between particular variables but neglected the understanding of

how humans interpreted their social world (ibid.). Thus, this understanding is arguably the strength of the inductive approach.

When using the inductive approach, research is likely to be particularly concerned with the context in which events were taking place (ibid.). Therefore, a smaller sample of respondents might provide more rich data on a problem. At this point, it is helpful to highlight Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2008) three reasons for using the inductive approach. First, it enables the researcher to argue for a more informed decision about the research design, which is more than just the data collection techniques and the data analysis procedures. It is the overall configuration of a piece of research involving questions about what kind of collected evidence and from where, and how such evidence is interpreted, in order to provide right answers to the initial research question. Second, it will help to think about those research strategies and choices that will work and, crucially, those that will not. For example, if one is particularly interested in understanding why something is happening, rather than being able to describe what is happening, it may be more appropriate to undertake the research inductively rather than deductively. Third, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) argue that knowledge of the different research traditions enables you to adapt the research design to cater for constraints. These may be practical, involving, say, limited access to data, or they may arise from a lack of prior knowledge of the subject. One may not be in a position to frame a hypothesis because of insufficient understanding of the topic to do this.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout history several schools of thought regarding authenticity have emerged and this topic has been the focus of studies ranging from identification of the genuineness of artwork (Trilling, 1972), to the quest for authenticity in marketing in the modern and postmodern society (Napoli et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2014). The authenticity literature in terms of marketing are mainly including *luxury wines* (Beverland, 2005b, 2006), *food* (Beer, 2008), *tourism* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999), *subcultures of consumption* (Leigh et al., 2006), *reality shows* (Rose & Wood, 2005), *advertisements* (Beverland et al., 2008), and *retro brands* (Brown et al., 2003).

Since the 1990s the concept of authenticity has evolved from museum-linked usage to a philosophical standpoint within postmodernism schemas (Yuan et al., 2014, p. 341). In a postmodern society, *"authenticity is increasingly cherished as its existence in the commercial world gradually diminishes"* (Napoli et al., 2014, p.1095). Based on the diminishing authenticity, individuals have become increasingly dissatisfied with the apparent shallowness of the material culture in a commercial society, where consumers become a pawn in a big capitalistic game. Consequently, marketing academics have increasingly noticed a demand for authenticity among consumers, as brands increasingly need to reflect the experiences, expectations and desires of the customers. Despite the increased demand and interest in authenticity the field of research still possesses vast blindspots.

The following section will seek to outline the concept of authenticity and its origin by presenting a comprehensive literature review of the field of authenticity. Moreover, the current insights within the internal and external perspective of authenticity will be elaborated and will further account for authenticity as a field of interest for this thesis. Also, the following section will establish the ground pillars in terms of how the thesis investigates the process of authenticity and how it is created, developed and maintained.

3.1 WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?

The concept of authenticity originates historically from the Latin word *'authenticus'* which can be translated in to *"worthy of acceptance, authoritative, trustworthy, not imaginary, false or imitation, conforming to an original"* (Cappannelli & Cappannelli (2004) as quoted in Beverland, 2009, p. 15). The term was traditionally used as an expression for being natural, honest, unspun, rooted and human, nowadays the general definition of authenticity is related to being *original*, *genuine*, *traditional* and *real* (Muñoz et al., 2006). Thus, authenticity is a central phenomenon in multiple

domains; however, no clear and concordant definition exist across these domains. As a result, several definitions and perceptions of authenticity exist.

3.1.1 PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AUTHENTICITY

Within the field of philosophy, the search for authenticity is related to the individual desire for a *'higher good'*. The philosopher Sartre (1992) further argue that authenticity embeds in the social environment which continuously hinders individuals from developing their real self. In this regard, Sartre (1992) proposes that *"people are authentic when they take full responsibility for their life, choices and actions"* (Guèvremont, 2015, p. 4). This line of thought is further in line with Kierkegaard (1985) which argue that in order to be an authentic self, the individual must realise the issue of self-identity, and as such attempt to live by the sense of true self. In addition, Heidegger (1996) suggests that one can be authentic or inauthentic dependent on different situations. The existential experience is thus argued to be highly dynamic and difficult to categorise or conceptualise (Frankl, 1985; Heidegger, 1996; Maslow, 1968; Sartre, 1992). However, the importance of authenticity has been questioned by the philosophers, as Baudrillard (1983) suggest that symbols of the real have replaced the real itself, hence projecting the world as a *'hyperreal copy world'*. This line of thought has clear links with postmodernism, which will be further elaborated in section 3.3.

3.1.2 SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AUTHENTICITY

The distinction between reality and subjectivity is central to the understanding of authenticity within the sociological perspective (Guèvremont, 2015). The concept of authenticity involves a complex interplay between the self, others, institutions, and cultures (Ibid.). However, the question is not whether the individual has an authentic experience or not, but rather how participants construct and experience authenticity. In this regard, Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn (2017) suggest that within sociology, a common observation stresses that authenticity is not a "real" thing or something that can be objectively determined but rather a socially constructed phenomenon, which is linked to expectations (p. 326). In a social context, studies show that authenticity and the interpersonal understanding of group members are interrelated, i.e. authenticity experiences enhance group members' understanding of each other, as well as, social experiences enhance the experienced authenticity (Guèvremont, 2015; Wang, 1999).

3.1.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AUTHENTICITY

Similar to the perspective of existential philosophy, the existential psychological perspective considers people authentic when their behaviours reflect their true self (Wood et al., 2008). In this regard, Harter (1999) suggest that authenticity is *"the ability to act in accord with one's true inner*

self" (p. 329), hence living authentically involves consistency between the physiological state, emotions, beliefs and cognitions (Wood et al., 2008). Authenticity is furthermore perceived as being rooted in subjective and internal experiences and can thus regard as the quality of perceived self-identity experienced as subjective consistency.

3.1.4 TOWARDS A GENERAL DEFINITION OF AUTHENTICITY

The word 'authenticity' refers to the qualities of *genuineness*, *truth*, and *reality* (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). The general definition of the concept is yet to be agreed upon by scholars, however terms such as; *trustworthiness* (Cappannelli & Cappannelli, 2004), *traditional* (Cohen, 1988), *uniqueness* (Lewis & Bridger, 2001), *sincereness* (Fine, 2003), *realness* (Sharpley, 2003), *honest* (Boyle, 2004), *genuineness* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), and *original* (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) are most commonly used to describe authenticity. Though, Wang's (1999) three classifications of authenticity; *objective, constructive and existential authenticity,* is among the most influential in authenticity literature. The *objective authenticity* concerns the traditional perspective of authenticity, thus determined based on the *'originality'* of objects, while *constructive authenticity* argues that authenticity achieves when objects are constructed and perceived as *'real'*.

However, Wang (1999) criticises both the objective and constructive authenticity arguing that they are not able to explain each individual's motivations and experiences. Consequently, Wang (1999) introduces existential authenticity, which is highly subjective, even more so than constructive authenticity, because it is concerned with the subjective feeling of a person, and further determined by the postmodern individual's quest for authentic and *'genuine'* experiences. As a result, there are "*many shades of grey concerning what is authentic*" (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 93), meaning that an absolute definition of authenticity is hard to specify as it is no longer perceived solely as an objectively measurable quality (Van Leeuwen, 2001). In line with this, the authors of this thesis, imply that authenticity is a socially constructed phenomenon which is inherently evaluative, making the authenticity dynamic, yet ambiguous. Thus, both creators and interpreters pertain an equally influential role in the continuous process of negotiation and reflection of authenticity (Molleda, 2010). Thus, the present thesis defines 'authenticity' as to perceive *'something'* as *'original'*, *'real'*, and *'genuine'*.

3.2 THE AUTHENTICITY CUES

In line with Wang (1999), Grayson & Martinec (2004) have identified and divided authenticity into cues, that acts as sources for the perceived authenticity. The distinction between the cues of

authenticity draws from the philosophy of Peirce (1998), who has examined the human perception with a focus on how individuals recognise *what is real* from *what is not* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Thus, they introduce indexical cues and iconic cues that provide a useful foundation for exploring and understanding how consumers evaluate indicators of authenticity (ibid.). Furthermore, the authors of this thesis introduce and discuss the cues related to Wang's (1999) existential authenticity, i.e. 'existential cues'. The section below elaborates the different authenticity cues.

3.2.1 INDEXICAL AUTHENTICITY CUES

The term *'indexical'* refers to a perceiver's experiences of physical or behavioural facts that provides a comparison to other brands (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In other words, to determine whether an object is authentic, the object has to be verified through a certification or trustworthy context in order to perceive the object as authentic thus reflecting what it really is. The indexical authenticity draws certain similarities to objective authenticity which stems from a museum-linked definition, hence determining authenticity based on traceable sources and measurable standards (Yuan et al., 2014), referring to something *"exceptional in its actuality, and valuable"* (Trilling, 1972, p. 93). The main argument brought by this view includes a dualist opinion on an object, where it can be seen as either 'authentic' or 'inauthentic'. Thus, within this line of thought, there is an absolute, universal and immutable standard that is traceable and can be applied to determine whether an object is authentic or not. As a result, authenticity is derived from an object and is seen as an inherent quality (Morhart et al., 2015; Leigh et al., 2006), hence referring to an evidence-based perception of authenticity, based on verifiable information, i.e. age, origin, performance or ingredients (Morhart et al., 2015). However, critics claim that objective authenticity has limitations. Firstly, Grayson and Martinec (2004) argue that the cognition of authenticity is far from simple in its dichotomy view. Secondly, Wiles and Stoep (2007) and Cohen (1988) have argued that the historical information inevitably has inherent biases, fake genuineness or reproductions that can considerably influence the knowledge about the past (Yuan et al., 2014). This view challenges the essential theoretical foundations of objective authenticity; the reliability and traceability of objects' origin.

3.2.2 ICONIC AUTHENTICITY CUES

The term *'iconic'* refers to objects which appears indexical authentic. In other words, iconic cues relate to the sensory experience, thus mirrors a schematic fit with a person's mental picture of how the authentic object should look like (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The individuals' sensory experiences are the factor determining whether the object is iconically authentic, meaning the perceivers have prior knowledge and expectations about the object, which they compare to their

sensed experiences, thus assessing the similarities. Hence, iconic authenticity is determined based on a personal and subjective evaluation of the object, thus drawing links to constructive authenticity.

Constructive authenticity assumes that authenticity is a personal view according to the personal profile (e.g. past experiences, life and emotion) and is a social constructive interpretation process rather than a notion that can be statically measured (Yuan et al., 2014). Wang (1999) argues that constructive authenticity is the result of social constructions, as *"things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers"* (p. 351). Therefore, the iconic cues are further argued to be socially constructed, meaning that reality is the result of different interpretations of what *'the real world'* looks like (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). That reflects the iconic authenticity as being impression-based (Morhart et al., 2015); thus, the fundamental aspect of iconic authenticity is that consumers perceive the authenticity cues as *'real'*, regardless of its potentially inherent fakeness (Beverland, 2005b).

3.2.3 EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY CUES

'Existential' authenticity cues consider authenticity to be related to the notion of 'self', meaning that authenticity is determined based on whether or not an individual is true to oneself (Wang, 1999). The existential perspective is deeply rooted in philosophical existentialism (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), and is about individual authenticity rather than authenticity of an object. It advocates the notion that the authenticity functions as a resource for consumers to become true to one's self (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, this kind of existential request is essentially an attempt to avoid losing the 'real self' in public 'role-playing' (Berger, 1973). Steiner and Reisinger (2006) consider that *"being in touch with one's inner self, knowing one's self, having a sense of one's own identity and then living in accord with one's sense of one's self is being authentic"* (p. 300). Such authenticity is activity-driven, existing as both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Hence, in the context of existential authenticity, individuals feel in touch with both a *real world* and with their *real selves*.

Sub-conclusion

Based on the above elaboration regarding indexical, iconic, and existentialist authenticity cues it becomes visible that each cue can influence the creation and perception of authenticity towards objects (Leigh et al., 2006). The indexical authenticity *"distinguishes the 'real thing' from its copies"* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 298) by utilising fact-based knowledge which can verify the connection between the brand and a reference point. The iconic authenticity, on the other hand, mirrors a

schematic fit with a person's mental picture of how the authentic object should look like (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Lastly, the existential cue refers to authenticity as a tool for individuals to reveal their true selves (Wang, 1999). As a result, the paper at hand perceives authenticity as an interplay of *indexical authenticity* (objective facts), *iconic authenticity* (subjective and constructive associations), and *existential authenticity* (existential motives). Hence, authenticity emerges either through objective facts, subjective associations or whether the individuals perceive an object to be true toward itself.

3.3 POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is a philosophical movement which was established as a direct response to modernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Thus, it is a shift from understanding the individual as a knowing or a cognitive subject and the external world as rational, to understand the individual as a communicative subject and the external world as a symbolic system (Venkatesh, 1992). The central characteristics of the modernist narrative refer to a period where the power of reason drove both society and the individual. As a result, marketing practice was based on knowledge and became the consummate instrument in creating the ethos of consumption and speaking to the rational mind (ibid). In contrast, postmodernism challenges the modernist perception of rationality, objective truths and homogeneous markets (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002). Even though Habermas (1981) argue that there is no direct implication that the paradigm of modernism has ended nor is coming to an end, there are still some anomalies which suggest that the assumptions and conditions under modernity need to be considered. Postmodernism represents a realisation that no single truth exists, but multiple realities should be accounted for. Individuals are, therefore, subject to historical and cultural processes that cannot be explained by reason alone (Venkatesh, 1992). Central to postmodernism are ideas of culture, narratives, symbolic modes, aesthetics, expressions and meanings, where symbolic production and consumption are the major areas of community participation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As a result, postmodernism perceives knowledge and reality as socially constructed phenomena through discourses and language, thus considering reality a construction (Goulding, 2003). Moreover, scepticism towards objective truth is a common trait of postmodernists, who instead embrace diversity (Thompson, 1993) and ambiguity (Stern, 1994).

Consequently, the elaborated notions of postmodernism show strong similarities to social constructivism, which is the adopted scientific position of this thesis. The following section will continue by outlining the consequences postmodernism have had on consumption as well as brand management.

3.3.1 POSTMODERN CONSUMERS

The emergence of the postmodern paradigm has brought new consumer behaviours which is crucial to grasp to understand the motivations of postmodern consumption thoroughly. In this regard, Firat & Venkatesh (1995) state that *"the world of consumption is changing dramatically and new possibilities are emerging that did not exist before"* (p. 239). More specifically Cova (1996b) suggest that the *"postmodern individual lives through consumption"* (p. 496), hence indicating that postmodern consumers have a desire to construct identity and create meaning. In contrast to modernity, identities are no longer a unified structure but is replaced by endless choice, where individuals are left with finding meaning in life (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Consequently, identity is now a commodity, i.e. something people desire but are unsure of and are constantly seeking to develop. This notion is in line with Østergaard & Jantzen (2000), who identified the consumers' desire to use consumption as a way of creating meaning in life based on emotions and symbolic associations attached to the goods. In this regard, Cova (1996a) further suggest that the postmodern consumer *"no longer merely consume products. They also - or even instead - consume the symbolic meaning of those products: the image"* (p.17). The consumption goods should emanate authenticity and social consciousness as consumers seek meaning in order to achieve an identity; hence the product itself becomes a bi-product (Jensen, 1999). In continuation, postmodern consumers are no longer homogeneous, rational and predictable entities which can be divided into customer segments. They are individualists and consume with the heart and rationalise with their brain after the purchase (Buhl, 2005).

Additionally, postmodernists perceive consumption as a value producing activity, meaning the distinction between consumer and producer is almost non-existing. The postmodern view on consumption aligns with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) notion of 'value co-creation' and Toffler's (1980) idea of *'prosumption'* describing consumers as being part of the value production. Consequently, postmodern consumption defines as an ongoing sociocultural process where consumers constantly seek to construct and reproduce their identities, meanings and self-images (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002). In order to identify the postmodern consumers, Firat & Venkatesh (1995) have established three characteristics of postmodernism's influence on marketing and branding; *hyperreality*, *fragmentation,* and *decentering*. These characteristics will be elaborated in order to gain a fundamental understanding of the postmodern consumer and the consumption patterns.

3.3.1.1 Hyperreality

In a postmodern context, *hyperreality* refers to an inability to distinguish reality from the simulation of reality. In other words, the lines between the real and simulated reality are systematically blurred and are more often than not blended. Cova (1996a) suggests that *"there is a tendency and willingness on the part of postmodern consumers to prefer the hype or the simulation to the 'real' itself"* (p.17). According to Arnould & Price (2000), the brands confront consumers through commercial media with illusive images which efface the distinction between reality and the simulation, as consumers realise, construct, and live the simulation in a continuous play (Baudrillard 1983). When a community adopts these simulations, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community. Therefore, reality and real experiences do not exist according to the postmodern perspective as every social act is being produced and reproduced in an ongoing process, meaning that all acts are an inverted representation of itself (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Also, consumers are becoming more sceptical towards the performed marketing communication (Molleda, 2010), as it undermines the ability to determine the difference between what is genuine and what is not.

Consequently, postmodern consumers are questioning the realness and authentic essence of a marketing message instead of merely accepting the information as true, thus challenging the actors to be more transparent. As a result, the notion of hyperreality is showing clear and distinctive links to authenticity as the established and created simulations can become authentic to a degree they may be perceived as real (Baudrillard, 1983). More specifically, the constructed representation of an authentic experience in a given situation is of higher importance than the real experience; hence the postmodern paradigm is in favour of the constructive authenticity as well as existential authenticity compared to the objective authenticity (Wang 1999).

3.3.1.2 Fragmentation

The second condition of postmodernism is the notion of *fragmentation*, which builds upon the fact that individuals are freed from the constraints of collective ideals, meaning that individuals take personal action in order to express an identity and show the difference (Cova, 1996a). In this regard, Firat & Venkatesh (1995) characterises fragmentation as splitting up a single unified reality into multiple realities, meaning that the society is no longer a joined unit with shared ideals, lifestyle and objective values, but is instead split into multiple subjective individuals with own representations of self and identities. Hence, consumers develop an identity which is not consistent and reflect

fragmented images, meaning that the function of a product is perceived differently for each individual (Elliot, 1994).

However, Cova (1996a) have identified a paradox characterising the postmodern consumers, as consumers desire to individualise but simultaneously seek a sense of belonging. Thus, this search for individualisation has led to a de-differentiation rather than a differentiation, as identities are based on self-exhibition within a social community (Arnould, E. J., & Price, 2000; Giddens, 1991). As such, postmodernism has initiated a reverse movement where tribalism and a need for a social link becomes a factor in the desperate search for individual identity through consumption (Cova, 1996a; Mccracken, 1986). Postmodernism has thus divided the society into smaller social groups or tribes who develop their own complexes of meaning and symbols (Cova, 1996a). Moreover, *"...postmodern individual[s] belongs to several tribes, in each of which he might play a different role and wear a specific mask"* (Cova, 1996a, p. 19) which indicate that postmodern consumers can have multiple identities within each social tribe.

Additionally, the fragmentation caused by postmodernism has led to an empowerment of consumers due to the rise of the internet and social media (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Consumers now have a voice and can share opinions with their peers which is influencing the image and meaning of a product or a brand. Consequently, this presents a problem for companies, as brands are interpreted differently by consumers, which is making it difficult for marketers to create coherent values between the consumer and the company.

3.3.1.3 Decentering

The last condition of postmodernism is the notion of *decentering*, which builds upon the fact that postmodern consumers are freed from commitment and rationality which characterised as modernistic (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Postmodern consumers choose products and brands based on emotional and subjective actions rather than logic and reasoning, thus characterising improbable and unpredictable behaviours (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As logic and rationality have diminished, the consumption depends on the individual's perception of an object (the consumed product), which is influenced by the individual's evaluation of the experience and the symbolism around the object (ibid). Moreover, consumption is utilised as a tool to construct self-identity, by absorbing the values and meanings inherent in the brands the consumers consume. This argument aligns with the theory of possessions and extended self, presented by Belk (1988), stating that *"possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities"* (p. 139). Brands and products thus constitute a

reflection of identity, through its constructed values and perceptions, which certain consumers can either identify with or wish to achieve in order to fit into the desired micro-group. This train of thought is further accepted by Napoli et al. (2014) stating that *"postmodern consumers use brands to create an authentic self and to reconnect to place, time, culture and others"* thus indicating that goods become a means of expressing identities among individuals and groups. As a result, the postmodern consumers primarily consume the symbolic meaning of a product (the image) rather than the product itself (Cova, 1996b). Thus, the subjective evaluations of the brand can be challenging for managers as consumers often alter, divert and twist the meaning in order to reflect their own self-image and thus might not interpret the brand as intended (Cova, 1996b). In this regard, consumers are within postmodernism often seen as an active participant in the creation and construction of brand meaning (Toffler, 1980).

According to Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) consumers *"are no longer simply targets of one-directional brand communication but active participants in brand discourse and co-creators of brand meaning"*, meaning that the balance of power between producer and consumer has changed. As a result, under postmodernity, the value of brands to consumers moves from being utilitarian to self-authentication, thus becoming extensions of the desired self. Therefore, this power shift has major implications for how brands are managed in the postmodern era, which will be elaborated in the following section.

3.3.2 POSTMODERN BRANDING

In order to comply with the desires and demands of the postmodern consumers, new brand management approaches have been required, as consumers wish to be more involved and participatory, rather than operand receivers of messages. Cova (1996a) state that postmodern consumers *"want to become part of processes and experience immersion in thematic settings rather than merely encounter finished products and images"* (p. 18). The new brand management paradigm thus has to include the consumer as a producer of experiences and value creation. In this regard, Merz, He & Vargo (2009) introduced a timeline of four brand eras based on the evolving brand logic describing how the understanding of brands and how value creation has developed over time.

3.3.2.1 From an inside-out to an outside-in perspective

In the first brand era, conceptualizes brands as operand resources, meaning brands worked as a tool for consumers to differentiate and recognize products on sight (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). This conceptualization is in line with Kotler's (2001) definition of a brand as: *"A name, term, sign, symbol*

or design or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services" (p. 188). Goods were branded to potential consumers through one-way communication, meaning consumers remained passive in the value creation process. Consequently, practitioners of traditional brand management perceived the minds of individual consumers as blank slates which can be moulded by external stimuli (Mitchell, 2012). A brand was thus traditionally perceived as an asset owned and controlled by the organization, who wished to communicate a coherent brand identity which is accepted by the consumers (Keller, 1993).

Around the 1990s the focus of branding switched from an inside-out perspective focusing on brand image as primary driver of value to an outside-in perspective focusing on consumers as an actor in the brand value creation process (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). In other words, consumers became a vital part of the creation of brand meaning and brand image. Therefore, the new brand era challenged the traditional understanding of brand management by stating that managers have the ability to communicate brand signals and identity, although, consumers will simultaneously create their own brand meanings (ibid). This has in reality always been the case, however, the rise of the internet, and hence the dynamics of social media have, empowered consumers as information today is not only shared through a top-down flow, but it can be distributed through bottom-up processes and peer-to-peer communications. In addition, consumers have, due to the internet and social media, easy access to information about the brand from multiple perspectives, which can affect their individual opinion and perception of the brand. As a result, the subjective perceptions and attitudes towards a brand is no longer limited to the individual, but can now be shared among consumers, thus jointly constructing a brand image which might be different than originally intended by the organization (Kornum et al., 2017). This might serve as a potential threat for brand managers as the brand interactions between consumers may cause different perception of the brand than originally intended.

3.3.2.2 Towards the co-creation of brands

Based on the above development, the brand management approaches of the postmodern era understand that brand value as created in a co-creational process between consumers and producers (Cova & Paranque, 2012). In this regard, the relational brand paradigm has been presented by Louro & Cunha (2001), which conceptualise brand management as "*an ongoing dynamic process, without a clear beginning and ending, in which brand value and meaning is co-created through interlocking behaviours, collaboration and competition between organizations and consumers*" (p. 865).

Brand management is thus within the relational paradigm enacted through 1) the specification of an intended brand identity reflecting the organisational values; 2) a projection through brand touchpoints and marketing programs; 3) a dynamic (re)construction and co-development of brand meaning from a consumer perspective; 4) internal re-evaluation of the reflected brand image developed by the consumers (Louro & Cunha, 2001). One fundamental theory within the relational paradigm is Hatch & Schultz's (2008) organisational identity dynamics model, arguing that brand identity and meaning need to be theorised concerning both culture and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). According to their theory, brand identity and meaning is developed through dynamic interactions between the organisational culture (internal perspective) and the external image of a brand (external perspective). The model consists of four processes: 1) the internal cultural values are expressed via brand claims to the stakeholders; 2) these brand claims leaves impressions on the consumers, creating images of the brand; 3) the brand images are mirrored in the intended brand in order to conform with the consumer perspective; 4) as the brand is embedded in cultural understandings, the brand meaning and identity will simultaneously be adjusted in order to reflect the cultural values. Such reflection is thus in line with the brand personality approach, which introduces a strong emotional bond between the brand and the consumer, based on consumers' use of the brand personality for the inward construction and outward expression of self (Heding et al., 2008). In other words, it is a dialectical process involving multiple entities who jointly co-construct brand value and meaning (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000).

The consequences of a dialectical process involving multiple entities are that marketers lose a significant amount of control over the brand. In this regard, the current literature suggests that in order to succeed in the postmodern relational brand paradigm, brands need to give up control (Cova & Paranque, 2012; Fournier & Avery, 2011). Postmodern branding is thus involving elements such as *trust*, *authenticity* and *openness* in the empowerment of consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). One way of doing so is to invite consumers and other externals stakeholders to co-create, which is what Fournier & Avery (2011) refer to as *open source branding*. Brand communities is a fundamental part of the concept of open source branding for its ability to connect multiple consumers and enable many-to-many communication (ibid). In this regard, a brand community defines as *"a group of ardent consumers organised around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand"* thus cater to the postmodern consumers' paradoxical need for belonging. Brand managers are further able to listen into the conversations within the brand communities, thus learn how the brand is reflected and perceived by the external stakeholders. Consequently, *"a strong brand community increases customer loyalty, lowers marketing costs, authenticates brand meanings, and yields an influx of ideas to grow the business"* (Fournier & Lee, 2009, p. 111).

In order to understand brand meaning from a postmodern perspective, researchers thus focus on consumers' perceptions and co-construction of brands. In order to do so, postmodernists propose qualitative methods as a primary source as such data provides holistic and comprehensive insights of the individual consumer's thoughts, attitudes and behaviours (Hanby, 1999). The paper at hand has thus adopted the qualitative methods in order to investigate the nature of brand authenticity in a postmodern context. The methodological choices will be further elaborated in section 4.1.

3.4 BRAND AUTHENTICITY

For the last couple of years, research and investigations regarding the concept of authenticity have evolved within marketing research literature in order to understand its signification. As such, authenticity has come to be perceived as an attribute of an object (Beverland, 2006), which has been investigated within multiple field areas and contexts of branding, such as; *luxury wines* (Beverland, 2005b, 2006), *food* (Beer, 2008), *tourism* (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999), *subcultures of consumption* (Leigh et al., 2006), *reality shows* (Rose & Wood, 2005), *advertisements* (Beverland et al., 2008), and *retro brands* (Brown et al., 2003), all indicating that authentic brands are perceived based on specific cues related to their *'originality'*, *'realness'*, and *'genuineness'*.

The reason for the increased awareness and interest in brand authenticity is argued to be, due, to the postmodern consumers' higher demand for authentic experiences (Beverland, 2005b). Gilmore & Pine (2007) further substantiate this line of thought by arguing that in the postmodern era, consumers are more inclined to seek out authentic objects or brands and value the perception of brand authenticity higher than the availability, cost or quality of the brand during their decision process. As a result, being perceived as authentic is argued to be essential in order to drive postmodern customers and grow successful businesses (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). More specifically, the increased demand for authentic brands, products and experiences arose as a consequence of the modern market context which was characterised by homogenization and standardisation. Leigh et al. (2006) further argue that consumers are in demand for authenticity in order to cope with the inauthentic nature of contemporary life. Modernity has brought a loss of meaning in commercial motives, thus driving consumers to seek authenticity in themselves and their activities (Cohen, 1988). Consequently, traditional marketing communication is under threat to fail if the expressed brand, which is built and communicated internally by the company, is revealed as fabricated in the consumers' perception (Beverland, 2009).

3.4.1 THE DEFINITION OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY

Within the field of brand authenticity, various disciplines have been studied, leading to a multitude of conceptualisations, thus resulting in the lack of a coherent definition or perception of the phenomenon. Also, brand authenticity shows signs of being a socially constructed phenomenon. In this regard, Waitt (2000) suggest that:

> *"…authenticity is not an absolute to be received, but rather a social construction to be negotiated. Post-structuralist readings redefine authenticity in existential or self-oriented terms, rather than by measurement against some stable autonomous reality." (p. 846)*

Consequently, due to the lack of a coherent definition of brand authenticity, the concept cannot be objectively measured based on sable autonomous reality (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Moreover, brand authenticity is perceived as a dynamic and fluid construct which can change over time through social negotiations between the internal organisation, external consumers and other stakeholders (Leigh et al., 2006; Beverland, 2005a). In other words, both creators and interpreters each have an equally significant impact on the negotiation of brand authenticity (Molleda, 2010).

However, it is proposed that the creation of brand authenticity perceptions can be understood based on the three previous mentioned authenticity perspectives; *objectivist*, *constructivist* and *existentialist* (Guèvremont, 2015). The indexical cues refer to brand authenticity seen from an objectivist perspective, hence focusing on verifiable characteristics of a brand (MacCannell, 1973; Trilling, 1972; Wang, 1999), such as labels of origin, performance, ingredients, and age. Contrary, the constructivist perspective sees brand authenticity as a perceived projection of the individuals' beliefs and expectations (Wang, 1999; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Consequently, considering a brand as authentic if it can position itself as such in the minds of the consumers. Lastly, from an existentialist perspective, being an authentic brand means being true to one's self (Beverland & Farelly, 2010). Existentialist authenticity thus refers to brands as a tool for consumers in order to be able to reveal their true selves or feel like being true to themselves through the consumption of the brand, hence becoming an identity-related source.

Although different perspectives of brand authenticity exist, they all share the same premise, that a brand has to be intrinsically driven and passionate about the brand, rather than being extrinsically motivated and solely strive for profits (Moulard et al., 2014). In this connection, Beverland et al. (2008) refer to this as 'moral authenticity' which *"comes from the sense that a passionate creator is*

involved in making products, and is motivated primarily by their love of craft, rather than the possibility of financial reward" (Beverland et al., 2008, p. 11).

Besides the notion of brand authenticity itself, brand authenticity literature refers to several dimensions in order to describe what stimulates authentic brands. A handful of the most recent dimensions, which current brand authenticity literature is based on, will be discussed in the next section in order to understand how brand authenticity is conceptualised in more detail.

3.4.2 BRAND AUTHENTICITY DIMENSIONS

As mentioned in the above sections the three authenticity cues suggest that the objectivistic, constructive and existential perspectives are central to the creation of authenticity perceptions. However, the key dimensions of what constitutes an authentic brand remain to be addressed. Throughout the marketing literature, several dimensions of authenticity have been identified in various brand-related contexts. In this regard, Beverland (2005b, 2006) have investigated brand authenticity, in the context of luxury wines, and presented six authenticity dimensions; *heritage, consistency, quality, place, production,* and *downplaying commercial motives*. Contrary, Napoli et al. (2014) have attempted to extend the understanding of brand authenticity to a broader perspective by investigating how to measure the phenomenon fundamentally. Their findings demonstrate that dimensions such as *commitment*, *sincerity,* and *heritage* corresponded with a higher order of brand authenticity among the consumers (Napoli et al., 2014). However, recently Morhart et al. (2015) have built upon the works of Napoli et al. (2014) developing a framework for perceived brand authenticity. This framework has addressed several limitations noted by Napoli et al. (2014), thus *"involving a wide range of product and service brands and examines scale performance in different cultural contexts"* (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 211).

3.4.2.1 Perceived brand authenticity framework

As a starting point, the perceived brand authenticity framework of Morhart et al. (2015) sees authenticity as a consumer-related construct, which in its essence is based on identity-related consumption. Morhart et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation brand authenticity are, furthermore, based on the three previously elaborated brand authenticity cues, hence the indexical, the iconic, and the existentialist cue. Based on fourteen consumer interviews, the Morhart et al., (2015) initially examined the dimensionality and structure of consumers' brand authenticity perception. This examination was done by asking what an authentic brand was to them and facilitating the articulation of unconscious meanings by stimulating the interviewees with logos, images, and

objects (ibid.). This data was interpreted in light of existing theory and yielded four brand authenticity dimensions: *continuity, credibility, integrity,* and *symbolism*.

Continuity refers to a brand's timelessness, historicity, and its ability to survive trends. This dimension has conceptual similarities to brand heritage (Merchant & Rose, 2013; Urde et al., 2007; Wiedmann et al., 2011) as both refer not only to brand's history and stability over time but also the likelihood that it will persist into the future (Morhart et al., 2015).

A high level of *credibility* relates to consumers' associations of authentic brands, as a brand's willingness and ability to deliver on their promises, but it also entails a brands transparency and honesty toward the consumer (ibid.). This dimension is similar to Boyle's (2004) honesty element of authenticity. It also refers to brand trustworthiness, which literature describes as a component of brand credibility that relates to consumers' perception of a firm's willingness to honour its premises (Erdem & Swait (2004) in Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202). It further shows similarities with the sincerity dimension of brand personality (Aaker, 1997), which inherent traits such as honesty and genuineness.

Integrity is based in the goodness of a brand's intentions, and in the value, it communicates. According to Morhart et al. (2015) brands that held integrity acts according to deeply held values, passion, and loyalty, that acts correctly and ethically. Therefore, the integrity dimension signifies the moral purity and responsibility of the brand, that yields an adherence to ethical values and genuine care about the consumer (ibid.). This dimension is similar to commercial disinterestedness of authentic brands, as put forward by Holt (2002): *"To be authentic, brands must be without an instrumental economic agenda, and be disseminated by people who are intrinsically motivated by deeply held values"* (Holt, 2002 in Morhart et al., 2015, p. 203).

Lastly, *symbolism* describes authentic brands that reflect values that they consider essential and may thus help construct who they are (Morhart et al., 2015). Considering this, symbolism becomes part of the consumers which could be defined as an identity construction. Thus, symbolism becomes a brand's potential to serve as a resource for this identity construction by providing self-referential cues representing values, roles, and relationships. Therefore, symbolism reflects the symbolic quality of the brand that consumers can use to define who they are. This dimension is similar to Beverland & Farrelly's (2010) connection benefit of authentic brands and identity-related brand attachment (Park et al., 2010), although the latter denotes consumers' actual use of brand authenticity, rather than the potential of a brand to serve as a symbolic resource.

However, the perceived authenticity framework, developed by Morhart et al. (2015), is based solely of the outside-in perspective, thus having a sole focus on the consumer perception of brand authenticity. Based on the previous elaborated literature regarding postmodernism, the creation of meaning is regarded as a dynamic process, hence including the interaction between multiple stakeholders, which their study disregards. Although the dimensions were established based on fourteen interviews, the measurement of their impact was quantitative, meaning it was not completely based on the social interactions between individuals, thus illustrating a different ontology and epistemology than presented in this present thesis. However, the findings still provide useful knowledge regarding the dimensions that act as drivers of brand authenticity perception from an external perspective.

3.4.2.2 Brand authenticity dimensions within young brands

Most studies of brand authenticity dimensions have previously been investigated on older and more traditional brands (Beverland 2006; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Thus, these studies on the authenticity dimensions are limited by not including younger brands or start-up brands. Thus, the thesis presents a case study of brand authenticity from the perspective of a young brand. Guèvremont (2018) have in a recent study initiated the first research trying to investigate this very phenomenon in the context of a young brand. Similar, to the work of Morhart et al. (2015), the conceptualisation of brand authenticity by Guèvremont (2018) is also based on the three previously elaborated authenticity cues. However, a very central distinction between the two pieces of research, aside from the focus on young versus old brands, is that Guèvremont (2018) take a holistic view, thus investigating the external interpretation of authenticity from a consumer perspective, as well as the internal construction of authenticity by the brand. From her research, three dimensions emerge as the most central: *transparency, virtuousness,* and *proximity* (Guèvremont, 2018).

Transparency refers to a brand which makes decisions and takes actions based on emotional and instinctive factors, thus following the heart instead of the brain. Brand transparency is further characterised as being open, spontaneous and being able to share emotions, imperfections and mistakes to the external environment (Guèvremont, 2018). If consumers interpret a brand as being transparent, it is suggested to positively influence the perception of brand authenticity, by having nothing to hide from the external environment.

Virtuousness refer to the brand having moral and ethical principles and are striving and able to live up to these values regularly. This dimension is in line with Beverland's (2009) general idea of authentic brands stating that *"leaders that walk the walk as well as talk the talk lead authentic brands"* (p. 172). Furthermore, Beverland & Farrelly (2010) have found a link between virtuousness and authenticity suggesting that staying true to one's morals and being intrinsically motivated by deeply held values are influencing the perceived authenticity. In other words, a brand achieves virtuousness if the business is conducted for the right reasons and the management is willing and committed to pursuing their inner passion, and not solely motivated by profits and the quest for success (Guèvremont, 2018).

Lastly, *proximity* refers to the brand's ability to be accessible and close to the consumers, meaning that showing genuine care by creating familiarity and intimacy within the brand community is believed to be central in consumers' assessment of brand authenticity (ibid). Proximity can be developed by communicating with the consumers as an equal in a way the consumers do not feel they communicate to a corporate brand but rather share a personal bond to a person behind the brand.

The dimensions found in her study show certain similarities to the works of Morhart et al. (2015); however, some new dimensions such as transparency and proximity have emerged (Guèvremont, 2018). Throughout the present thesis, we wish to use these dimensions as a reference point in the discussion of our findings, in order to get a holistic view of authenticity and understand whether we have contributed to new and improved brand authenticity dimensions.

3.5 INTERRELATION BETWEEN POSTMODERNISM AND BRAND AUTHENTICITY

In this section, the interrelation between the postmodern era and the rise of authenticity within branding will be discussed. In section 3.3.1, three postmodern characteristics were elaborated in terms of the influence on marketing and branding; *hyperreality, fragmentation* and *decenteredness*. According to Holt (2002), these conditions have resulted in a shortage of authenticity in the lives of the consumers, which according to Beverland & Farrelly (2010) have caused a loss of meaning and fragmentation of self-identity. As such, authenticity in brands has become an important influence and a tool for consumers to create self-identity. Therefore, consumers actively search for and appreciate the authenticity in brands, as it enables them to reflect their own identities through their consumption (Leigh et al., 2006). The identity developed through the consumption of brands is thus

providing the consumers with an opportunity to achieve a sense of belonging, differentiation, individualisation (Arnould & Price, 2000). Given the consumers' desire and demand for authenticity, brands seek to accommodate this by achieving authenticity (Beverland et al., 2008). However, neither of the studies presented by Morhart et al. (2015) and Guèvremont (2018) account for the interrelationship between the postmodern identity creation and brand authenticity, meaning their authenticity dimensions are not build upon this notion. Within their studies, the authors merely identify subjects and themes used in order to describe an authentic brand. As a result, the influence of postmodernity and the stakeholders' desire and search for their true self lacks in their study of brand authenticity, thus becoming a new and interesting perspective to study in order to gain a more thorough understanding of brand authenticity.

In this regard, authenticity often becomes a commercial asset, hence functioning as a competitive advantage and a positioning tool aiming to generate brand trust among the consumers (Beverland et al., 2008). On the contrary, Holt (2002) suggest that using authenticity as a commercial asset can have multiple consequences, as it risks to delude and overly manipulate true authenticity to an extent which makes it challenging for the organisations to fulfil the demand from the consumers (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Postmodernism has further caused the consumers to develop a certain scepticism towards marketing communications, thus indicating that consumers are more critical and can see through inauthentic communication (Beverland et al., 2008).

3.5.1 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AS A POSTMODERN PARADOX

In continuation of the above section, a paradox occurs when advertising in order to state the authenticity of a brand, as marketing in its core definition is the diametrically opposite of authenticity. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007), anything that an organisation offer cannot be authentic as it is argued to be *"artificial and utterly fake, being man-made, mechanical, and monetary"* (p.88). On the other hand, Beverland et al. (2008) suggest that advertising activities influence and reinforce authenticity image, where advertising function as an illusion of the reality referring to a consumption situation. In line with this, Beverland (2018) argue that brand authenticity comes with a paradox that everything made by humans is inherently fake, but at the same time, everything that is human-made is essentially authentic. This idea feeds into hyperreality which is one of the characteristics of postmodernism, stating that simulations of reality can be perceived as more authentic than the real reality (Cova, 1996b). According to Cova (1996b) postmodern consumers in most situations prefer hyperreality over their own reality, meaning that although consumers are sceptic and aware that advertising is a simulation and not real, the advertising (simulation) is often

perceived as authentic and even more real than reality itself, due to the postmodern desire for the hyperreal.

3.5.2 EMPOWERMENT OF THE CONSUMERS

Postmodernism has further empowered consumers in the construction of brand meaning (Toffler, 1980). As a result, consumers have become active participators in the value and meaning creation rather than merely targets of one-directional brand communication, meaning that subjective opinions are dominant which have led the notion of homogeneous markets to fade (Holt, 2002). Consumers thus demand brands, which are able to deliver individual and social value (ibid), meaning that the consumers search for specific cues in the communication which can ensure that the brand reflects the desired moral and individual values of the consumer (Beverland et al., 2008). This is further in line with the existential authenticity cues hence advocates to the notion that authenticity functions as a resource for individuals to become true to one's self (Wang, 1999) by enabling the individuals to reflect their desired self-identity in the brand. It is thus suggested that in terms of the postmodern era, the existential authenticity have a higher importance in the individuals' determination and perception of authenticity.

Moreover, the indexical authenticity cue, related to physical facts in order to perceive an object as authentic, seem to have less importance within postmodernity. Consequently, brand managers have lost control of the postmodern consumers, leading organisations to avoid consumer scepticism by establishing new methods in order to convince the consumers that the offerings fulfil their need for identity construction. In this regard, Holt (2002) states that the symbolism in brands enables the consumers to express individual values and identities, which is a theory that feeds into Firat & Venkatesh's (1995) perception of consumers being loyal to the images and symbols of brands rather than the brands itself. This is furthermore related to *decenteredness*, which is one of the elaborated characteristics of postmodernism, stating that consumers attach meanings to brand objects through the use of symbols. Consequently, postmodern consumers cannot be expected to accept the frames set internally by the organisation only, therefore the organisation needs to rely on consumers as co-creators of authentic brand meanings.

In order to comply with the above statements regarding the postmodern consumers and the understanding of brand authenticity, the thesis at hand seek to utilise a holistic approach, thus investigating brand authenticity from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. As a result, the thesis will seek to understand authenticity based on an internal as well as an external perspective.

METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

In the initial chapter of this thesis, the research onion was introduced, and the outer two layers elaborated: research philosophy and research approach. This chapter has the goal of uncovering the next layers, focusing on the research design, i.e. methodological choices, research strategy, time horizon, data collection, and data analysis (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 162). Following this, the practical issues bound to the research design, in terms of the ethical and quality issues will further be discussed.

The thesis at hand seek to understand the nature of brand authenticity and further determine its main dimensions in terms of the SOUNDBOKS brand. The phenomenon of brand authenticity has previously been studied by several scholars; however, mainly from an outside-in perspective (Guèvremont, 2018; Morhart et al., 2015). This study, thus, wishes to accommodate to this research gap, by investigating the nature of brand authenticity from a multiple-stakeholder perspective. Consequently, this study will contribute to brand authenticity theory by introducing the combination of internal data and external data in order to understand the dynamics between these two entities in terms of brand authenticity. In order to be able to answer the given research question of this thesis, the data insights will be retrieved through semi-structured qualitative interviews and a netnographic analysis consisting of both internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS. The data retrieved will thus be used in an inductive thematic analysis in order to shed light upon the stakeholders' understandings of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity.

4.1 METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE: MULTI-METHOD QUALITATIVE STUDY

The thesis at hand seek to study how the nature of authenticity can be understood from a postmodern perspective in order to identify the main drivers for brand authenticity. In order to answer this research, question a qualitative and inductive research design will be utilised, which is further substantiated by a social constructionist stance (Saunders et al., 2016). The choice of qualitative research is grounded in its ability to analyse and study the individual in order to gain an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon by the examination of how social worlds are experienced and interpreted by the participants who are part of it (Flick et al., 2004). In the context of answering the research question, this method will provide an understanding of the individual stakeholder's perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity. In addition, the chosen research philosophy of this thesis, hence social constructivism, is further associated with interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 168), meaning that a naturalistic research setting is needed in order to gain

access to meanings and an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (ibid.). Consequently, qualitative research is argued to be highly appropriate, as it studies respondents' perceptions and the relationship between them.

While utilising the inductive approach, the theories and knowledge will be derived based on the collected data from qualitative research. In addition, the use of exploratory techniques will be utilised in order to seize potential findings related to the *'how'* and *'which'* of the research question. The exploratory approach is further utilised as it is argued to be useful in order to clarify the understanding of a phenomenon, which is the case for the given research question (Saunders et al., 2016). Consequently, this approach provides the researcher with flexibility and grounds for interpretation about how the internal and external stakeholders perceive the nature of brand authenticity in case of the SOUNDBOKS brand (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Consequently, this research does not seek to confirm current theories, but rather focus on generating knowledge and insights, by initially being broad and becoming progressively narrower as the research progress (Saunders et al., 2016).

In order to be able to answer the research question at hand, the insights will be retrieved through multiple sources of qualitative data, i.e. semi-structured interviews of internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS and a netnographic study of brand-generated and consumer-generated social media posts, with the purpose of enlarging the focus on the phenomenon under study (Flick, 2014). This combination of multiple qualitative research methods is chosen in order to understand the stakeholders' cognitive and affective perceptions about the authenticity of SOUNDBOKS through the interviews and further gain insights into the behavioural acts of the stakeholders on the Facebook community through the netnographic data. None of these qualitative approaches seek standardised results, but rather seek to gain insights and a deep understanding of the subjective perception regarding a subject. In its essence, the use of these qualitative methods, therefore, focus on the systematic collection, organisation, and interpretation of data derived from observations and conversations about SOUNDBOKS as a brand (Flick et al., 2004). Moreover, the researcher functions as an interpreter who investigates social constructions of reality from the respondents' point of view (ibid.). In that context, the case study of SOUNDBOKS serves as a basis for understanding the phenomenon of brand authenticity from a young brand perspective (Kvale, 2007; Flick et al., 2004). Thus, the data retrieved from the interviews and the netnography will be used in an inductive thematic analysis to shed light upon the stakeholders' individual understandings of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity.

4.1.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The interviews are performed in a semi-structured manner as it allows the researcher to take the exploratory approach in order to gain insights into the respondents' perceptions. Moreover, the semi-structured interview approach is considered appropriate when operating with small sample sizes, which arguably is the case for the thesis at hand (Laforest, 2009). During semi-structured interviews, the researcher is able to ask follow-up questions in order to explore interesting subjects which might appear during the interviews, and thus gain more in-depth knowledge into the respondents ascribed perception of a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, the researcher is allowed to revise questions in order to establish a fluent conversation, thus act spontaneously, should an interesting topic emerge. This provides the researcher with a sense of control and thus ensure the respondents stay on topic, and the conversation does not drift in the wrong direction (Ibid.). Lastly, during semi-structured interviews, the researcher is able to ask more comprehensive questions compared to a standardised questionnaire, meaning the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the respondent's perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity compared to the quantitative method. Consequently, the insights gathered from the semi-structured interviews cannot be provided through quantitative approaches, which is why the qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate in order to answer the research question.

4.1.1.1 Visual stimuli using photo elicitation

During the semi-structured interviews, the respondents were presented with visual stimuli in the form of social media posts, posted by SOUNDBOKS within the last 12 months, in order to evoke more accurate responses. This is in line with the method called *'photo elicitation'*, which utilise visual images to elicit comments. According to Harper (2002), the use of images evokes deeper elements of human consciousness than words do. Thus, the use of photo elicitation in interviews, arguably, not only elicits more information but instead evokes a different kind of information inaccessible beforehand. Most elicitation studies use photographs, but is, essentially, suitable with any visual image (e.g. posts on social media, videos, and advertising posters) (Harper, 2002). In line with this, video elicitation, (e.g. film, video, television broadcast), compared to still photos, is a wayward medium, challenging for the researcher to control (Harper, 2002). Consequently, only still images containing text and photos are considered for the interviews.

4.1.2 NETNOGRAPHY

The netnographic approach is chosen as an addition to the semi-structured interviews in order to understand the behaviour of the stakeholders involved in the SOUNDBOKS brand. This approach is

useful for identifying symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns specific to online consumer groups. Netnography is a relatively new qualitative research method which adapts to the ethnographic research techniques emerging through online communications (Kozinets, 2002). Consequently, this marketing research approach uses the information publicly available on digital forums in order to gain thorough knowledge about the perceptions of relevant online stakeholder groups through online content (ibid).

In the context of the empirical case, SOUNDBOKS' online platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) meets the requirements advocated by Kozinets (2010) for conducting a netnographic study: 1) relevance to the research question, 2) high level of activity/interactivity within the community, and 3) an abundance of descriptively rich data. Additionally, the netnographic approach enables the researcher to study and observe individuals in a manner that is entirely unobtrusive and in a context that is not fabricated (ibid). This approach thus provides the thesis with a window into the naturally occurring behaviours of SOUNDBOKS' stakeholders. Given the naturalistic and unobtrusive benefits of the netnographic approach, the thesis at hand can gain access to and understand the online social situation of the internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS. Regarding the collection of netnographic data, dual visions encompassing both consumer-created and brand-created content was applied in order to answer the research question. Thus, posts were screened in relation to its relevance for the subject of brand authenticity, and whether it could be retained for analysis.

This thesis, thus, utilise multiple sources of qualitative data, i.e. semi-structured interviews and netnography, which according to Flick (2004) enlarges the focus on the phenomenon under study. However, one main issue of the qualitative methodology is to transform complex social situations into text through transcriptions and writing (Kvale, 2007), where interpretation and subjectivity integrated into the process (Malterud, 2001). Thus, the limitations of qualitative research will be elaborated further in the following section.

4.1.3 LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research and interview studies are argued to provide valuable benefits to this research; however, this approach also shows several disadvantages which should be taken into consideration. Qualitative research involves the active participation of the researcher, which includes the researcher's social worlds (Flick, 2009; Kvale, 2007). Consequently, qualitative researchers are implicated by their scientific position, background, preconceived knowledge, choice of methods, and framing of findings which all influence the research design and the knowledge produced (Malterud,

2001; Daymond & Holloway, 2011). However, this entails one major limitation of qualitative research, as the validity of the findings is highly implicated by the subjectivity of the researchers, which affect the ability to replicate and generalise findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Consequently, the researcher should account for the bias regarding the researcher's prejudice and pre-knowledge during the whole process of the qualitative study, due to the risk of influencing the interpretation of data and the results (Bailey, 1994). Additionally, the semi-structured interview approach cannot allow for standardised questions, meaning that the data generated is not generalizable, as the answers are subjective to the individual respondent. Therefore, the goal of using qualitative research in this thesis is concerned with subjective descriptions and notions to a specific context, rather than producing universal facts (Malterud, 2001). Hence, qualitative research is criticised for the reflection of common sense rather than science (Kvale, 2007).

In addition, the netnographic approach further show limitations which must be accounted for. Given the narrow focus on online communities and the lack of informant identifiers, the netnographic approach relies on the researcher's interpretive abilities, which leads to difficulty in generalising the results to groups outside the online sample (Kozinets, 2002). Consequently, even though relevance and validity are generally considered essential standards in science, reflexivity is deemed as an equally important measure in qualitative research, both in terms of interviews and netnography. To be reflexive, the researchers must apply strategies for:

> *"…questioning findings and interpretations, thinking about the effect of context and bias, without believing that knowledge is untouched by the human mind; and displaying and discussing the processes of analysis instead of believing that manuals grant trustworthiness" (Malterud, 2001, p. 483).*

However, in respect of the inductive approach, the present thesis, acknowledges the position of the researchers as prejudiced observers that unavoidably influence data, findings, and conclusions, that by nature are subjective and interpretative, yet implicated by contemporary theory. Therefore, a strong commitment to reflexivity in the proposed findings is, therefore, imperative to ensure quality and transparency in the research. As two researchers do the research, it is, additionally, acknowledge as a strength as it ensures dual positions in the interpretation and contemplation of the data.

4.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY: CASE STUDY RESEARCH

In order to investigate the research question of this thesis the case study approach has been utilised as it enables the authors to understand the nature of brand authenticity from a postmodern

perspective, while simultaneously identifying the main drivers/dimensions of brand authenticity in the context of the SOUNDBOKS brand.

According to Yin (2015), the case study is used as an in-depth investigation into a phenomenon within a real-life setting. Moreover, the case study is described, as being relevant when researchers seek to explain the "how" and "why" in terms of more complex social phenomena. In order to do so, the case study has the ability to provide in-depth knowledge about individuals, groups, and organisations. The case study methodology is a common addition to the qualitative research approach (Bryman and Bell, 2015), and is respected as an efficient method of studying real-world situations in its unique ability to manage diverse data such as observations and interviews (Yin, 2015). However, according to Stake (2005), the case study should not be perceived as an individual methodology, but rather a research focus. Consequently, the applied methodology within the present thesis is linked to the employed philosophy of science, hence social constructivism. As this thesis desire to understand the nature of authenticity from a postmodern perspective and further unveil the central dimensions and practices used in order to create authentic brands, the case study approach is deemed suitable for the purpose of understanding of this social phenomenon.

The case study methodology further distinguishes between two research design types; single-case and multiple-case (Yin, 2015). Accordingly, the single-case design is preferred when the purpose of the study is to critically test a significant theory, from an interesting and relevant perspective. In this regard, the SOUNDBOKS case is argued to be interesting as it is perceived to be a relatively young brand which has achieved the success which the postmodern era. Being a 'young brand' is interesting as the current literature mainly are taking a point of departure in more mature brands when studying brand authenticity. As the purpose of the present thesis is twofold, thus desire to understand the nature of brand authenticity from a postmodern perspective, as well as learn about the underlying dimensions influencing the development of brand authenticity, the single case design is further argued to be most applicable. The authors of this thesis thus wish to relate critically to the chosen theory elaborated in the theoretical framework section, in which the single case design can contribute to theory building by confirming, challenging or extending the current theory (ibid.).

In addition, Stake (2005) presents the 'instrumental case study', which define the case as a secondary and supportive mechanism in the study of a theoretical research question. The thesis at hand will adapt to this line of thought, thus resulting in an approach characterised as an instrumental single-case study where SOUNDBOKS is the case, which enables the authors to link and merge empirical findings with the theoretical research question. As a result, the SOUNDBOKS case is

considered as a useful tool in order to clarify the academic subject, and further answer the research question. However, one challenge within the case study approach is to fully present all relevant perspectives relevant to the investigated phenomenon and case in a fair and balanced manner (Yin, 2015). When the researcher of a case is unable to encounter the phenomenon being researched with own eyes, the case data rely on experiences and statements of others, thus resulting in the thesis being dependent on a subjective interpretation of data (Stake, 2005). The aforementioned hermeneutic heritage, in which the researcher possesses, thus potentially influence the interactions once employed in the analysis, as the data used and mentioned is chosen based on the authors' subjective selection of data, meaning that no objective picture of reality is possible, which is in line with the scientific position of the social constructivist paradigm. As such, the researcher must handle the process as a co-production between the researcher and the people being researched, meaning that it is unable to provide an objective statement of the absolute 'truth', but merely a subjective account of reality (Gergen, 1985).

One of the primary critiques of the single case study is, similar to the overall qualitative approach, its inability to produce scientific generalisation due to a focus on a specific case. In continuation, Stake (2005) further adds to this critique by stating that the main challenge for single case studies is the small sample size which makes it difficult to represent the entire population. However, the specific aim of a case study is not to provide generalisations; it is instead seeking to refine a current theory or to suggest complexities for future research (Stake, 2005). As a result, the findings of this thesis will be grounded in the theoretical framework rather than a generalisation in a broad context.

4.3 TIME HORIZON

Following the choice of research strategy and research methodology, one must consider the time framework for the intended finish of the study (Saunders et al., 2016). In line with this, the time horizon is the overall time framework for the project, determined by the research question. Thus, Saunders et al. (2016) specify two types of time frameworks within the research onion: the cross-sectional and the longitudinal. The cross-sectional time horizon is concerned with a 'snapshot' in time collection, where data is collected at a certain point (ibid.). On the other hand, the longitudinal time horizon is concerned with repeatedly data collection over an extended period, which is also referred to as the "diary" perspective (ibid.). As the longitudinal time horizon is most suitable for examining change over time, is has the benefit of studying change and development, as well as it gives some control over data over the variables being studied (ibid.). However, for the present study, the cross-sectional horizon will be utilised, as it is constrained in time, suitable for examining a

specific phenomenon (ibid), which in this case is the perceived brand authenticity among multiple stakeholders. Thus, this is reflected in the research design as interviews are conducted over a short period. This will further function as a limitation of the study, as the results only provide a snapshot of the subject, and do not account for changes over time.

4.4 DATA COLLECTION

In this section, the method for collecting the data and choosing the participating interview respondents accounting for the primary data will be elaborated. In order to answer the presented research question, the case study methodology has been applied. As such, the thesis at hand seeks to acquire a thorough understanding of the SOUNDBOKS brand and the nature of brand authenticity seen from both an internal and external stakeholder perspective. According to Saunders et al. (2016), the recommended number of respondents is determined by continuing collecting qualitative data until data saturation is reached, hence, until additional data provide little, if any, new information. Moreover, Saunders et al. (2016) present a rule of thumb, arguing for at minimum sampling size for semi-structured/in-depth interviews around 5-25 respondents. Consequently, this thesis consists of seven internal interviews including SOUNDBOKS founders and employees, which serve the purpose of reflecting the internal stakeholder perspective of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity. In addition, six external interviews have been conducted based on a selection of SOUNDBOKS users in order to understand brand authenticity from an external stakeholder perspective. The selection of respondents is, as previously stated, not based on a desire to make generalised assumptions but rather wish to gain an in-depth understanding of these 13 respondents and their perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity.

The external respondents have been selected based on the non-probability method, where respondents are preferred based on explicit requirements or geographic availability (MacNealy, 1999). In addition to the non-probability method, two underlying sampling methods are argued to be of particular interest for the present thesis; *volunteer* and *purposeful* sampling (Saunders et al., 2016). In terms of *volunteer* sampling, the selection of external respondents is built upon voluntary inquiries collected from the online SOUNDBOKS community (Harboe, 2011). As such, the researchers of this thesis posted a post on the SOUNDBOKS Facebook community asking the members whether they would like to participate in a qualitative interview (see appendix 1). In this regard, 12 inquiries were received from individuals interested in participating in an interview; however, the majority was from Copenhagen. This could potentially bias the overall outcome of the study as it would not include perceptions of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity from consumers

outside of the capital city of Denmark. In order to accommodate this potential bias, the respondents were sorted and selected based on the *purposeful* sampling method. Purposive sampling is defined as the '*judgemental sampling that involves the conscious selection by the researcher of certain subjects or elements to include in the study*' (Higginbottom & Awoko, 2004, p. 11). This sampling method is often utilised when operating with case studies with small samples sizes (Neuman, 2005). The heterogeneous purpose sample was thus performed in order to choose participants located in different regions of Denmark, hence provide variation in the data collected and acquire external perceptions from consumers inside as well as outside the capital region. Moreover, for the purpose of gaining an understanding of the external perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity the respondents were explicitly required to own a SOUNDBOKS product. This is argued to be a fundamental criterion to understand the customers' motivation for buying into the SOUNDBOKS brand. Consequently, based on the purposive sampling method, six respondents were selected out of the 12 inquiries based on their ownership of a SOUNDBOKS product as well as their geographical location.

The internal respondents were selected and invited by the CBO, Hjalte, in accommodation with the researchers. The selection of internal interviews was further determined based on the *purposeful* sampling method as well. In order to, understand the internal perception of SOUNDBOK S' brand authenticity across organisational hierarchy levels, the respondents were selected based on their designation of occupation. Consequently, the study will be able to separate brand authenticity from a founder perspective as well as an employee perspective, and thus determine whether the perception is aligned internally. As such, two founders, two executives and three employees is accounting for the internal perspective of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity.

The internal interviews were conducted face-to-face in the meeting-rooms in SOUNDBOKS' office, which ensured a relaxed atmosphere, as the participants were in a comfortable environment which enables them to speak more freely (Saunders et al., 2016). On the other hand, the external interviews were conducted by telephone, which compared to face-to-face, may have influenced the interaction between the researcher and the respondents. However, according to Saunders et al. (2016), the information gathered by telephone interviews is relatively comparable to the face-to-face interviews, as the approach of questioning is quite similar. Additionally, all external interviews were conducted in Danish, as it is their native language, and further in order to make them feel comfortable and enable them to respond without the barrier of a foreign language. The majority of the internal interviews was further conducted in Danish; however, two respondents did not speak Danish, one was an American and the other German, meaning these interviews were conducted in English.

Before the interview process, two interview-guides was produced; one for the internal respondents and one for the external (see appendix 2). The interview guide was produced with the purpose of answering the research question and was further based on the information gathered from the literature review. The main focus was to illuminate the perceptions of SOUNDBOKS in terms of the brand authenticity, and further how the individual stakeholders make sense of authenticity, in order to gain a deeper understanding about the nature of brand authenticity.

The internal interviews were limited to 30 minutes due to the busy schedule of the employees and founders of SOUNDBOKS, whereas, the external interviews lasted around 1 hour each. The shorter amount of time for the internal stakeholders is not perceived to influence the results, as the respondents, given their expertise was able to answer the questions more quickly and to the point, compared to the external stakeholders who needed more time to understand the questions thoroughly.

All 13 interviews were fully transcribed, thus providing the thematic analysis with more manageable data, which made it easier to code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, Braun & Clark (2006) argue that transcriptions do not need to be highly detailed when operating with a thematic analysis as the analysis is focussing on what is said rather than how it is expressed. The transcriptions were further done in the language the interview was conducted in, in order to ensure that no data was lost in translation. The full transcriptions can be found in appendix 3 and 4.

The data for the netnographic analysis were collected from the online SOUNDBOKS community established on Facebook and furthermore their social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The research question and available resources have guided the choices of which data to include and pursue. As a result, the conversations between the internal and external respondents has been argued to be of interest in order to establish the relationship between these in terms of creating brand authenticity (Kozinets, 2002). The researchers have thus scattered the online community and social media platforms for posts and comments within the 12 months. The selection of data used in this analysis is thus chosen based on the researchers' subjective evaluation of the content, which potentially risks of influencing the results of this analysis.

In table 1.1 and table 1.2 the selected respondents constituting the primary data of this thesis is visualised.

INTERNAL RESPONDENTS:

Respondent	Age	Title	Origin	Employment	Usage of SOUNDBOKS
Hans	26 years old	Chief People Officer	Virum, Denmark	4,5 years	Use it occasionally - not the typical user
Hjalte	23 years old	Founder & Chief Brand Officer	Virum, Denmark	From start	Use it for everything - the typical user
Jesper	23 years old	Founder & Chief Executive Officer	Virum, Denmark	From start	Does not own a SOUNDBOKS
Josh	36 years old	Chief Marketing Officer	Santa Clara, California, USA	4 months	Use it around the house
Christian	27 years old	Consumer Insights Lead	Copenhagen, Denmark	3 years	Use it at home - not the typical user
Niels	29 years old	Community Coordinator	Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany	2 years	Use it inside at winter and outside in the summer
René	28 years old	Communications Lead	Odense, Denmark	1,5 years	Own one - but not the typical user

Table 1.1: Internal respondents

EXTERNAL RESPONDENTS:

Respondent	Age	Occupation	Origin	Own a SOUNDBOKS
Benjamin	15 years old	Student, Primary school	Greve, Denmark	2 weeks
Mads K	18 years old	Student, High school	Skanderborg, Denmark	1 year
Mads L	22 years old	Student, College	Holte, Denmark	1 year
Marcus	27 years old	Work in digital banking	Gentofte, Denmark	1,5 year
Mikkel	25 years old	Consultant	Frederikssund, Denmark	1,5 year
Oliver	18 years old	Carpenter	Frederikshavn, Denmark	1 year

Table 1.2: External respondents

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the internal interviews, external interviews, and from the netnographic study, were used as raw data for a thematic analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The thematic content analysis is selected as it enables the processing of raw data into knowledge and insights, through systematically clustering themes in the text through coding (Krippendorff, 1980). In this regard, the analysis will according to Krippendorff (1980) provide a *"(…) process of identification and representation of patterns that are noteworthy (…) or descriptive [of a phenomenon]"* (p. 55). The thematic analysis is applicable in both inductive and deductive research settings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). However, when applying the thematic analysis with an inductive coding approach, the emphasis is to gain an understanding of particular instances, whereas the research afterwards combines them and put them into context in order to build an understanding of a larger whole (ibid.) Following this, Elo & Kyngäs (2008) argue that in order to shed light upon a knowledge gap or fragmented knowledge found in current literature, an inductive approach to a thematic analysis is recommended. Thus, the thesis at hand, chose to apply inductive thematic analyses in three

independent silos, i.e. 1) internal stakeholder interviews, 2) external stakeholder interviews, and 3) the netnographic study. This enables the utilisation of the exploratory approach through three 'channels', where findings are based on empirical interpretation rather than based on existing theories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Thus, the use of the social constructionist view in an inductive thematic coding setting, however, implies that the proposed meaning of the raw data and coding is based on the researcher's own interpretation.

In the coding stage, the focus is about emphasising the raw data from the transcripts (i.e. from the interviews) and the chosen social media posts (i.e. from the netnographic study) into a set of themes, that act as clusters of information, wherefrom the researchers can make sense of. This enables the researchers to identify meaningful data and set a stage to interpret the data in a new way (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, as argued by Braun & Clarke (2006) qualitative analysis guidelines are merely rules, but rather basic precepts that need to be applied flexibly to fit the research questions and data. However, the thematic analysis provides a process of the identifying patterns or themes that are relevant or interesting, usable to address the research interests at hand. Thus, Braun & Clarke (2006) have comprised a six-phase guide which is used as a framework for conducting the thematic analysis (table 2). Thus, these phases of thematic analysis applied in the thesis at hand and argued for in the following section.

Step 1: Become familiar with the data
Step 2: Generate initial codes
Step 3: Search for themes
Step 4: Review themes
Step 5: Define themes
Step 6: Write-up

Table 2: Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis

4.5.1 THE PROCESS OF DOING THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Step 1: Becoming familiar with the data. The first step of the analysis was to read and re-read the raw data in order to become familiar with the body of the compound data, i.e. all interviews and netnographic material, in relation to the purpose of the study. Thus, the transcripts of the raw data and the selected social media posts were read through several times by both researchers, in order to become immersed in the collected data. That follows the argument of Elo & Kyngäs (2008) stating

that no insights can be developed throughout the coding process and analysis if the researcher is not completely familiar with the data.

Step 2: Generation of initial codes. In this phase, the researchers started organising the data in a meaningful and systematic way, in regard to the research question at hand. Each interview was coded by *open coding*, meaning that were no pre-set codes prior to the semi-structured interviews and the netnographic study, but rather codes were developed and modified as working through the coding process. However, initial ideas about the codes unavoidably appeared during the transcribing of data and, hereof, discussions between the researchers. For example, initial codes such as *'durability', 'loudness',* and *'portability'*, which were discussed in several interviews, appeared as preliminary ideas about what could be coded. Thus, the coding was done interview-by-interview, where transcripts were worked through generating new codes and sometimes modifying codes. This was done by the use of the qualitative data analysis software 'NVivo'.

Step 3-6: Searching for, reviewing, defining, and writing-up themes. Following the steps above, the themes were captured and organised by its interpreted significance or interest in relation to the research question. In this case, codes were examined in relation to how each fitted together into an organised theme. Thus, the themes were predominately exploratory, i.e. exploring patterns in the data that were deemed relevant to the nature of brand authenticity. Although, some themes appeared more strongly related to the research question at hand. The codes were thus reviewed and collected into organising themes (i.e. sub-themes) in order to more thoroughly analyse and understand the overall global themes. Thus, each theme was reviewed, modified and developed by examining each code in relation to how and whether it supported the theme at hand. Also, each organising theme were reviewed in relation to whether it was supported by single or multiple empirical cues. Organising themes that were supported by data from multiple interviews were prioritised as stronger. Following the example above, codes related to *'durability', 'loudness', and 'portability'*, were organised under the organising theme of *'product superiority'*. Thus, the final refinement of the organising themes was in relation to identifying the essence of the global themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92), e.g. 'product superiority' were organised under the global theme of 'brand excellence'. Following this, the interrelationship between each organised theme was discussed and related to the research question at hand. Thus, each organised theme was supported by appropriate citations or screenshots (i.e. in the netnographic study) supporting each theme and sub-theme.

Consequently, the open coded thematic analyses support the inductive approach, thus enabling the researcher to provide an in-depth understanding of the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions.

5.6 ETHICS

In order to secure the ethics of the research, the researchers have carefully considered how to gain access to SOUNDBOKS and its stakeholders, thus, to be on the forefront of possible ethical concerns that could arise throughout the study. Thus, the coordination of the research has been conducted in close dialogue with the case company, in order to secure the confidentiality, sensitivity and source anonymity, of the information gathered, as well as offering value, in respect of the case company. This has been discussed with the case company and agreed under a "non-disclosure agreement" signed by both the researchers and the case company. Following this, all internal and external respondents have agreed to volunteer and have given acceptance for being recorded during the interviews. Additionally, all external respondents has been provided with fake names, in order to secure the privacy of the participants.

Regarding access to internet-mediated sources, the researchers have considered a variety of issues in terms of securing data quality and ethical standards, when collecting online data. Online communities generate a large amount of qualitative material (through, e.g. images, posts, likes, and comments), which all are accessible for any member of the community (Saunders et al., 2016). However, in order to gain access to this community, the authors had to gain access as community members – un-regarding a true interest in the main purpose of the online community. Thus, this is subject to critical ethical issues, as the members are unaware of them being studied by the researcher, even though the data is publicly accessible. However, in respect of the privacy of the members of the community, all names, profile photos, and other indications of the identity of the members are anonymised before analysing and presenting data.

5.7 ESTABLISHING THE QUALITY OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the fact that measurements of validity and reliability are mainly appropriate to assess quantitative studies based on positivist assumptions, the authors seek credibility through other criteria more appropriate to qualitative research based on interpretivism assumptions, where reality is regarded as being socially constructed and multifaceted (Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, the quality of data in the present thesis is assessed based on the qualitative criteria; *trustworthiness*, *credibility*, *dependability*, *transferability*, and *confirmability* presented by Lincoln & Guba (1985),

whereas trustworthiness is considered being the main criteria of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2016). In line with this, the researchers have done several actions in order to secure the quality of the research. Firstly, when planning the research and developing the interview guide, feedback and sparring have been provided from an external academic partner, i.e. the supervisor of the thesis. Secondly, interviews have been recorded and transcripts have been checked with written notes from both researchers in order to ensure that no data has been lost in the transcription process. Lastly, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the coding process and the thematic analyses, the transcripts are included in the appendices in its native language. Thus, only the selected citations used in the analysis have been translated into English. Consequently, the reader is able to adhere to the authentic expression of each citation in the appendices (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In addition, in order to further secure transferability, the selection process and criteria for the respondents have been described in order to gain a foundation from where others can conduct a similar selection process. In this regard, Elo & Kyngäs (2008) argue for the researcher to be thorough in the descriptions of the data collection and the analysis process in order to increase the credibility of the study. Therefore, the authors of this thesis have attempted to create a detailed description of the collection and analysis of the data throughout the methodology chapter. Moreover, the reader will have access to the interview guide and transcripts of interviews (see appendices 2-4). Consequently, the process from raw data to codes and themes has been described. Emphasis on enhancing credibility is also visible in regards to the amounts of interviews conducted. 13 interviews have been conducted in order to ensure multiple perspectives from actors in the stakeholder ecosystem (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Additionally, all interviews have been conducted with the same semi-structured interview-guide for each stakeholder group.

Despite all these efforts of enhancing the trustworthiness of the study, it is critical to highlight that the present thesis is depended on the researchers' understanding of the collected data and the analysis thereof. Thus, a certain level of subjectivity must be accepted in order to be able to answer the research question at hand. In line with this, the use of social constructivism argues that knowledge is constructed through interpretation, interaction, and understanding (Saunders et al., 2016). Thus, the research design emphasises interaction and dialogue as a prerequisite for generating knowledge in order to understand the nature of brand authenticity. Consequently, the semi-structured interviews and netnographic analysis were conducted in order to gain in-depth understandings of the respondents' social worlds.

ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

As described in the methodology section, the analysis is based on a qualitative study, consisting of semi-structured interviews with the internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS. Moreover, the analysis consists of a netnographic study on the social media platforms of the SOUNDBOKS brand. Consequently, the analysis of this thesis will thus examine the collected data from internal and external stakeholders as well as the netnographic investigation in order to understand brand authenticity from each stakeholders' perspective. Initially, the analysis will seek to clarify the internal perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity based on patterns discovered within the internal data which will explain the dimensions of brand authenticity seen from an internal perspective. Next, the analysis will seek to clarify the external perception of SOUNDBOKS' brand authenticity based on patterns in the external data, which has been coded in order to understand the essential dimensions for perceiving the SOUNDBOKS brand as authentic. Finally, the analysis carries out a netnographic investigation, which seeks to clarify the actual communicative behaviour of SOUNDBOKS as well as the response of the consumers, in order to understand whether the stakeholders' perception resembles the actual behaviour. Jointly, the outcome of these analyses will provide this thesis with insights into how to understand the nature of brand authenticity, as well as identify the main dimensions of brand authenticity in the case of SOUNDBOKS.

5.1 INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

In the initial phase of this analysis, it is sought to understand the perception of the SOUNDBOKS brand and its prerequisite in terms of being perceived as an authentic brand from an internal point of view. In the following, various themes have been identified based on the interest of how SOUNDBOKS is perceived as an authentic brand. In this regard, the internal respondents have been asked to describe and define how they subjectively perceive the brand in order to understand the dimensions which are perceived to be the main drivers for authenticity from an internal stakeholder perspective.

5.1.1 GLOBAL THEME 1: LIFESTYLE BRAND

Another interesting global theme which emerged from the internal data was centred around the brand being perceived as a lifestyle. This theme arose primarily among the founders and executives of the company, which all referred to the aspiration of being perceived as a lifestyle brand. This global theme is composed based on both explicit and implicit indications linking to the brand to a specific lifestyle. First of all, Josh, the CMO, suggest that the SOUNDBOKS brand wish to solidify

themselves as a lifestyle brand, but they are still in the process of defining the specifics of that lifestyle.

> *Josh*: *"Last year it was decided to really solidify our self as a lifestyle brand, you have to establish what that lifestyle is, what is it that we are selling just beyond the product?" (Interview 4; l. 49-50)*

The first organising theme which is explored in this section is the 'Built for personal use' describing why and how the brand was incepted, and the origin of the brand mantra. The second organising theme, *'Brand mantra'*, is concerning the respondents' notions on the guideline for the desired lifestyle. Thirdly, the respondents continuously mention and relate to the *'ambassadors'*, which is functioning as the living example or the actors of the lifestyle. Finally, the fourth organising theme regarding *'community'* explores the community and its influence on the consumers in order to adapt to the lifestyle.

5.1.1.1 Organised theme 1.1: Built for personal use

Firstly, one of the respondents, Jesper (CEO), highlighted that the SOUNDBOKS brand has progressed through several iterations, and the construction of the first product was long before the official birth of the brand, hence dating back to Roskilde Festival in 2011. The product was initially a project meant for personal use, rather than a commercialised purpose, meaning that the original motivation for building the product was to create a cool "camp" environment for Roskilde Festival.

> *Jesper: "... if you look at why we chose to build the speaker ourselves, then it was probably because we wanted to throw some better parties, get more girls and be more social in general. It is further linked with my own motivation. When I was in 7-8 grade I played World of Warcraft 4-5 hours a day, but I did not want to do that anymore. So the importance of being social has probably always been there" (Interview 3; l. 98-102)*

Based on the statements made by Jesper, the product was built based on a personal desire to become more social and improve their camp in order to host bigger and better parties to attract many different people. This feeds into the authenticity of the brand, given Holt's (2002) statement, in which he argues that authentic brands need leaders who are intrinsically motivated by deeply held values and desires. Jesper explains that his motivation for creating the product was in order to become more social than he was before, thus becoming a more desired version of himself, and shy away from being a person playing computer 4-5 hours a day. In addition, it was not before 2014; the founders identified a demand for the product which they initially built for personal use only, and thus

decided to develop the first product with a commercialized purpose. According to Jesper, this was marked as the birth of the original brand, SOUNDBOKS.

> **Jesper**: "At one point I spoke more specifically about it with [Christoffer] Nyvold and we started to build speakers together as our [festival] camps merged. So we started talking about making it a business in 2014, and there were some friends who asked if we couldn't build a speaker for them, then we put our built speakers up on the DBA [Den blå avis] and then it took off from there." (Interview 3; l. 48-51)

The SOUNDBOKS brand is thus perceived to be motivated by the personal need of the founders and was initially a home project with close friends building products in their parents' garage for their own amusement. This provides the brand with a certain integrity, as the founders can reflect themselves and their personal desired values in the brand, which is found to be linked to authenticity by Morhart et al., (2015). Furthermore, the product was used in order to become the desired self, hence becoming more socially inclined and able to host better and bigger parties. This is further linked to existential authenticity where individuals reflect their desired self-identity in the brand (Wang, 1999). The citations above illustrate that SOUNDBOKS was initially started based on their own need for a festival-speaker with a lack of commercial interests.

5.1.1.2 Organised theme 1.2: Brand mantra

The lifestyle SOUNDBOKS wish to display is according to the internal respondents rooted and linked to the brand mantra; "*Break Through the Noise*", which is built upon three layers of values; 'breaking physical barriers', 'breaking social barriers' and 'breaking mental barriers'. 'The physical barriers' are claimed to be regarding the products functional values complimenting the SOUNDBOKS lifestyle.

> **René:** "... we break physical barriers with the product, it plays louder, it is more durable, it can last longer. You break physical barriers which allows you to do crazier things" (Interview 7; l. 128-130)

The brand thus physically enables the user to do more crazy and extreme things, for example, enables the user to throw a party on top of a mountain, which is part of the lifestyle. Moreover, in terms of 'the social barriers', several of the internal respondents express a fondness and a proudness for SOUNDBOKS' being '*social* and *inclusive*' (Interview 4; l. 166-168). According to the internal stakeholders, 'breaking social barriers', involves deeply held values linked to the previously stated personal motivation of the founders, desiring to become more social. Consequently, this social value feeds into the general approach of SOUNDBOKS, where the idea is to enable the users to become more social and inclusive themselves. Moreover, breaking down 'social barriers' is

revealed as an aspirational value with links to social discourses providing the SOUNDBOKS brand with more depth:

Hjalte; "Social barriers are the norms and rules in society and among our friends that make us unable to let go and do what we want" (Interview 2; l. 60-61)

Josh: "Social barriers. What are these social rules that hold people back? Or why is it only cool kids that can go to this party, why don't you just throw a random party on the canal on a Tuesday? You should be able to do that, and a SOUNDBOKS allows you to do that, and we want to be able to promote that sort of positive partying atmosphere." (Interview 4; l. 109-112)

Hjalte and Josh thus express that SOUNDBOKS is partaking a social responsibility in terms of enabling consumers to break these social barriers and unwritten rules with the SOUNDBOKS brand. Consequently, SOUNDBOKS becomes the symbol of breaking social barriers, and is suggested to serve as a resource of identity construction by providing self-referential cues (Morhart et al., 2015). This relation to the individuals' selves is, furthermore, stated by the CEO as the core of the SOUNDBOKS brand (Interview 3; l. 80). In line with the purpose of breaking social barriers the internal respondents are highlighting the inclusiveness of the brand, thus characterising SOUNDBOKS as a welcoming and open brand.

Josh: "...we welcome all people. We are for all people. I think we are very open about who we are, and we do not tolerate, certain things, we do not tolerate people who are not inclusive and welcoming. I love that about us, I love that we are open to talk about that" (Interview 4; l. 266-268)

The open and inclusive nature are thus expressed as a fundamental part of whom the internal stakeholders perceive themselves and the SOUNDBOKS brand to be. The openness is further argued to be fundamental in postmodern branding, which provides the brand with an ability to become authentic (Fournier & Avery, 2011). The final value, 'breaking mental barriers', is deeply connected to the philosophical tradition of existentialism, where Kierkegaard (1985) argue that in order to be an authentic self, the individual must realise the issues of self-identity, and as such attempt to live in accordance with the sense of true self.

Hjalte: "The mental barriers are our own journey, our own barriers to living freely (...) inspire us to tackle the things that hold us back by saying; I dare not, I should not, I cannot" (Interview 2; l. 59-61; 148-149)

Breaking the mental barriers are thus argued to be linked with existential authenticity, aspiring the user to be their true and authentic self, and not be restrained through the socially constructed norms

(Wang, 1999). Consequently, SOUNDBOKS is expressed, from an internal stakeholder perspective, as a brand which is striving to break physical, social and mental barriers through an inclusive and welcoming mindset with a focus on getting out of one's comfort zone. This is further stated as being the mantra of the lifestyle which the internal stakeholders wish to be associated with.

5.1.1.3 Organised theme 1.3: Ambassadors

The ambassadors were a topic that often arose in many of the internal interviews, and especially among the founders of the company. Moreover, one person, in particular, is often mentioned in this context which is a guy called Max:

> *Josh: "...his name is Max, and we are working with influencers and ambassadors, who sort of live an embody this uninhibited lifestyle. Max is all about breaking your comfort zone, it's about meeting new people and having a good time with strangers. Everyone is invited, whether you are 8 or 80." (Interview 4; l. 145-148)*

The respondents are all referring to Max as a mirrored image of what SOUNDBOKS is standing for, and whom they wish to become. Ambassadors, such as Max, is used in order to explain the lifestyle by showing exactly how it is meant to be lived out, thus constructing a simulation, or in this case 'lifestyle', in close collaboration with their ambassadors. The SOUNDBOKS brand is thus constructing a simulated reality together with Max, in order to communicate the purpose of the lifestyle to the consumers. Obviously, all users are not able to become just like Max, but he functions as an aspiration or a desired identity which the users wish to become through the consumption of the brand. The use of aspirational ambassadors thus effaces the distinction between reality and simulation thus adapting to the hyperreality of the postmodern society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). This particular ambassador is thus living the lifestyle and is performing the values stated by the SOUNDBOKS brand in the real world. Their ambassadors are moreover described as 'the aspirational hero' in relation to the brand:

> *Hjalte: "... that is definitely 'the aspirational hero' and Max is probably closest to it. It's this ultra-outgoing, super positive, insanely energetic, proactive individual that gives a lot to a group of. He is not afraid to be a fool in front of others in order to create an awesome atmosphere." (Interview 2; l. 171-174)*

In other words, the ambassadors are described as having the same mindset and share the same values as SOUNDBOKS, hence these social and inclusive behaviours, linking to the lifestyle which the brand wishes to be associated with.

In order to acquire new ambassadors, the brand has a rigorous application policy in order to make sure that the ambassadors are aware of the purpose and values and are able to live out this desired lifestyle of the SOUNDBOKS brand. The ambassadors are thus trained opinion leaders, which are reflecting the desired lifestyle onto the brand through their actual behaviour.

> *Nils: "You have to apply in order to become an ambassador of SOUNDBOKS. The ambassadors are our brand, so we need to educate them in the way we want to be perceived." (Interview 6; l. 170-171)*

Consequently, the ambassadors are the public image of the SOUNDBOKS brand, performing and living the purposes of the brand in order to visualise the emotional values and meaning behind the product.

5.1.1.4 Organised theme 1.4: Community

In addition to the brand mantra and the ambassadors mentioned above, the internal respondents further describe the community as an asset to the brand. The community is thus perceived to be an added value beyond the physical aspects of the brand. In this regard, René, the 'Communications Lead', is emphasising the community as a fundamental part of SOUNDBOKS and their success.

> *René: "... the value that comes from having a strong cultural platform, including an added value in the culture and lifestyle around it, is what enable us to keep a high price point in the future. I would say that the speaker costs $500, and the ticket into this community and lifestyle costs $400, which is why we can justify that speakers cost $900." (Interview 7; l. 110-114)*

The ability to build a community is thus perceived to have a positive impact on the possibilities of authenticating the desired lifestyle, as the community consist of individuals sharing common interests or ideologies, thus establishing the foundation for creating a movement. This means that the simulation (lifestyle), initially created by the founders and the ambassadors, are more easily adopted by a community where members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation and thereby creating a social reality of the community (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In this regard, Hjalte explains the vision behind the community.

> *Hjalte: "It's a community-brand. It is a folky brand in many ways (…) all members have that in common that it is people who live life to the fullest, in their own way." (Interview 2; l. 180-182)*

Consequently, SOUNDBOKS wish to implement the mantra mentioned above into the community, in order to authenticate the lifestyle in the eyes of the consumers. The community members are thus

perceived to strive for the mantra of the brand, hence moving past being a merely a physical product, into the world of becoming a lifestyle brand.

Nils, who is the community coordinator of SOUNDBOKS, further expresses a need to nurture and maintain the community in order for it to function correctly. In this regard, SOUNDBOKS has hired community managers for the purpose of supporting and communicating with the consumers in a more personal matter. The community managers are thus able to be proactive and listen in to the conversations on the community in order to understand each stakeholders' needs and concerns. This ability to listen to the external consumers is arguably essential in terms of postmodern branding where consumers have been empowered in the meaning creation (Toffler, 1980). In this context, Nils mentioned a trend in the community where the members started customizing their products, providing SOUNDBOKS with the opportunity to cater to that need.

> **Nils:** *"I actually think that it was a thing the community started. That is something we want to do more and more, with the customised grill. Like this week we had a swim club picking up their customised grill with their logo. So, it's very easy to implement."* (Interview 6; l. 192-195)

Consequently, the community is used by SOUNDBOKS as a tool in order to communicate and regain some of the control over the image of the brand by understanding the external stakeholders' needs and wants. Consequently, information can be acquired directly from the consumers, in order to, understand and foresee trends which can comply with the desired lifestyle and further authenticate the SOUNDBOKS brand.

5.1.2 GLOBAL THEME 2: BRAND PERSONALITY

The third theme is derived based on the patterns discovered in the internal data and is centred around the brand personality. This specific topic was mentioned across all internal respondents and is thus argued to be an interesting topic for further investigation. Based on the brand personality, three organizing themes was deducted from the utterings of the respondents, describing the internal perception of the brand persona. The first organising theme revolves around the *link to founders' identity*, followed by the *characterization of brand personality*. The final organising theme illuminates the patterns describing the internal stakeholders as being *part of the target audience*.

5.1.2.1 Organised theme 2.1: Internal identity

The purpose of the first organising theme is to demonstrate how the internal respondents link the brand personality to the founders' identity and the identity of the internal stakeholders in general. In

this regard, a pattern has been identified where the internal respondents refer to the brand persona as a reflection of themselves as well as a reflection of the founders' personality, meaning their identity is perceived to be attached to the brand.

> *Hans*: *"... It's about knowing who you are and being yourself. And not to be influenced by others' expectations, but to be true to themselves. So one can say that the progression the brand has had is very much proportional to the progression we have had as individuals."* *(Interview 1; l. 145-147)*
>
> *Hjalte*: *"SOUNDBOKS is probably a reflection of who we are as individuals. So just as well as we can be confused about who we are, given that we are 22 or 25 years old, the SOUNDBOKS brand can probably be rather confused about who it is too."* *(Interview 2; l. 132-134)*

The journey which the SOUNDBOKS brand has been through is thus perceived to be similar to the development the internal stakeholders themselves have gone through. In this context, Hjalte argues that the iterations the brand has been through in order to find its identity, have been a direct parallel to how the internal stakeholders themselves have tried to find their own personality and identity, thus substantiating the argument that the identity of the internal stakeholders is attached to the brand personality. Moreover, Josh agrees that the brand personality is specifically built around the founders, and argue that this has been a key to their current success.

> *Josh:* *"When I told people that I would go and work for SOUNDBOKS they said; 'Oh yea! I live around the corner from one of the founders', like, it is cool that people know that. You have other brands who were founded by people who were known to not be nice people, but these guys they literally embody what the brand is going to stand for. (...) That has definitely been part of the success, people like them and they are genuine."* *(Interview 4; l. 242-246)*

The founders are thus argued to embody what the brand is going to stand for, given their previously mentioned desire for breaking comfort zones. Moreover, the founders are simultaneously perceived as being 'genuine' by the internal respondents, which is further one of the key cues related to the characterisation of authentic brands (Muñoz et al., 2006). Consequently, brand personality is perceived to be a reflection of the internal stakeholders' identities. Moreover, the founders are argued to be genuine and further embody what the brand stands for, which jointly provide the SOUNDBOKS brand with authenticity from an internal perspective. The next organised theme will seek to explore the internal characterisation of the brand personality.

5.1.2.2 Organised theme 2.2: Reflection of brand personality

During the interviews, the respondents were asked to characterise the brand with personality traits in order to understand their perception of the brand. In this context, similar patterns were discovered across the internal data, showing comparable descriptions of the brand persona.

Hjalte: "... It's this ultra-outgoing, super positive, insanely energetic, proactive individual that gives a lot to a group of. He is not afraid to be a fool in front of others in order to create an awesome atmosphere." (Interview 2; l. 172-174)

René: "It is a very outgoing, very open and energetic person. One who can make friends with everyone and someone who wants to talk to everyone. One who has control over his values, is open to other people and does not exclude anyone. Someone who is game for anything, in a non-negative way. Says yes to things that are out of the comfort zone and has a mantra stating that the more effort you put into something, the more it is worth. Thus a focus on breaking barriers." (Interview 7; l. 255-259)

The brand persona is thus perceived as outgoing, extrovert, inclusive and energetic, which is in line with the social and inclusive values identified in global theme 2 and are thus complimenting the lifestyle in which the brand is striving to represent. Interestingly, Josh and Jesper both agree with this characterisation of the brand personality; however, they both refer to the brand as being similar to the founder, Hjalte.

Jesper: "The brand is Hjalte in many ways. And Hjalte is the brand. (...) outgoing, social, slightly crazy and not scared." (Interview 1; l. 199-203)

Josh: "Sure! He is like Hjalte. Like, he is up for anything, super inclusive, welcoming, always has a smile on his face, energetic, willing to try new things, push the comfort zone, will definitely be the first one on the dance floor, will definitely put his playlist out there where its good or not." (Interview 4; l. 206-208)

The above statements are further linked to the brand being a reflection of the founder's personality, in this case, Hjalte, as the internal stakeholders are characterising the brand personality based on how they perceive Hjalte as a person. The SOUNDBOKS brand is thus perceived as genuine given that the brand resembles the founder's identity, thus providing the brand with a sense of genuineness and trustworthiness which is in line with Morhart et al.'s (2015) *credibility* dimension. Consequently, the brand personality is perceived as being outgoing, extrovert, inclusive and

energetic which is in line with the founder's identity and furthermore the lifestyle in which they strive to represent.

5.1.2.3 Organised theme 2.3: Part of the target audience

In addition to the link between the internal stakeholders' identity and the brand personality as well as being perceived as outgoing, extrovert, inclusive and energetic, the internal respondents argue that they have a certain understanding of the target audience.

> *René: "We do not try to give people what they want, we are not tactical in this regard. We do what we feel is the best, the funniest, the coolest and most remarkable one could do if you have a SOUNDBOX. And fortunately, the target audience we want to talk to, really believe in us, and they often think just like us and can see the same value in what we do. And that way we built authenticity." (Interview 7; l. 338-342)*

René thus perceives the values and behaviour of the internal stakeholders to be similar to the target audience; thus the internal stakeholders strive to communicate content they find interesting themselves. This intuitive understanding of the consumers and their needs is, according to René, providing SOUNDBOKS with a sense of authenticity. Jesper is further aware of this topic and sees it as a strategic move.

> *Jesper: "Yes, of course, we ARE the target group. That is why we keep the average age so young, because then we will continue to be part of them and understand them." (Interview 1; l. 261-262)*

Jesper thus agrees with René in terms of the internal organisation being a part of the target audience and further argue that the average age within the company is helping SOUNDBOKS understand the target audience better. The internal stakeholders do not pretend to be someone else in order to fit in with the target audience, which reflects the perception of genuineness and realness and is closely linked to authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The average age of the employees is thus a consideration the organisation has in mind when recruiting new employees, in order to maintain the roots and being perceived as a young brand who understands the target audience. The internal respondents are further convinced that the target audience of SOUNDBOKS perceives the brand as 'young' and 'cool'.

> *Josh: "I think the consumers sees us as a super cool, young, fun" (Interview 4; l. 188)*

> *Nils: "Here [in Denmark] it is perceived as a very young brand, a cool brand." (Interview 6; l. 43-44)*

Consequently, the internal respondents thus perceive themselves as being part of the target audience, enabling them to fully understand their needs and interests, which has been a key driver for their success and perceived authenticity. It is furthermore a position which the brand is striving to maintain by keeping the average age of the employees around the same age as the target audience.

5.1.3 GLOBAL THEME 3: WALK-THE-TALK

The fourth theme regards the internal respondents' perception of the SOUNDBOKS brand's ability to practise what they preach and act upon the statements and aspirations. The SOUNDBOKS brand was previously described as honest, respectful and open by the internal respondents, and these qualities are further claimed to be fundamental in terms of the internal culture, the communication strategy and the overall go-to-market approach. This theme thus consists of three organising themes whereas two of these describe the focus areas where the internal respondents express an ability to walk the talk and one opposing theme where a pattern of statements expressing the opposite.

5.1.3.1 Organised theme 3.1: Internal culture

In terms of the overall go-to-market approach, the internal data indicate that the SOUNDBOKS brand act according to their personality and values, thus being perceived as 'open' and 'honest'. In this regard, Hans expresses that SOUNDBOKS have remained open to new ideas and feedback from multiple stakeholders.

> *Hans*: "*But I think that the monumental moments, which are the basic reason why we are where we are today, is that we have been open to development, that we have accepted the learning curve we have had, we have been humbled to the task and listened to the feedback we have received from wise people, and we are extremely interested in looking inward when there were conflicts.*" (Interview 1; l. 175-179)

Hans is thus referring to SOUNDBOKS as a place which is willing to look inward and is open to ideas both from internal and external stakeholders. This is further a fundamental element in postmodern branding according to (Fournier & Avery, 2011), and might thus have been a key factor in the postmodern success of SOUNDBOKS. Hjalte agrees and further elaborate on the shared values in the internal culture, including a workspace where 'openness' and 'respect' is fundamental among the employees.

Hjalte: "I spoke to our newest intern, where I asked her why she likes to be here [the SOUNDBOKS company], where she answered 'well, I feel I can bring my full self to work'. It was the first time that she had been at a workplace where she could be herself and where she didn't have to wear a mask when she entered. So, if she has a bad day, she can say that she has a bad day." (Interview 2; l. 195-199)

According to Hjalte, the internal culture is open and encourage the internal stakeholders to be their true self, which according to Wang (1999) is connecting the stakeholder to the brand through an existential authenticity. The brand is thus enabling the internal stakeholders to be their own true self. Similarly, Josh shares his experience of his first week at SOUNDBOKS where he felt that the brand internally acted according to their values, which he identifies and characterise as authentic branding.

Josh: "We at SOUNDBOKS practise what we preach we have a very inclusive office. (...) The first week I was here, all of us had to sing karaoke, so we practise breaking these mental barriers, pushing ourselves and getting out of our comfort zone on a weekly basis. That is what makes a brand authentic, does they live the lifestyle that they preach?" (Interview 4; l. 166-170)

The term 'practise what we preach' is a similar expression as Beverland's (2009) 'Walk the talk' and which is related to Guèvremont's (2018) 'dimension', 'virtuousness', referring to the brand striving to live up to the values on a regular basis. The authenticity of SOUNBOKS is thus, according to Josh, grounded in their ability to behave according to their beliefs. Josh, Hjalte and Hans thus state that openness, inclusiveness and humbleness is a fundamental dimension internally which is consistent with the emotional value of being inclusive and open, thus indicating that SOUNDBOKS is practising what they preach internally.

5.1.3.2 Organised theme 3.2: Communication

The SOUNDBOKS brand is moreover acting according to their values and lifestyle through their communication, which is characterised as being 'open', 'personal' and 'honest'. In this regard, the internal respondents all agree that SOUNDBOKS strive to be transparent and open towards their consumers providing them with honest content, both in good and in bad times.

Kristian: "We have to be open to the consumers, and say, 'we have fucked up, that's why there is a delay in your delivery' and we are very transparent to those who are affected by a situation we have caused. (...) It is something we try to live by to the best of our ability." (Interview 5; l. 209-214)

As such, Kristian is arguing for SOUNDBOKS' ability to admit blunders openly and are not trying to hide these for the consumers in order to pose as a perfect company. Instead, the brand is openly

sharing their flaws, thus being honest towards their consumers, which accords to Kierkegaard (1985) argument about embracing flaws is essential to authenticity. This is in line with the 'transparency' dimension presented by Guèvremont (2018), referring to a brands ability to be open and able to share imperfections which are directly linked to the perceived authenticity of a brand. According to Hans, this approach is deeply rooted in the way SOUNDBOKS is communicating towards their consumers.

Hans: "honesty is deeply rooted in the way we are in contact with our customers. We don't want to be arrogant" (Interview 1; l. 203-204)

René further argues that when a mistake occurs the immediate reaction is not how to cover it up, but how to express it correctly towards the community. On the other hand, René is arguing that the level of 'honesty' and 'openness' are still in development, meaning that the brand wishes to become even more transparent in their communication towards their consumers.

René: "... when we have had some situations where we have made mistakes that could affect the customer experience, then we put ourselves in a room and discuss how we can handle this problem, and the conversation is never 'here is the most effective way we can bypass it' but rather 'what do we do about the relationship with our community? What do we do about our transparency and our authenticity? '. (...) But it is difficult when we get to the "walk the talk" section, especially if you make some mistakes that can cost some momentum this early in the company's lifetime" (Interview 7; l. 215-224)

Lastly, Josh relates to a scenario where SOUNDBOKS execute both the rooted 'openness' and 'inclusiveness' expressed within the internal culture as well the communication towards consumers.

Josh: "We had someone the other day, who was downstairs and came all the way from China, I think they needed a battery swap, and they came to the office and they came into the office, we gave them a new battery and then they left. Do you think that you could walk up to Apple saying 'hey guys I'm having an issue'? NO! they are going to send you to a retail store, and go talk to a 'genius' – it's amazing." (Interview 4; l. 278-282)

Consequently, SOUNDBOKS' communication towards their consumers are highly influenced by honest and transparent content, where the brand is not afraid to show their mistakes and flaws.

5.1.3.3 Organised theme 3.3: Employees as non-users

The third organising theme is included based on an identified pattern suggesting that the employees do not use the product themselves, even though it was previously expressed that they find themselves to be within the target audience. The majority of the internal respondents, state that they own a SOUNDBOKS, however, do not use it as often or with the same purpose as the kernel users. Both Kristian and René, which is both employees state that they own a SOUNDBOKS but would not characterise themselves as users.

> *Kristian: "Yes I use it at home, and then beyond that I take out of home 2-3 times a year, I am not at all a core user of SOUNDBOKS. (...) So for me personally I probably would not have bought it in the same way as many of our users do, but it is a preference." (Interview 5; l. 53-57)*

> *René: "Yes I have a SOUNDBOX, but only because it is one I have got because I work here. I don't know if I would have bought one myself if I wasn't part of SOUNDBOKS. (...) I do not believe that with the brand image and expression the brand had back in the day, that it had been something for me, it was a little too young and a little too much party." (Interview 7; l. 53-56)*

Consequently, the actual behaviour and the internal stakeholders' use situations with their own SOUNDBOKS product is indicating an incoherence with their previous statement of being part of the target audience, as they believe in using the product differently compared to the kernel users. Moreover, René claim argues that his initial perception of SOUNDBOKS did not fit his self-identity, which held him from acquiring the product at first. In addition, within the founder-group, a similar pattern is identified, whereas the CEO of SOUNDBOKS does not even own a SOUNDBOKS himself.

> *Jesper: "I don't have a SOUNDBOKS myself. It is not created for an apartment I would say. If I'm going to a festival, then I would like to have a SOUNDBOX or if I'm outside. But at home I would say that my Sonos system works better." (Interview 3; l. 55-61)*

The internal respondents thus seem to live in a simulation where they are convinced to be part of the target audience, even though their behaviour does not show any coherence with their cognition. However, internally, they have constructed this idea of being part of the target audience based on the average age of the employees who, by accepting the simulation, is authenticating the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the internal community (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

On the contrary, Hjalte, whose personality and identity was earlier described as being embedded in the SOUNDBOKS brand, is a heavy user of the product, stating that it is the only speaker that he owns.

> *Hjalte*: "Yes, and I use it. I use it as a living room speaker and as a party speaker. It's my only speaker. It has just become part of my home. (...) And then of course when I go out for parties I have it with me." (Interview 2; l. 46-47)

Hjalte is thus perceived to use the product similar to the target audience, thus indicating that he is a founder with similar characteristics as the target audience, which potentially increases the perceived authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand.

Consequently, based on the interviews with employees and founders, it is identified that the majority of the internal stakeholders cannot be characterised as kernel users of the SOUNDBOKS product, as their behaviour is not in line with the target audience.

5.1.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The initial phase of this analysis had the purpose of understanding the brand perception of SOUNDBOKS as well as the perceived authenticity of the brand from an internal stakeholder perspective. In the above analysis of the internal stakeholders three global themes were identified; *'lifestyle brand'*, *'brand personality'* and *'walk-the-talk'*. Based on these, the SOUNDBOKS brand is arguably perceived as being intrinsically motivated by deeply held values, as the brand is built upon the founders' personal need for the product, thus providing a certain amount of integrity and genuineness to the brand. The founders are thus able to reflect their own identity and beliefs in the brand which enhance the existential authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand (Wang, 1999). This further leads to the internal stakeholders perceiving the brand as being *'genuine'* and *'trustworthy'*, which is directly related to the authenticity of a brand (Morhart et al., 2015). In addition, the internal stakeholders state that SOUNDBOKS practice what they preach, as the brand acts according to own values and beliefs of being *'open'* and *'inclusive'*, by creating a work environment where the internal stakeholders feel like they can be their real true self. This is further enhancing the existential authenticity in the brand (Wang, 1999). In addition, the brand purpose, i.e. the lifestyle that the brand strives to represent, is providing SOUNDBOKS with a symbolic stance regarding the desire to break comfort zones through inclusiveness and being open-minded, thus serving as a resource for identity curation by providing the stakeholders with self-referential cues (Morhart et al., 2015). Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS brand is perceived as an authentic brand, from an internal stakeholder perspective, based on its genuineness and its links to the internal stakeholders' self-identity.

5.2 EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

The second phase of the analysis antent to understand the brand perception of SOUNDBOKS and its authenticity seen from an external stakeholder perspective. Following section is arranged similarly

as the internal study in chapter 5.1; thus three global themes, with eight underlying organising themes were identified helping the researchers to understand of the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions in the mind of the consumers. The three global themes were identified as 1) *'beyond the product'*, 2) *'consumer self-narrative'*, and 3) *'personal communication'*.

5.2.1 GLOBAL THEME 1: BEYOND THE PRODUCT

The first interesting global theme derived from the external interview data was centred around the customers' perception of the brand in relation to the product. All respondents indicated that SOUNDBOKS is more than just a physical product, thus expressing an existence of emotional value related to the brand. Contradictory statements and subjects have been identified in relation to this global theme which has been divided into three organising themes; 1) *'product superiority'*, 2) *'providing unique opportunities'*, and 3) *'desire'*. These organising themes and their relevance to the global theme will be discussed in the following sections.

5.2.1.1 Organising theme 1.1: Product superiority

The first organising theme is identified based on a pattern among the external respondents stating that the SOUNDBOKS product is superior to their competitors and is thus having a strong brand position in the market. According to the external respondents, the SOUNDBOKS brand has constructed a product with superior physical attributes, which is further acknowledged as a fundamental driver for their purchase decision.

> *Benjamin: "Because SOUNDBOKS stands out. Completely! There are no speakers on the market that can do what they can. SOUNDBOKS is very special, because it can play very loud and the battery lasts insanely long. So therefore I chose SOUNDBOKS." (Interview 8; l. 66-68)*

Benjamin thus describes the SOUNDBOKS product as unique and non-substitutable and is further perceived as being different from the competitors in the market. Benjamin has earlier owned a JBL Extreme (i.e. a portable, outdoor speaker) which, in comparison, did not provide him with the same special feeling (Interview 8; l. 25-26). According to the external respondents, the product is thus characterised by specific functional values, which arguably is the main driver for their purchase. In this regard, a pattern in the data is presented, linking the significance of the product to three key functional values; *'loudness'*, *'durability'* and *'portability'*.

> *Mads L: "... it is able to play crazy loud, that I can overpower any speaker out there. (…) there is no battery-driven speaker that is louder". (Interview 10; l. 68-70)*

In line with Grayson and Martinec (2014) this attention to *indexical authenticity* details by the consumers, arguably, reinforce the perception of high quality, and further positioning the brand as superior and more authentic to the market. In addition, Mads K is emphasising the '*durability'* of the product as an original feature which is linked to product superiority.

> *Mads K: "SOUNDBOKS is a tough speaker, however you can easily find speakers that play better, but you can't find anyone who is as easy to carry and powered by battery and Bluetooth. Others are not at all as tough (...) and then I think it's cool that it's a speaker I shouldn't be afraid to break when I'm at parties. I'd rather spend money on this than buying a speaker where I'm afraid it might get a small dent." (Interview 9; l. 411-414; 30-32)*

The '*durability'* of the product, hence the ability to tolerate any surroundings, is argued to be a critical benefit which has provided SOUNDBOKS with an added value by enabling the user to throw parties without any worry of it being destroyed. Lastly, the '*portability'* of the product is, from an external perspective, unique and further a key benefit of the product. In this regard, Oliver links SOUNDBOKS to a sense of boundlessness and freedom which enables him to do things he was otherwise not able to do if he did not have a SOUNDBOKS.

> *Oliver: "There are no limitations! For example, there are no wires and it is super durable and the battery lasts longer than a day. You can have it with you anywhere." (Interview 13; l. 125-126)*

Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS product is perceived as being superior in terms of physical attributes such as 'loudness', 'durability' and 'portability' compared to the current competitors. This is highly in line with Bruhn et al. (2012) notion of the 'uniqueness', and Beverland (2006) and Napoli et al. (2014) presented 'quality commitment', as key factors for consumers to perceive a brand as authentic. Additionally, the customers express a feeling of freedom and increased opportunities which cannot be replicated by competitive products. These values ascribed to the brand is thus interpreted as providing a sense of 'originality' to the SOUNDBOKS brand, which further is linked to authenticity (Muñoz et al., 2006).

5.2.1.2 Organising theme 1.2: Providing social experiences

During the interviews, the external respondents described SOUNDBOKS as providing unique experiences deeply inherent in the product. In this regard, both Mads K and Oliver explains how the functional attributes enabled them to do things, that was not possible without the use of a SOUNDBOKS:

> *Mads K: "Last year we had a summer party down by a small lake, where we had a super nice party with loud music, which we would not have had the opportunity to do if we had not had a SOUNDBOX." (Interview 9; l. 88-90)*
>
> *Oliver: "You can use it for absolutely anything. Even family birthdays, there is nothing it can't do. Festivals even. I can't really think of anything it can't do, I feel like it can do anything. (...) One could probably have the same experiences with another speaker, but SOUNDBOKS just makes it 10 times better." (Interview 13; l. 69-71; 247)*

In this context, Oliver argues that SOUNDBOKS not only provides him with physical opportunities but is simultaneously able to enhance the social experience, meaning that, events, parties and adventures become more exciting and even better when a SOUNDBOKS is present. Hence, these citations regarding the implication of this social context, support that authenticity and the interpersonal understanding of group members are interrelated. Thus, the experience with SOUNDBOKS is deemed authentic, as the social experience enhances the experienced authenticity of the brand (Guèvremont, 2018; Wang, 1999).

Moreover, Marcus perceives the SOUNDBOKS brand to be more than just a physical product, as the brand evokes unique feelings within him and creates a distinctive atmosphere, e.g. by evoking the feeling of being at a festival and thus create a unique atmosphere which was not possible without the SOUNDBOKS. This is in line with the postmodern '*hyperreality*', where reality is constructed rather than given (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

> *Marcus: "They came from festivals. Not necessarily making a speaker for festivals, but creating the feeling of being at a festival. That is, creating an environment where you can relax, listen to some music and create some good memories." (Interview 11; l. 117-119)*

In continuation, Marcus state that SOUNDBOKS has the ability to create a gathering effect, as the brand enables him to meet and speak to strangers due to the created atmosphere which the SOUNDBOKS enables.

> *Marcus: "In 'Kings Garden' [Kongens Have] we played music on our SOUNDBOKS and there came a lot of people which we didn't know, and just because we played on a SOUNDBOX, you could easily start talking to strangers. We break down some sort of social barrier, so when we are around a SOUNDBOX we can talk to strangers." (Interview 11; l. 374-477)*

The presence of a SOUNDBOKS is thus creating a unique experience, enabling the users to throw away the inhibitions thus being able to speak to strangers, which would not happen without the SOUNDBOKS. In line with the ability to join strangers together, the brand is further perceived to create a sense of belonging and togetherness through the community. In this regard, Mads K argues that SOUNDBOKS embodies a sense of community inherently in the product, as it brings people with similar interests together:

> **Mads K**: *"SOUNDBOKS becomes a bit like a community in itself, something you can do or talk about together, something you have in common. Me and my friends talk a lot about SOUNDBOKS and it's a conversation topic among my friends, giving us something we have in common." (Interview 9; l. 134-136)*

This sense of togetherness is further in line with Cova's (1996b) identified paradox concerning the fragmentation of the postmodern consumer, which both seek individuality but also a sense of belonging. This is further argued by Belk et al. (2003), stating that the underlying motivation behind even the most object-focused desires is having social relationships with other people and obtaining desired responses from other people, entailing the desired object as a means of building friendships, relationships, and sociability (p. 337).

Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS brand is expressed as a product of the postmodern *'hyperreality'* providing the consumers with a simulated world, hence this unique atmosphere which other speaker brands are unable to replicate. Moreover, the brand can provide a sense of belonging based on a community feeling. The SOUNDBOKS brand is thus perceived as providing the physical product with an added emotional value, hence the ability to evoke a unique feeling and atmosphere. Moreover, the brand is perceived to have a gathering effect thus creating an environment where strangers can be social with each other, thus breaking a barrier which would not have happened without a SOUNDBOKS. This is further in line with the previously stated 'break social barrier' value which the internal stakeholders presented, meaning there exist a coherence between the internal and external perception of the benefits of SOUNDBOKS.

5.2.1.3 Organising theme 1.3: Desire

The third organising theme linked with the global theme 'beyond the product' is identified based on the expression from several external respondents related to their desire for the product and the brand. In this regard, Benjamin claims the purchase of a SOUNDBOKS product to be a substantial investment for him:

> *Benjamin:* *"And I've probably been 13 years old when I first got my eyes on SOUNDBOKS, but I thought it was too expensive for me. But I have always had it in mind that I wanted a SOUNDBOKS, and now I could finally afford one." (Interview 8; l. 115-117)*

Benjamin thus perceives the purchase of a SOUNDBOKS to be a high-involvement purchase. According to Fritz et al. (2017) brand authenticity is found to be more pronounced for high-involvement consumers than for low-involvement consumers. The price point of the product has restrained Benjamin to purchase the product right away, which have given him a desire for the product. This is in line with Belk et al. (2003) who argue that the desire for a product is the motivating force in contemporary consumption. Thus, desire can be experienced as a deep and highly positive emotional state best characterised as passion (ibid). Benjamin is further elaborating on the desire for the product through his description of his first experience with his SOUNDBOKS.

> *Benjamin:* *"... I ran home with the SOUNDBOKS on my head, and then I remember unwrapping it, and fuck all the instructions – I just plugged it in and got it up to 11 right away! And it was just a crazy feeling to know that I had actually bought the SOUNDBOX." (Interview 8; l. 128-131)*

Benjamin thus claimed that owning a SOUNDBOKS gave him a sense of joy and happiness. This is argued to be the result of the desire and the motivation for acquiring the product which had led to a feeling of success when finally acquired. Additionally, Marcus indicates that owning a SOUNDBOKS is in line with his self-identity, describing himself as a gadget person. He felt obliged to acquire a SOUNDBOKS in order to maintain his sense of self.

> *Marcus:* *"I think there is more to it. I'm a bit of a gadget person and it's a super cool gadget I think. It's cool to have. (…) After the second time I was at Roskilde, where I did not have a SOUNDBOKS, and I saw it grew bigger and bigger, and I wanted to own one. (…). It's a cool gadget to bring out in fælledparken or on the beach, or if you are generally out in the summer, I think it is more cool to have a SOUNDBOX compared to a small speaker." (Interview 11; l. 76-84)*

Thus, the citations of both Mads K and Marcus illustrate and substantiate Beverland's (2018) argument about *"what we buy says a lot about who we are, how we see ourselves, and even who we would like to be" (p. 32),* and further in line with Morhart et al., (2015), positively linking the symbolism of a brand with its degree of authenticity. In continuation, Mikkel further perceives SOUNDBOKS as being a status symbol of wealth due to its high price point.

> *Mikkel:* *"Yes, that's 100%. It seems functions as a status symbol, as it's pretty expensive" (Interview 12; l. 235)*

The price of the product has branded SOUNDBOKS as a symbol of financial wealth and can according to Mikkel be compared to owning an Apple product. The user of a SOUNDBOKS can thus be associated with, a specific status among the peers which share a similar perception of SOUNDBOKS as Mikkel. This is an excellent example of Belk's (1988) notion of a product becoming an extension of the self.

In sum, the external data showed indications towards SOUNDBOKS being a brand that the respondents' desires. Although only a few respondents explicitly discussed this theme, it is argued that this desire for the brand indicates how brand authenticity is created through a reflection of the consumers' self-narrative, as it involves confirmation of what is real to one's self-image. Lastly, as the SOUNDBOKS brand is perceived as being a high-involvement product, it is argued to influence the consumers' desire for the product providing the brand with an increased meaning and value to the external stakeholders.

5.2.2 GLOBAL THEME 2: CONSUMER SELF-NARRATIVE

The third theme identified concern consumer self-narrative. From the external interviews, most respondents indicate that owning a SOUNDBOKS help the external stakeholders to define their self-identity. This is further reflected in the underlying organising themes; '*purpose-driven*, '*reflection of self-narrative*', and '*sense of community*' which will be elaborated below.

5.2.2.1 Organising theme 2.1: Purpose-driven

The first organising theme is connected to a common perception among the external stakeholders, indicating that SOUNDBOKS are having and pursuing a higher purpose. In this organising theme, the emotional values and benefits which the external stakeholders can reflect their self-identity in are explained. Marcus believes that the purpose of SOUNDBOKS stems from the link between the SOUNDBOKS brand and Roskilde Festival, thus seeking to recreate a sense of community which is typically found on festivals where the brand was born.

Marcus: "It's what you do in your little camp at a festival. I think it because of where they come from I would say. They are good at building a sense of community feeling in groups of society." (Interview 11; l. 119-121)

Marcus: "SOUNDBOKS is kind of a catalyst for experiences, I actually think that SOUNDBOKS helps create a community, and they create good experiences and they create good entrepreneurial stories, and they have some kind of social impact" (Interview 11; l. 327-331)

Marcus further believes that SOUNDBOKS is directly related to having great experiences and provide a sense of community, thus functioning as a catalyst for social experiences. Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS brand becomes a symbol of social experiences, thus contributing to authenticity through existentialism as the consumers can reflect their self-image in the brand symbolism in order to define who, they are (Wang, 1999). Taking this position is argued to have a positive influence on the external respondents, as they seem to have an interest in brands which is concerned about societal discourses. In this regard, Mads K believes that SOUNDBOKS is an organisation which engages in more than just their customers, but truly has a genuine interest in helping and nurturing the society around them.

> **Mads K**: *"They make sure to support larger issues and try to get more entrepreneurs to Denmark. (…) SOUNDBOKS are many things, they are not just a product, they are also an organization that does something to solve issues and help the society to become better. (…) It was quite surprising that they do so much more than just engaging in their customers. I think it's really crazy to see."*
> *(Interview 9; l. 246-249)*

Consequently, Mads K shows a positive attitude towards SOUNDBOKS given their purpose-driven nature, and thus being more than just a physical product. In continuation, Oliver has noticed a specific focus in terms of social discourses which is linked to the SOUNDBOKS brand. In this regard, he draws a link between the ambassador called 'Yes Theory', and SOUNDBOKS, which use SOUNDBOKS as a tool in order to get out of the comfort zone and provide the ability to be more social.

> **Oliver**: *"Do you know about Yes theory? They are Youtubers and SOUNDBOKS has a collaboration with one of them. And their brand is about 'seeking discomfort' and that you have to get out of the comfort zone. He uses SOUNDBOX a lot for that purpose"* (Interview 13; l. 227-229)

As such, Oliver perceives SOUNDBOKS to be linked with the act of *'seeking discomfort'* based on the acts of the influencers, which are using the product for that specific occasion, thus establishing this emotional value in the mind of the consumer. This is further in line with the findings of the internal stakeholder perception, which found that the internal stakeholders perceive the brand purpose as breaking the comfort zone. This notion of being 'purpose-driven' which is the headline of this organizing theme, is further deemed illustrative for *'the existential authenticity'* (Wang, 1999). The external stakeholders can mirror this purpose onto their perception of self or self-purpose, thus authenticating the SOUNDBOKS brand (ibid). Arguably, consumers use the brand to determine their self-identity, which is what Heidegger (1996) express as, the postmodern individual's quest for

answering "who am I?". For Sartre (1992), individuals' way of "being" is inevitably linked to their choices, addressing individuals' conscious decisions and their responsibility for their actions and inaction. This line of thought thus substantiates the importance of respondents believing that the brand has a higher purpose, as it helps construct their self through the actions they take, enabling the consumers to get out of their comfort zone and becoming more social beings.

5.2.2.2 Organising theme 2.2: Reflection of self-narrative

The second organised theme is anchored around how the brand is perceived as a reflection of the external respondents' personality. In this regard, several respondents indicated how the brand helps them to construct their identity through what could be noted as a self-narrative. For example, Benjamin expressed that the SOUNDBOKS is 'made for telling stories:

Benjamin: "I think SOUNDBOKS is more than just a speaker. It about telling a story with the SOUNDBOX. It is a little cool if it is a little worn and if it has got some scratches. They are not just a brand." (Interview 8; l. 172-174)

One way of interpreting this is that Benjamin uses the SOUNDBOKS to tell a story about his experiences, and further reflect his personality. Following this, the SOUNDBOKS brand is used in order to express and reflect an inner personal identity. Therefore, Benjamin perceives SOUNDBOKS as authentic as it reflects a narrative of himself that reaffirms his desired identity (Beverland, 2009). In line with this, Mads L and Mads K responded to the question of whether the SOUNDBOKS brand was explicitly connected to them as a person, expressing that they are perceived to be 'the guy with the SOUNDBOKS' among their peers.

Mads K: "You don't have quite the same reputation as a MacBook user, but you get this reputation as being 'the guy with the SOUNDBOX'." (Interview 9; l. 77-78)

Mads L: "The first thing they saw was me with a SOUNDBOKS on my back on full blast through the tailgates here. And ever since, there has been an expectation that there is a SOUNDBOKS with me when I arrive. And then I always have a SOUNDBOKS cap on, and I wear that cap almost every day, so that's probably why people think about SOUNDBOKS when they see me." (Interview 10; l. 85-89)

In this regard, Mads L sees himself as an ambassador for the brand, wearing SOUNDBOKS caps every day, thus declaring himself as a part of a brand culture that, arguably reflect his values and identity. This connection to the brand has in Mads L's point of view created a link between his personality and the SOUNDBOKS brand, leading to him becoming the 'party starter'. When asked about his perception of the brand personality, Mads L expressed SOUNDBOKS as having a positive,

outgoing and inclusive personality (Interview 10; l. 261). However, he was further able to see a link to his perception of self.

Mads L: "Yes, totally, about being outgoing. That's something I have had to do many times in my life, since I was going to Exchange in High School and later chose to move to the US alone. It was taking a leap myself, I just had to open up to get some friends and get to know some new people. Otherwise, I would also say that I am quite positive and a cool person, at least I hope so, that is what I can relate to and reflect myself in." (Interview 10; l. 268-272)

This is in line with Aaker (1997), suggesting that brand personality help consumers express their self-concept and provide a sense of comfort to consumers who have found a brand that "fits" their self-concept (Malär et al., 2011). In terms of the external stakeholders, reflecting and mirroring their self-identity in the brand is further indicated in the following quotes:

Mikkel: "I can reflect myself in all of it. I also like to party and bring in new people and play loud music. (…) If I was the type who would like to listen to some music for myself, then I had just bought some headphones. I like to create a good mood and would like to create a good atmosphere for others." (Interview 12; l. 72-79)

Mads L: "I think their brand is just like me, this young and loud brand that can want to make some sound and also create a sense of community that others can't, that's why SOUNDBOKS is awesome." (Interview 10; l. 178-180)

Additionally, Mads L further indicate that the SOUNDBOKS brand enables the customers to make it their own, and thus make it authentic to themselves. This is further in line with the current theory, stating that authenticity is subjective to the individual (Beverland, 2009). In line with this, Mads L, explain that the customisation of the SOUNDBOKS is, a tool in order to express himself (ibid.):

Mads L: "I think it's great that they promote that you can make the SOUNDBOKS your own. Also that you can customize it. They probably think they started out with a rather perfect product, but then the consumers found that they wanted to provide the product with their own personal touch. (...). They have been good at adopting this 'BREAK THROUGH THE NOISE' and creating it something unique." (Interview 10; l. 315-320)

Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS brand is closely related to the way consumers construct their own identity through the narratives told through the brand, which is authenticating the brand from an external stakeholder perspective.

5.2.3 GLOBAL THEME 3: PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The fourth and final global theme derived from the external data is regarding SOUNDBOKS being perceived as a non-corporate brand. The data show a pattern indicating that the consumers experience the brand as being more 'down-to-earth' in their communication, which has positively influenced their brand authenticity perception regarding SOUNDBOKS. As a result, this theme has been divided into three organising themes based on patterns in the data linking to the non-corporate perception of SOUNDBOKS.

5.2.3.1 Organising theme 3.1: Language

The first organising theme linked to the consumers' perception of SOUNDBOKS being a non-corporate brand is regarding the 'language' used in the communication. In this regard, the language is referred to as the way SOUNDBOKS communicate in terms of their phrasing of sentences and the general tone of voice which the external stakeholders seem to respond fondly too. During the external interviews, the respondents were presented with Facebook posts previously posted by SOUNDBOKS in order to understand how they perceive the communication.

Mads L: "I don't think this is corporate at all, it's Google Forms, it's 'fresh guys' (...) It's more of a personal post sent from a corporate account. I just think it's really good." (Interview 10; l. 395-397)

As a response to the pictures used as visual stimuli during the interviews (see appendix 2.2), Mads L perceived the language as non-corporate due to specific phrases in the communication, which he perceives to provide a distinct personality to the brand. On the other hand, Mads L does not believe that all brands can pull off this type of communicational language as it for some might seem fake and forced.

Mads L: "For most it fails, but not for SOUNDBOKS. Companies often try to be young just to fit in with the target audience. It's a bit like brands really are trying so hard to create fun marketing that makes customers think it is so much fun, it's just too much and it seems fake. But when SOUNDBOKS uses these emojis on their posts I think it fits them perfectly." (Interview 10; l. 435-438)

Mads L thus perceive the language used by the SOUNDBOKS brand to align with his idea of the brand. In other words, the brand is perceived to be genuine and real as it is perceived to feed the consumers with a fake identity in order to fit in. This perceived genuineness and realness is further highly related to the authenticity of a brand (Muñoz et al., 2006; Beverland, 2006). Mads L further elaborates on why he accepts this language from SOUNDBOKS and why he sees it as genuine when SOUNDBOKS uses this more personal tone of voice.

> *Mads L:* "SOUNDBOKS can get away with it because it is this young brand, and they stand for party and fun. I think they can use such content without it seems unprofessional, because I think that the company itself is not considered corporate in the same way." (Interview 10; l. 447-450)

The fact that the tone of voice is aligned with the values of SOUNDBOKS, as well as the fact that Mads L perceive the brand to be young, is enabling the brand to communicate more personally and less corporate. In other words, the language, SOUNDBOKS uses, is perceived to come naturally to the brand seen from an external stakeholder perspective, which creates a more authentic communication. Besides, Mikkel further describes SOUNDBOKS' communication as 'down-to-earth' with a personal touch.

> *Mikkel:* "The way they communicate is pretty nice, and it's chill and down to earth. (...) there are many emojis which seem quite personal and it is very down to earth." (Interview 12; l. 122-127)

The personal communication is thus received positively by Mikkel, as he believes it is more 'down-to-earth' compared to corporate communication which is perceived to be more 'mechanical'.

Consequently, the external stakeholders argue that the non-corporate language has a positive effect on their perception of SOUNDBOKS, as it is argued to be genuine and natural, giving the brand a sense of authenticity. Moreover, SOUNDBOKS' communication is perceived to be more personal and down-to-earth which is further enhancing the authenticity of the communication.

5.2.3.2 Organising theme 3.2: Open, trustworthy, and down-to-earth

The second organising theme was highly prevalent throughout the external interviews and is revolving around the perceived openness of the SOUNDBOKS brand, how the consumers find the brand to be trustworthy as well as the perception of the brand being down-to-earth. The majority of the respondents have throughout the interview mentioned the community as positively influencing the brand. According to Mads L, the community is perceived to be an added value to the SOUNDBOKS product, making it more fun to follow and engage with the brand.

> *Mads L:* "I think the way they care about their community, and make it fun to be a SOUNDBOKS customer, has helped. I think their community makes it more than just a product." (Interview 10; l. 498-500)

The community is thus enhancing the SOUNDBOKS experience, by making it more fun to be a customer. In this context, Mads L state that the community is opening up a friendly conversation between the internal and external stakeholders of SOUNDBOKS, and expresses a fondness of the

exciting and fun content which SOUNDBOKS is posting in order to engage and entertain the users of the community. In addition, Mikkel argues that the members of the community wish to engage in the brand content as well as the user-generated content, creating a down-to-earth and engaging environment. Thus, the notion of being down-to-earth and personal is supported the notion of 'sincerity' which is deemed as a source of authenticity (Trilling, 1972). This is further in line with, Guèvremont's (2018) *proximity* dimension, stating that the ability to create an intimate and familiar environment with the consumers, is closely related to the perceived authenticity of a brand. Besides, Mads K describes SOUNDBOKS as a welcoming brand following their openness towards their consumers and further believes that the SOUNDBOKS office is open for those who wish to visit.

> *Mads K: "... when they, for example, take pictures and videos from the office. Not so long ago they posted a video where they were in a cottage, and he [Hjalte] asked us from the community to provide him with our input regarding a specific topic. They often post personal pictures from the office, where they show and tell, I think it's great. You feel a little that you are invited inside." (Interview 9; l. 286-292)*

The communication strategy which entails content from within the SOUNDBOKS office and personal videos from the founders has established a personal connection with the brand. The openness is further established through the brand's interest in including the consumers' opinions and feedback for new inputs. As such, the understanding of the brand as being open and welcoming is based on SOUNDBOKS' behaviour, which reflect these values through the content they post on social media. This has, arguably, a link to Guèvremont's (2018) notion of 'brand transparency', which consumers observe in the brand's instinctive and emotional nature, thus contributing to the perception of the brand being authentic.

Consequently, the community is providing an added value to the SOUNDBOKS brand as it creates a togetherness between the brand and the consumers, enabling the brand to post content beyond commercialised, in order to become *'personal'* and *'down-to-earth'* around the users. Thus, the SOUNDBOKS brand is perceived as an *'open'* and *'trustworthy'* brand, based on communication, which is openly displaying the people behind the brand, thus inviting the consumers to engage.

5.2.3.3 Organising theme 3.3: Genuine care for customers

The third and final organising theme is derived from the patterns in the external data which indicate a perception of genuine care for the consumers. In this regard, Mads K state that SOUNDBOKS is continuously keeping the consumers up to date with the latest information and tips about the SOUNDBOKS product even after the purchase has been made.

> *Mads K: "They have even posted tips on how to get connect multiple SOUNDBOKS' together. They just give the impression that their work is not finished when we have bought the product, but they are only happy when we are happy. I think it's super cool." (Interview 9; l. 219-222)*

As such, Mads K feels that SOUNDBOKS show genuine care for their consumers by continually engaging with them, thus making sure that the customers are happy about their products and use it for its full potential. This feeling of genuine care has led him to believe that he has bought into something special.

> *Mads K: "They keep engaging in the customers, they do not personally ask each individual, but they talk to us in the community, and you feel that you are asked about how it is going and whether you are happy and happy with your purchase. You feel that you have bought something very special because they show interest in the customers." (Interview 9; l. 299-302)*

What separates the above quote from Mads K from simply describing 'good customer service' is the fact that he feels spoken to, and perceive SOUNDBOKS to have a genuine interest in his needs and opinions. This level of brand engagement has thus led to a stronger connection between Mads K and the SOUNDBOKS brand, as it has generated a perception of genuine care for him as a customer. This is once again related to the proximity dimension presented by Guèvremont (2018), which regard the fact that consumers feel equal in the communication, thus listened to and not only spoken to. In addition, Mads L share an anecdote regarding an incident which substantiates the genuine care for customers. The incident involved a man who has dropped his SOUNDBOKS into the water from a boat and asked if there was any good advice in terms of repairing it; otherwise, the man would like to purchase a new SOUNDBOKS (Interview 10; l. 474-485). However, SOUNDBOKS chose to fix his SOUNDBOKS free of charge, which Mads L believe was a fantastic move from the brand.

> *Mads L: "I think it was so cool, because SOUNDBOKS could avoid helping him, as he had already said in the same post that if he couldn't get it fixed he would buy a new one, so it was potentially $800 - $900 they could throw in their pocket extra, but instead they chose to help him without him having to pay a penny. (…) It just makes SOUNDBOKS a cool brand to support." (Interview 10; l. 486-492)*

This action provides SOUNDBOKS with a sense of integrity which is in line with Holt (2002) arguing that to be authentic the brand must be intrinsically motivated and without economic agenda. As such, Mads L believe SOUNDBOKS show genuine care for their consumers as they chose to help the customer, free of charge, thus indicating that the brand is not solely about the money, but truly care for the happiness of their customers.

Consequently, the external stakeholders perceive SOUNDBOKS as showing genuine care for their consumers. Moreover, the external stakeholders perceive the SOUNDBOKS brand as having a high focus on the consumers' happiness rather than a sole focus on commercial goals.

5.2.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The second phase of the analysis presented an understanding of the brand perception of SOUNDBOKS as the prerequisite of being perceived as an authentic brand from an external stakeholder perspective. In the above analysis of the external stakeholders three global themes were identified; *'beyond the product'*, *'consumer self-narrative'* and *'personal communication'*. Based on these, the SOUNDBOKS brand is perceived as being superior in terms of functional benefits such as 'loudness', 'durability' and 'portability', providing the brand with a sense of uniqueness and quality which is further argued to enhance authenticity through the indexicality that is ascribed to the brand. These functional benefits are further used by the external stakeholders to express a reflection of their self-identity, hence being knowledgeable about the offerings in the market, thus perceiving themselves as, e.g. a 'gadget freak'. Also, SOUNDBOKS is further perceived to be purpose-driven, hence adding emotional value to the functionality of the product, as the external stakeholders further perceived the brand to provide unique social experiences and a sense of community by uniting people. SOUNDBOKS is thus accommodating the postmodern sense of belonging by providing these social experiences and togetherness. In addition, the external stakeholders perceive SOUNDBOKS to be a non-corporate brand given the language in their communication. This youthful language is believed to be in line with the external stakeholders' perception of SOUNDBOKS as a brand, which thus enhances the genuineness and realness of the brand. Finally, the external stakeholders perceive the brand to be intrinsically motivated without economic agenda, thus showing genuine care for their consumers through their personal bond with the consumers. Consequently, the external stakeholders perceive SOUNDBOKS as an authentic brand, due to its perceived genuineness of others and relation to their self-identity.

5.3 NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

The last part of this analysis consists of a netnographic research. This study method is implemented to examining the actual behaviour of the SOUNDBOKS brand in terms of how they are communicating on social media. Moreover, this analysis will seek to understand the interaction between the external and internal stakeholders in terms of examining the actual behaviour and reactions to the communicated content. In this regard, this research sought to understand how SOUNDBOKS is projecting their brand while simultaneously identify the feedback and reaction of the

external stakeholders in order to understand the interaction between the brand and the consumer. This will further lead to an increased understanding of the nature of brand authenticity and in addition help identify the main dimensions which are being utilized in order to influence the authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand.

5.3.1 GLOBAL THEME 1: NON-CORPORATE

The first global theme identified, based on the netnographic analysis of SOUNDBOKS' social media behaviour, is regarding SOUNDBOKS' communicative approach, which consists of a specific language and tone of voice. SOUNDBOKS is communicating through fun and entertaining content including a personal touch from the internal stakeholders attempting to establish a down-to-earth and non-corporate interaction with the consumers.

5.3.1.1 Organising theme 1.1: Fun and entertaining content

The first communicative approach identified from the netnographic research was the heavy use of fun and entertaining content from the SOUNDBOKS brand. The majority of the posts, identified on the social media platforms, were filled with either textual messages or visual imagery closely linked to humorous and entertaining content. From the analysis, the below pictures are included as they symbolise and exemplify the use of fun and entertaining content delivered by SOUNDBOKS.
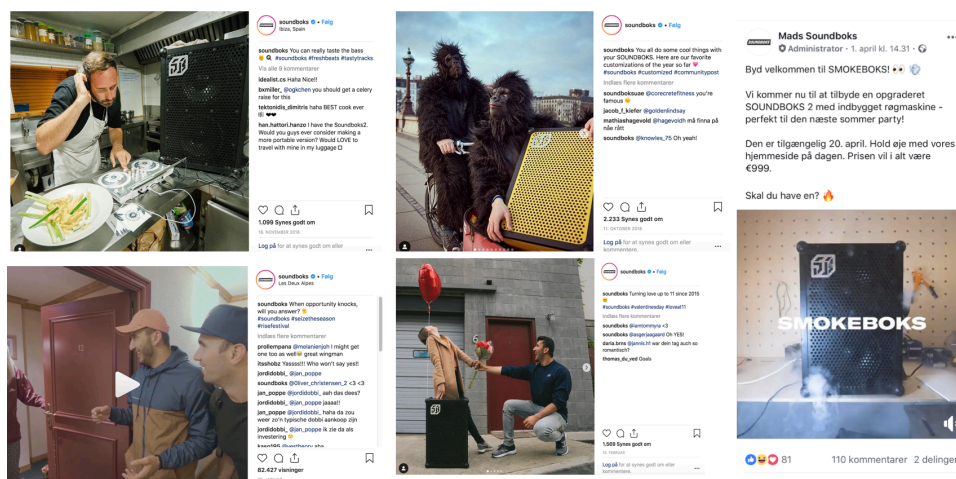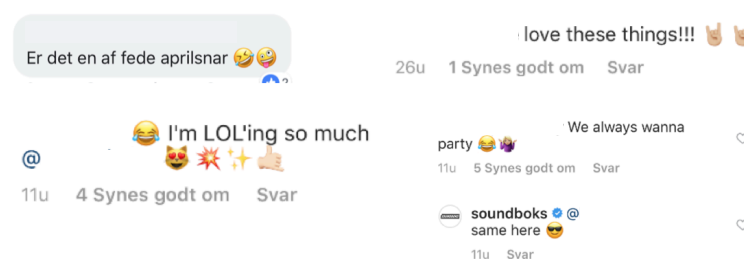

Picture 1: *Fun and entertaining content*

The first four posts are introducing the SOUNDBOKS product in three different and fun use cases which can be interpreted as the brand showcasing the many different ways of using the product in funny situations. However, this type of content is further projecting the brand as a fun and enjoyable brand due to its less commercialised content, as the product is not the primary focus, but rather a participator in these humorous moments. In addition, the post made by 'Mads SOUNDBOKS' is a

post on the Facebook community, and was posted on the 1st of April and was meant as an April fool in order to have some fun with the consumers. Consequently, instead of communicating strictly commercialised content including unique selling propositions, SOUNDBOKS is trying to entertain their followers through fun content which should evoke a feeling of joy.

This type of content has been positively received by the consumers in terms of likes and comments, as the above-chosen posts have gained an average of 1.000 likes each with around 80 comments. The analysis of the comments yielded some interesting patterns illustrating how customers reflect and interact with the fun and entertaining content:

Picture 2: *Fun and entertaining comments*

The consumers show a fondness of the humorous and entertaining content by writing positive comments on the post. In this regard, first comment in picture 2 shows how one consumer appreciates the April fools post, by commenting directly to the SOUNDBOKS brand in a casual tone '*that is a cool April fool*!'. Moreover, the second and third comment is showing an appreciation towards these fun posts by stating 'I love these things!' or 'I'm LOL'ing so much', indicating that the consumers find such content very amusing and relatable. The final comment is illustrating how the interaction between the internal and external stakeholders is continuing in the comment section, where the brand is answering the consumers. The tone is non-formal, and the use of emojis from both sides makes the interaction more personal and fun. The use of informal language is thus, as previously stated, in line with the proximity dimension presented by Guèvremont (2018), referring to the perceived authenticity being developed by through accessibility and familiarity with the consumers. Consequently, this content type seems to be positively received by the consumers while simultaneously act as a tool in order to shape the image of SOUNDBOKS as a fun and exciting brand, which potentially influence the authenticity of the brand.

5.3.1.2 Organising theme 1.2: Founders communicate directly to consumers

The second organising theme is based on an identified pattern indicating that the founders communicate directly to the consumers from their personal profile, hence outside of the Facebook brand page. As a result, the founder and CBO, Hjalte, is often using his own Facebook profile to post content on the Facebook community as well as commenting on consumer posts. This is interpreted as a way of communicating with the consumers at eye level, making the content more personal and less corporate, hence aligning with the previously mentioned proximity dimension (Guèvremont, 2018).

Picture 3: *Founder personal communication*

The tone of voice and general language is once again very casual, and the use of emoji makes the post look similar to the posts made by other members of the community. Hence SOUNDBOKS is communicating with the consumers as equals in a way the consumers do not feel they communicate to a corporate brand but rather share a personal bold to a person behind the brand (Guèvremont, 2018). In this context, Hjalte further addresses the receivers as 'friends' which indicate a special relationship between the founder and the community members. Moreover, he is the one to personally invite the external stakeholders to events (see picture 3), making the communication more personal when it is not coming from the SOUNDBOKS brand. In continuation, Hjalte is personally asking the external stakeholders for input in order to understand their demands and desires for breaking barriers, thus align the internal and external perceptions of the corporate values (see picture 3 to left). Consequently, SOUNDBOKS and Hjalte are aligned with postmodern branding which is conceptualising the management of a brand as an ongoing dynamic process between the internal and external stakeholders (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

The content posted by Hjalte's personal profile has been positively received by the consumers in terms of likes and comments, as the posts have gained an average of 60 likes each with around 80 comments. The analysis of the comments yielded some interesting patterns illustrating the bond between the founders and the consumers.


Picture 4: Founder personal comments

As illustrated in the pictures above, the comments from the external consumers are referring directly to Hjalte and are very informal in their tone of voice and are seemingly similar to how they would respond to a friend. Moreover, Hjalte is responding to the consumer comments in a casual tone, hence responding at eye level which provides the conversation with a sense of comradery and genuineness between the two parties and arguably enhances the perceived authenticity (Beverland, 2008). Consequently, the communication, which essentially is for brand purposes, becomes an interaction between friends at eye level, communicating casually and informally. The friendly and personal communication between the founders and the consumers is arguably reflecting the image of the SOUNBOKS as a personal and down-to-earth brand which potentially have a positive influence on the authenticity of the brand.

5.3.1.3 Organising theme 1.3: Get to know the employees personally

The third and final organising theme linked to the SOUNDBOKS brand behaving and communicating more personally, in contrast to corporate and commercialised brands, is their customer service management, or in this context, their community managers. SOUNDBOKS have hired community managers whose primary focus is to maintain and support the Facebook community members, or in other words, provide customer service to the members of the community. However, the SOUNDBOKS community managers seem to have a more personal connection with the members of the community, compared to what is seen in conventional customer service departments. As an example, when a new community manager is joining the community, they write a personal post about who they are, in order to create a personal bond with the consumers.
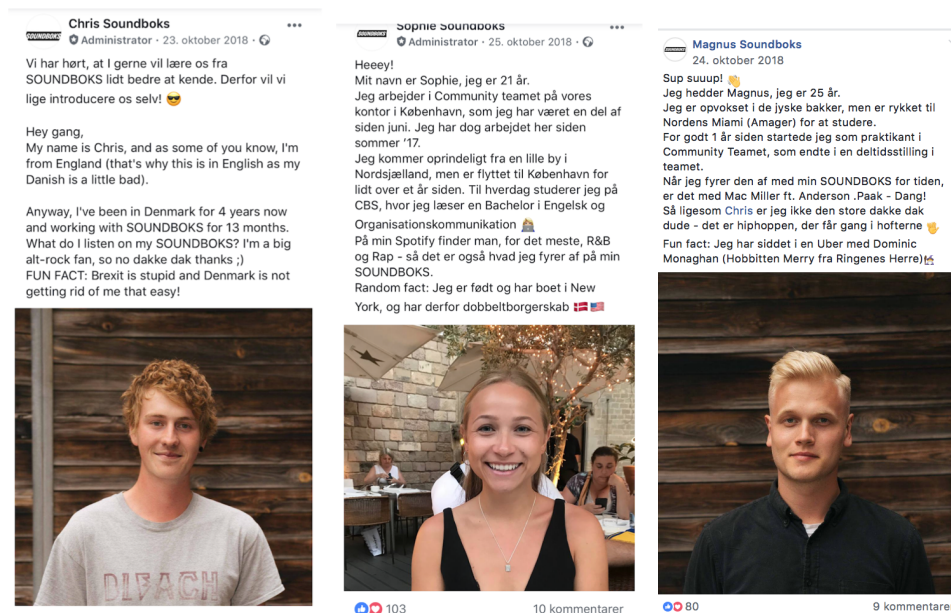
Picture 5: *Employees sharing information about themselves*

As illustrated in the posts above, the language is in line with the previously mentioned organising themes, hence very down-to-earth and informal. These posts are moreover including personal information about the employees themselves which potentially encourage the community members to get to know the community managers on a more personal level, rather than just being a part of a giant corporation. The members of the community are thus able to get an idea about the person behind the screen, thus creating a unique communicative environment where both parts are interacting at eye level. In addition, the age of the community managers is rather young, which can provide SOUNDBOKS with existential authenticity as the external stakeholders might feel more relaxed and down-to-earth in their interactions as they can reflect themselves in these managers due to similar interests, age or communicational language (Wang, 1999).

Illustrated below is a selection of the comments made by the members, showing how they greet the new community managers in a relatively informal and friendly manner.
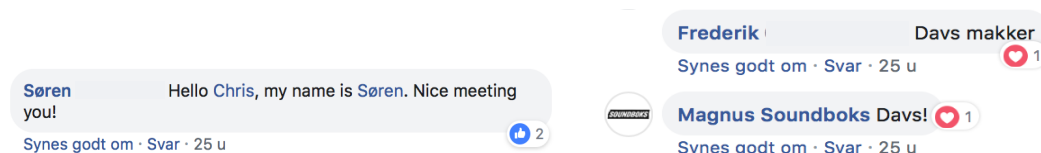
Picture 6: *External stakeholders greet new employees*

The members of the community are welcoming the new community managers, thus establishing a friendly relationship which they can use later on in the community. This relation makes the members

more inclined to tag the community members directly in their posts when in need of help or information. By having a more personal relationship with the customer service employees, the members/consumers know whom to approach and how to approach them when in need. This is further illustrated below.

Picture 7: External stakeholders reach out to specific employees

Consequently, SOUNDBOKS have employed community managers who have the sole focus on maintaining and supporting the Facebook community. However, these community managers can have personal and down-to-earth interactions with the community members thus forging a relationship between the brand and the consumers which potentially affect the authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand positively.

5.3.2 GLOBAL THEME 2: BRAND ENGAGEMENT

The second theme which was identified during the netnographic analysis is regarding the engagement of the SOUNDBOKS brand within the community. The brand shows a high interest in the community members and is argued to be highly engaged in the consumers, thus display a willingness and desire to support the members and listen to the conversations and feedback they present. In other words, this theme revolves around the fact that SOUNDBOKS show genuine care for their community members and customers.

5.3.2.1 Organising theme 2.1: Community care

The first organised theme within 'Brand Engagement' is identified as the aspect of 'caring'. Thus, the posts selected illustrates how SOUNDBOKS cares about its community members/external stakeholders and their needs. The two examples illustrated below were chosen from the SOUNDBOKS community, i.e. two brand-generated posts. These two posts illustrate and showcase an identified pattern which indicates how SOUNDBOKS practice genuine care for their community and their consumers.

Picture 8: *SOUNDBOKS sharing important and helpful information*

The content illustrated in picture 8 (to the left) illustrates a SOUNDBOKS community manager, Chris, searching for an owner of a lost product. In the post, the community manager tells that SOUNDBOKS has been in contact with the police about a stolen SOUNDBOKS with having a specific ID-number, and he wishes to find the owner of this stolen SOUNDBOKS. From the authors point-of-view, this is an example of genuine care, as SOUNDBOKS appears to help this particular customer with no specific commercial or financial interest. This provides the SOUNDBOKS brand with a sense of trustworthiness and integrity, which is shown to have a direct link to the perception of brand authenticity among external stakeholders (Morhart et al., 2015; Cappannelli and Cappannelli, 2004). Another example is seen in picture 8 (to the right) which showcase how SOUNDBOKS are sharing a genuine concern about products which have been stolen at the Roskilde Festival. This is an excellent example of how the brand seems to take action and transcend these potential issues with owning a SOUNDBOKS. This identified care for consumers is further in line with the previously stated perception from the external consumers arguing for SOUNDBOKS continually trying their best to satisfy the needs of the customers, even after the purchase has been made. In addition, Hjalte further commented on a post from an external stakeholder who requested a gift card.

*Picture 9*: *Tailor-made solutions by the founder*

In this context, the external stakeholder asks for a gift card, which is currently not a possibility; however, Hjalte provides him with a solution that SOUNDBOKS typically do not offer, which illustrates

that SOUNDBOKS is willing to go above and beyond for the individual, thus providing service and solutions tailor-made for the individual.

Consequently, SOUNDBOKS is showing genuine care for their consumers, which is illustrated based on their behaviour in terms of sharing concerns and willingness to go above and beyond for the community members and customers. This act of genuine care is arguably influencing the image as well as the authenticity of the brand positively seen from a consumer perspective.

5.3.2.2 Organising theme 2.2: Informing the consumers

The second organised theme within 'Brand Engagement' is based on how SOUNDBOKS shared non-requested information about their product and services in order to keep the external stakeholders updated. Thus, the posts below illustrate 'openness', and 'responsibility' towards the community which is fundamental factors in order to perceive a brand as authentic in the postmodern era (Morhart et al., 2015; Beverland, 2005a). In line with this, a few sub-themes were identified as relevant for the 'information' aspect of the authenticity of the brand. This was interpreted as 1) openness about inputs from customers, and 2) taking responsibility within the community. Hence, the following brand-generated posts showcase how SOUNDBOKS share information to the consumers:
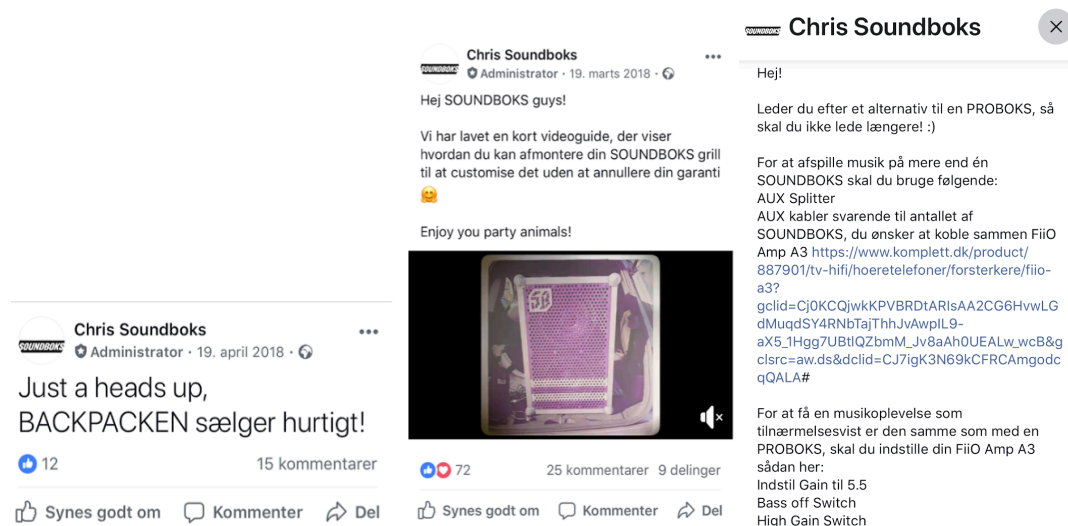
Picture 10: *Informing the external stakeholders*

The three posts above all share the information-giving aspect as they all seek to provide the community members with useful information and updates enabling them to enhance their experience with the brand. The first post seeks to inform the customers that the product accessory, hence the "BACKPACK", is almost out of stock. This information might seem ordinary and

commercial, but given the high interest in this particular accessory, it is not perceived to be necessary to create this post to increase sales and is thus instead assumed to be a way of making sure that anyone interested in the accessory is getting a fair chance. The second post illustrates a video guide, showing the external stakeholders, how to customise their SOUNDBOKS, without losing their rights of guarantee. Typically, the guarantee is lost when the original product is taken apart; however, the internal stakeholders know about the customers' interest in customising their product, which has led them to assist the customers in this process. This shows genuine care for the community members and is further in line with the third post, informing the consumers how to connect to multiple speakers simultaneously. In the post, a link to a third party webshop is attached which links to a product, not owned by SOUNDBOKS, but similar to their own PROBOKS. This post is an exemplification of SOUNDBOKS having genuine care for their consumers and are willing to disregard the economic agenda in order to satisfy their needs.

Along similar lines, SOUNDBOKS shows 'openness' and 'transparency' by posting questions with the purpose of listening to their customers.

Picture 11: *The brand seeks feedback from the external stakeholders*

The three examples above illustrate how SOUNDBOKS seek the opinion of the community members, in order to improve and develop the brand in the right direction. Following this, in the first post, SOUNDBOKS present an idea for creating SOUNDBOKS merchandise, but instead of just producing the merchandise from an inside-out perspective, SOUNDBOKS seek the ideas and feedback of the community members. The post was well-received with over 63 comments from community members. In the second post, the founder Hjalte is asking the community members whether the brand should use the English or Danish language in their global communication outside of the community. The last post is seeking insights from the consumers in order to understand how they use the physical product and thus enable the internal stakeholders to improve the future products to fit the needs of the external stakeholders. Common for these three posts is that they comply to

the notion of postmodern branding and thus include the internal stakeholders into the process of creating meaning and determine the direction of the brand moving forward (Louro & Cunha, 2001). This further shows a great openness towards the opinion of the customers which is further linked to brand authenticity (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

5.3.3 GLOBAL THEME 3: EXPRESSING A LIFESTYLE

In the third and final global theme of this netnographic analysis, it is identified that both the SOUNDBOKS and the users express a lifestyle through what they post and how they engage in these posts. Thus, SOUNDBOKS is through their content trying to establish a lifestyle by communicating the functional as well as the emotional aspirations of the brand. The brand further encourages the audience to share moments which is in line with the lifestyle they wish to represent. SOUNDBOKS is further showing how the brand internally is living out this specific lifestyle.

5.3.3.1 Organising theme 3.1: Encourage the consumers to share their experiences

The first organised theme identified is anchored around customer engagement. One example of this is the Instagram campaign *#seizetheseason (i.e. "seize the season")* during the winter 2018/2019. The campaign was introduced with dazzling photos of young skiers and snowboarders together with a SOUNDBOKS in the snow. The three examples picked gained respectively 751, 671 and 925 likes on Instagram, illustrated how SOUNDBOKS showcased their product in appealing surroundings with a message encouraging the customers to share their experiences with the product. This campaign could be interpreted as communication with two purposes: 1) showcase the durability of the product, i.e. as it is visualised in the snow, and 2) encouraging users to take part in the winter season with their SOUNDBOKS. Throughout this campaign SOUNDBOKS would select the best photos posted by customers that used the hashtag #seizetheseason:
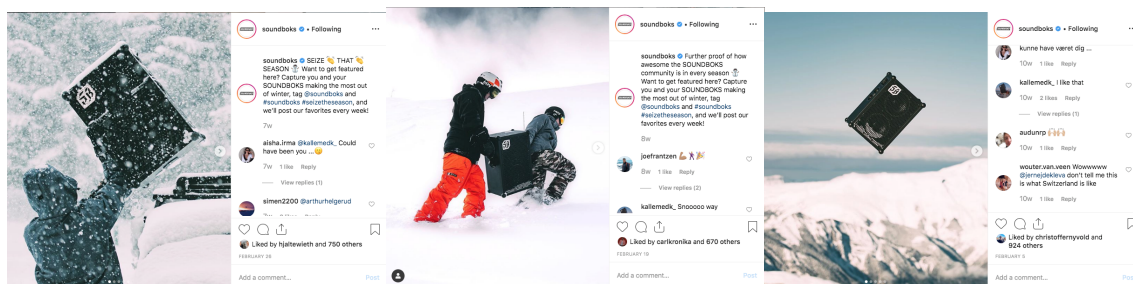
Picture 12: Dazzling and aspirational photos encourage the external stakeholders

The pictures below are examples of the customer-generated posts, sharing their winter-experiences with their SOUNDBOKS. From this, a clear link between the aspired lifestyle of SOUNDBOKS and the lifestyle of the customers is identified. The previously stated lifestyle SOUNDBOKS wish to be

associated with, thus seem to be adopted by the community members, and they are encouraged by SOUNDBOKS to behave according to this lifestyle, which authenticate the simulation and further create a sense of authenticity around the brand (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Morhart et al., 2015).

Picture 13: Customer-generated content

Looking, at related comments, this encouragement to sharing their experiences with the SOUNDBOKS product was seemingly well-received. Based on the comments, it is illustrated how customers interact and reflect upon such content:
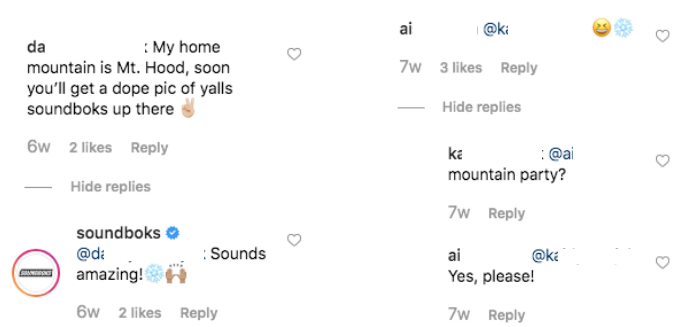

Picture 14 – External stakeholders accommodate to the lifestyle of SOUNDBOKS

The comments above, show how customers show positive attitudes towards engaging in the products and the experiences. Hence, the first illustration shows a comment from an external stakeholder claiming that he will soon send *"dope pic[ture] of [your all's] SOUNDBOKS"* on a mountain. This customer is thus conforming to the lifestyle, set out by SOUNDBOKS, looking for extreme places to throw a party, thus breaking the physical barriers. The second comment illustrates how users encourage each other to throw a *"mountain party"*, thus become part of the lifestyle and part of the community. In conclusion, these types of posts seem to act as a way of authenticating the simulation, by encouraging customers to use their product according to the desired lifestyle.

5.3.3.2 Organising theme 3.2: Share the inside of the office

The last organising theme is anchored around the way SOUNDBOKS openly share and communicate their internal culture through social media. Along with several posts, a pattern was identified, showing that SOUNDBOKS often show the inside of their headquarters, which enables the external stakeholders to get an idea about what is going on behind the scenes.
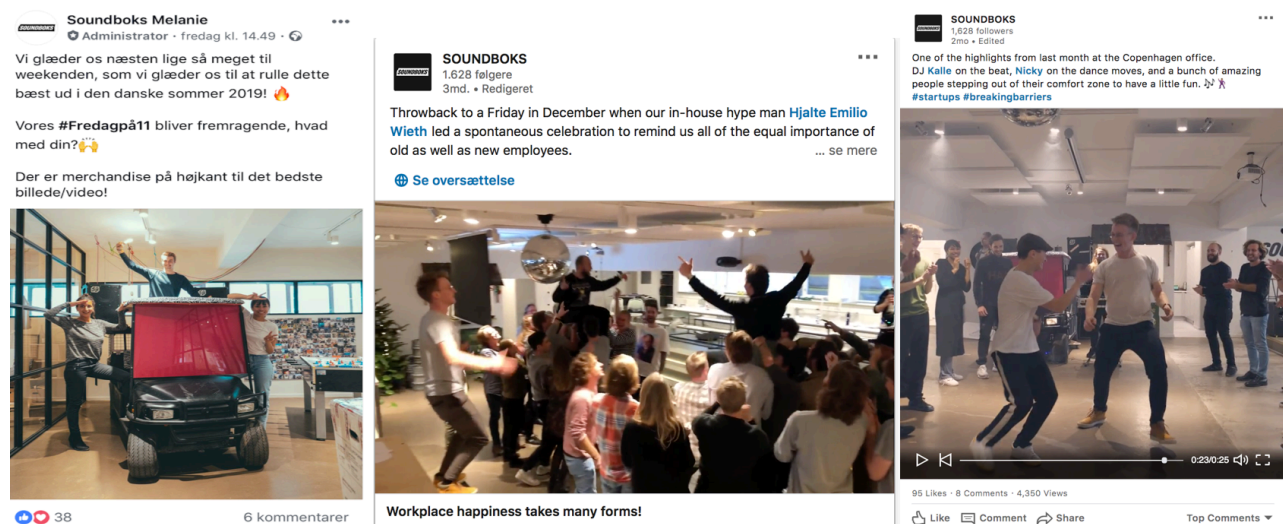

Picture 15: Pictures and videos posted from the inside of the SOUNDBOKS office

As the above three social media posts illustrate, SOUNDBOKS share the people behind the brand through photos that appear to be spontaneous and down-to-earth. The first example is posted on the SOUNDBOKS Facebook community, where SOUNDBOKS, share a photo of three internal stakeholders posing with a golf cart inside their office. This post displays the internal stakeholders as young and humorous, which the external stakeholders may be able to reflect and mirror themselves in. This can further generate a sense of trustworthiness as the consumers can see and get to know the persons behind the screen and see that these individuals are similar to themselves. Moreover, these posts illustrating the inside of the office is further providing the brand with a sense of transparency, where SOUNDBOKS is actively sharing emotions and spontaneity posting pictures about what is going on behind closed doors, implicating that they have nothing to hide (Guèvremont, 2018). The second post is from their LinkedIn platform and shows how the employees have hosted a spontaneous party inside the office, thus illustrating to the external stakeholders that SOUNDBOKS are able to practise what they preach (Beverland, 2005a). This is further illustrated in the third post, which is showing a video where the founders have planned a 'pop-up' dance lesson among the employees, in order to break the comfort zone. The video is thus showing the internal stakeholders dancing and breaking their own comfort zone in order to show the external stakeholders, that it is not only empty words, but they are themselves acting upon their own purpose. This is providing a

sense of trustworthiness showing the consumers that they are genuine and true to their values, hence enhancing the authenticity of the brand. From the authors' point of this illustrate how a brand authentically can be transparent and open the doors in order to welcome the external stakeholders to see how the internal stakeholders operate.

Thus, looking into the comment-section these posts showing the inside of the SOUNDBOKS office seems to generate a positive reaction from the external stakeholders:
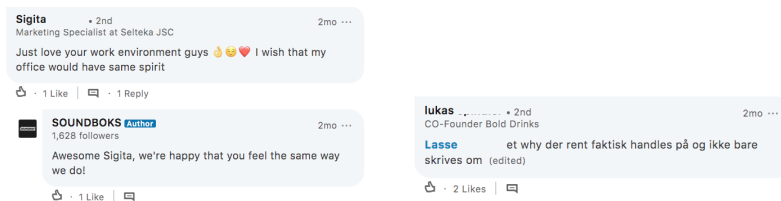
Picture 16*: Feedback on the pictures of the SOUNDBOKS office*

The first comment in picture 16 shows an external stakeholder appreciating the work environment of SOUNDBOKS and show a desire to have a workplace with the same spirit and express a desire to adapt to the lifestyle. The second comment is illustrating a stakeholder identifying that SOUNDBOKS is truly practising what they preach which seems to have a positive effect on his perception of SOUNDBOKS. In line with this, it is argued that these types of posts appear to reflect that 1) SOUNDBOKS appreciate their employees, and 2) that SOUNDBOKS is a social organisation living up to their inherent values. Thus, this way of communicating how the brand lives its values are perceived to be a vital dimension positively contributing to brand authenticity.

5.3.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The final phase of this analysis had the purpose of understanding the interaction and actual behaviour of multiple stakeholders on social media. In the above analysis three global themes were identified; '*non-corporate*', '*brand engagement*' and '*expressing a lifestyle*'. Based on these, it was found that the internal stakeholders are communicating with the external stakeholders in a '*down-to-earth*' and '*non-corporate*' manner, thus creating a relatable bond between the brand and the consumers, as the external stakeholders are communicated to as an equal (Guèvremont, 2018). Based on the internal stakeholders' willingness to share details about themselves and actively engage with the consumers, the consumers can reflect themselves in the brand, due to similar interests, age or language, which provide SOUNDBOKS with existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). In addition, the founders further engage with the consumers through their own personal profiles, which is creating a sense of comradery and genuineness (Beverland et al., 2008). Also, the founders are

actively asking the consumers for input in order to understand their demands and desires, thus accommodating to the postmodern branding which argues that brand management as an ongoing dynamic process between the internal and external stakeholders (Louro & Cunha, 2001). In addition, the internal stakeholders are openly sharing the inside of the offices which is providing the brand with a sense of *'transparency'*. These posts are further reflecting the brand's internal stakeholders' ability to walk-the-talk, and thereby acting according to the deeply held values. Lastly, the brand is actively encouraging the consumers to share their experiences with the SOUNDBOKS in a manner that represents and authenticate the simulation of the lifestyle of the brand (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Consequently, the SOUNDBOKS brand is believed to have a personal connection with the external stakeholders which is providing the brand with a sense of *'genuineness'* and *'trustworthiness'*.

DISCUSSION

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this section is to discuss and evaluate the findings from the internal, external and netnographic analysis (cf. Chapter 5). With a point of departure in the SOUNDBOKS case, the intention is to outline the acquired new knowledge which arises when combining the theoretical and empirical results concerning the use of authenticity in postmodern branding. This section is structured based on the research question identified in section 1.1, which will be discussed and answered by combining the generated empirical and theoretical knowledge within this thesis.

The global and organising themes identified in the internal, external and netnographic analysis will thus be linked in order to demonstrate how the nature of authenticity can be understood from a postmodern perspective. Subsequently, the global- and organising themes of the analysis will be linked in order to derive the possible dimensions which are perceived to be the primary driver of authenticity from a multiple stakeholder perspective. Following this, the theoretical- and managerial implications are discussed in relation to the theory proposed.

6.1 THE NATURE OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY

The analysis within this present thesis underscores the importance of understanding the nature of brand authenticity. In the case of SOUNDBOKS, it seems that the perception of brand authenticity and brand meaning is negotiated between multiple stakeholders. Moreover, the findings indicate that the authenticity of SOUNDBOKS gains its strength when individuals inside and outside the organisation are able to reflect themselves in the brand. Hence, what is deemed authentic to each stakeholder is subjective in terms of how they substantiate, create, and (re)produce the authenticity of the brand in relation to their self-concept. This is further in line with Sartre (1992) which suggests that authenticity is about taking full responsibility for one's life, choices and actions.

6.1.1 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Based on the findings, it is illustrated that the internal and external respondents perceive the SOUNDBOKS brand to be genuine, real, and original, however, it is based on subjective interpretations of different values and benefits ascribed to the brand. In this regard, the internal respondents claim the brand to be more than just a physical product, hence describing aspirational and emotional values of the brand in terms of breaking social and mental barriers. Internally the brand is further claimed to be a lifestyle brand with a purpose responding to social discourses. However, even though the internal respondents claim the brand to be more than just a physical product, SOUNDBOKS has initially positioned themselves based on functional benefits in the eyes of the external stakeholders. In this regard, the external respondents associate SOUNDBOKS with

functional values, such as 'loudness', 'durability' and 'portability', when describing the meaning of the brand. These functional values thus seem to have importance; in the way, customers argue for other speaker brands as being inferior to SOUNDBOKS. The quality of the product and its gathering effect is thus important to the external stakeholders. However, they further indicate the brand's genuineness of others, e.g. the genuine care of the consumers, as enhancing their perception of SOUNDBOKS' authenticity, thus imply the importance of emotional values as well. Consequently, the internal and external stakeholders show both shared and distinctive perceptions of the authenticity of SOUNDBOKS. The internal stakeholders primarily base their perception on existential cues i.e. the brand having a purpose based on founder identity and value, which gives the sense of realness and genuineness (Morhart et al., 2015). On the other hand, the external stakeholders show interest in both the indexical cues, i.e. the product performance, as well as the existential cues i.e. the ability to express their true self through consumption.

As a result, what is deemed authentic to the internal respondents, is not entirely aligned with the authenticity perception of the external respondents. However, the SOUNDBOKS brand is expressed as an authentic brand from each stakeholder's point of view, even though the perception of each group is subjective. However, the consistency of subjective perceptions is argued to be fundamental. In this regard, Harter (1999) suggest that living authentically involves consistency between the physiological state, emotions, beliefs and cognitions (Wood et al., 2008). In this context, authenticity is perceived as being rooted in subjective and internal experiences and can thus be regarded as the quality of perceived self-identity experienced as subjective consistency. Consequently, brand authenticity is based on subjective perceptions about the brand which does not necessarily have to be aligned across the internal and external stakeholders in order to become authentic. This is illustrated by the two entities (i.e. the internal perspective and the external perspective) incorporated in the framework presented later in this chapter.

6.1.2 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AS A NEGOTIATED CONSTRUCT

Based on the above notion of authenticity being a social construct, this indicates a need for a new approach to understanding the nature of brand authenticity in terms of brand-meaning co-creation from a postmodern perspective. It is thus argued that brand authenticity is developed in a multi-stakeholder system, where several stakeholders make choices that affect the authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand. This is in contrast to 'passive' models framing consumers as mere receivers of marketer-driven meanings, thus assumed to play no role in the meaning of the brand (Beverland, 2018). The traditional approach led to a top-down model whereby marketers provide all the content

of the brand's intended meaning. In contrast, the thesis at hand argues that in the case of SOUNDBOKS, the consumers are framed as 'active' meaning creators, as they engage in direct interaction with the brand and other consumers. This perception of the consumers being active participators is further in line with Cova's (1996) notion of postmodern consumers having a desire to become part of the meaning creation. This is especially evident in the analysis of this thesis, showing that, SOUNDBOKS is actively searching for approval and is interested in listening to the feedback the multiple stakeholders within the eco-system. Thus, implicitly asking them the question 'who am I?' in order to establish what the stakeholders perceive as self-relevant and hence genuinely authentic about the brand. The nature of brand authenticity can thus be understood as an iterative process where multiple stakeholders are involved in the interaction and negotiation regarding the authenticity of the brand.

Consequently, these findings are in line with literature related to existentialism, hence arguing that brand authenticity is not a stable construct, but rather highly dynamic (Heidegger, 1996; Frankl, 1985; Maslow, 1968; Sartre, 1992). This is further in line with social constructivism where knowledge and truth are found in the dynamic interaction between multiple entities regarding a phenomenon (Burr, 2003). This process is argued to be similar to Hatch & Schultz's (2002) dynamic identity model, that entails the process of 'negotiation' and 'mirroring'. The dynamics of 'negotiation' appears as an iterative process between multiple stakeholders, negotiating the meaning of a brand, i.e. through the use of brand authenticity dimensions as argued in this thesis. Whereas, the dynamics of 'mirroring' appears as the brand's reflection and expression towards the consumers which collect the brand impressions and mirroring their self-identity back to the brand. Thus, the thesis at hand proposes that the nature of brand authenticity as an ongoing dynamic process between multiple stakeholders as active participants, as illustrated in the framework below.

6.1.3 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AS A MIRRORED CONSTRUCT

As mentioned in the section above, the identified claims of 'loudness', 'durability', and 'portability' indicate that the external respondents perceive SOUNDBOKS through functional benefits. These functional claims are merely emotional, but according to brand literature regarding postmodern consumption, these functional benefits tells a lot more about the identity of the consumer than what is alleged. Beverland (2018) argue that "*what we buy says a lot about who we are, how we see ourselves, and even who we would like to be*" (p. 32). This means that the consumption of brands in the postmodern era is influenced by identity creation, rather than solely the objective and physical performance of the product the brand offers. In this context, Belk (1988) argues that the possession

of things is an extension of self, thus, providing emotional and symbolic value to the brand being consumed. As a result, the consumers ascribe emotional benefits to these functional benefits in order to reflect the desired self-identity. This is further illustrated in the external analysis, as the product superiority of SOUNDBOKS, is expressed as a reflection of being knowledgeable about the offerings in the market, thus underlining how the consumers perceive their self-identity as gadget freaks or savvy individuals. Similarly, the internal respondents express the brand as a reflection or 'mirroring' of their own self-identity, as their identities and values are perceived as being anchored in the SOUNDBOKS brand.

However, in contrast to Belk (1988) and McCracken (1986) stating that brands have symbolic and identity-related benefits, which is used to articulate self-identity based on predictable movements of meaning through fashion systems and advertising, the postmodernity claim that meaning is free floating and released from these traditional channels of meaning creation. Therefore, in order to create a self-identity which is deemed authentic, the individual must take full responsibility for one's life, choices and actions (Sartre, 1992). In continuation, research within social media, both brand and consumers present their authentic self as a product of online interactions (Robinson, 2018). This is seen in the netnographic study, where stakeholders engage in identity curation when sharing, commenting, and liking social media posts in the context of the brand, e.g. when users encourage each other to throw a "mountain party", they curate their identity in their engagement, in order to become part of the lifestyle and the community.

Consequently, from an existentialist and postmodern perspective, an authentic brand appears as the medium where individuals can reflect their true or desired selves. This is, however, limited to the extent insofar the brand can provide self-relevant and authentic information for the stakeholders to mirror their self-identity in, i.e. the underlying dimensions presented later in this chapter (Rose & Wood, 2005).

6.1.4 THE DYNAMIC BRAND AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK

Based on the above findings and discussion, the present thesis recognises the nature of brand authenticity as two-fold: 1) brand authenticity is 'negotiated', or 2) brand authenticity is 'mirrored'. The SOUNDBOKS brand consists of multiple stakeholders with individual identities and subjective perceptions, which is co-creating authenticity in an iterative process, meaning that authenticity is fluid and 'social-negotiable' (Cohen, 1988). Additionally, these multiple stakeholders continuously reflect or 'mirror', their desired identities in the brand through self-relevant and authentic information

(Shankar & Fitchett, 2002). The authentic and self-relevant information is further argued to be extracted and negotiated through a set of dimensions, which is identified as the main drivers of authenticity. From a multiple-stakeholder perspective, these dimensions are further evaluated based on their perceived genuineness, originality and realness in relation to the authenticity of the brand. This will be further elaborated in the next section. Consequently, the presented dynamic brand authenticity framework shows how one can understand the nature of brand authenticity within postmodernism as a dynamic and iterative process consisting of multiple reflections and negotiations between multiple stakeholders.
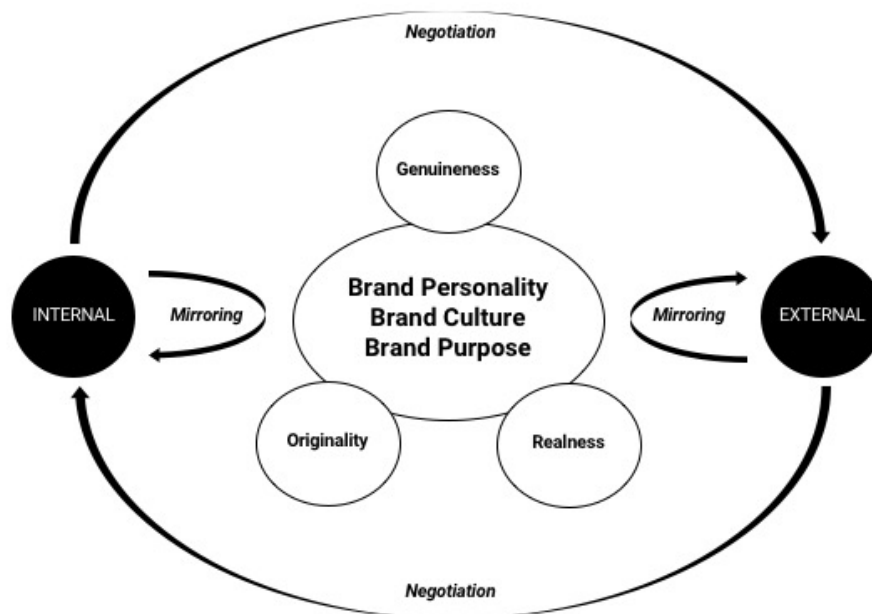
Own contribution: *The dynamic brand authenticity framework*

6.2 DIMENSIONS OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY

The following section seeks to determine the main driver of authenticity from an internal as well as an external perspective. As discussed above, the nature of authenticity within a postmodern context is argued to be a dynamic social process between the consumers and the brand. Consequently, it is fundamental to understand the key dimensions being reflected and negotiated from both the internal and external perspective. These dimensions were determined based on whether they were emphasised in all three phases of the analysis. Thus, these dimensions are evaluated based on their perceived genuineness, originality and realness in relation to the brand authenticity. As a result, the following three dimensions will be further discussed in this section; '*the personality of the brand*', '*the culture of the brand*' and '*the purpose of the brand*'.

6.2.1 PERSONALITY OF THE BRAND

The empirical findings suggest that the personality of SOUNDBOKS is a vital component for the brand as it was found to be essential for both the internal and external stakeholders. From an internal perspective, the brand is characterised as a reflection of their own personality, providing the brand with a set of unique personality traits that are directly linked to their self-identity. Additionally, when the internal stakeholders were asked to describe the personality of the SOUNDBOKS brand, the majority compared the brand persona with the founders' personalities. Moreover, the internal respondents claim that they show similar personality traits as the target audience, thus arguably providing SOUNDBOKS with a unique ability to understand their needs and wants. As a result, the personality of the brand is, from an internal perspective, positively influencing its authenticity, as the brand is perceived to act upon the genuineness of own beliefs and actions, thus reflecting the self-identity of the internal stakeholders.

In addition, the internal stakeholders are characterising the people within SOUNDBOKS as down-to-earth and personal. This perception is further shared by the external stakeholders describing the brand as informal and friendly in their communication which is arguably providing the brand with a sense of trustworthiness and openness. This is further supported by the netnographic analysis which visualises the casual and informal interactions between the internal and external stakeholders, which, based on their responses, is found to have a positive influence on the authenticity perception of the SOUNDBOKS brand. As such, the down-to-earth and informal relationship between the consumers and the SOUNDBOKS brand is reflecting a more personalised brand, thus providing SOUNDBOKS with personality traits that resonate within the internal and external stakeholders. In line with this, philosophical existentialism argues authenticity related to brand personality advocates the notion that authenticity functions as a resource for individuals to become their true and authentic self (Morhart et al., 2015).

The existential authenticity is very much in line with postmodernism, where the consumers desire to create their own identity through consumption, thus actively searching for brands that reflect the desired self (Cova, 1996b). The personality of SOUNDBOKS is further characterised as; fun, down-to-earth, social and positive, which is the symbolic values, stakeholders can attach to their self-identity. The majority of the internal and external respondents, was able to identify with all or most of these characteristics as part of their self-identity, thus enabling the stakeholders to reflect their authentic self in the brand. This is further in line with the notion of 'decentering' presented by Firat &

Venkatesh (1995) stating that that consumption is utilised as a tool to construct self-identity by absorbing the values and meanings inherent in the brands the consumers consume.

As a result, the personality of the SOUNDBOKS brand is claimed to be a key dimension for the creation of brand authenticity as it establishes the authentic symbolism of the brand, which the postmodern consumers consume in order to create and reflect their self-image.

6.2.2 CULTURE OF THE BRAND

The empirical findings further demonstrate a link between the brand culture and the authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand, as this particular dimension was found to be essential from both the internal and the external perspective. Moreover, the netnographic analysis also illustrated that the stakeholders perceive the culture around the SOUNDBOKS brand to be unique.

From an internal perspective, the uniqueness is argued to be related to the values identifying the culture as 'open' and 'inclusive'. They perceive the brand to act according to these identified values thus indicating that the brand is practising what they preach, which is in line with Beverland (2009) arguing that authentic brands are led by leaders who 'walk the talk'. In this regard, the stakeholders perceive the mindset of the brand to be 'open' and 'respectful', and these values are further reflected and fulfilled in the brand culture. Furthermore, the external respondents argue that SOUNDBOKS differentiates from its competitors by having a fundamental desire to create 'unique and satisfying experiences' for the consumers. As a result, SOUNDBOKS is believed to have a genuine care for the consumers, which is acknowledged as key for the brand's authenticity. In addition, both the internal and external stakeholders, argue that the brand maintains the connection to the consumers throughout the entire brand journey, even after purchase. In this context, the notion of genuine care for the consumers further show similarities to Morhart et al.'s (2015) authenticity dimension 'integrity', implying a moral purity and responsibility of the brand, which adhere to ethical brand values and sincere care for the consumer (Morhart et al., 2015). The perception of SOUNDBOKS, thus, provides the culture of the brand with a sense of integrity which is directly linked to a positive perception of the authenticity of a brand (ibid.).

In addition, according to the external analysis, the consumers seem to believe that the internal culture of SOUNDBOKS is intrinsically motivated, meaning that the passion for the product and the aim for consumer happiness, over commercial goals, is highly prioritised. This is further stated by the internal respondents, as the brand has acquired community managers with the sole purpose of nurturing current SOUNDBOKS customers. In this context, Guèvremont (2018) have found a similar link between being intrinsically motivated and being perceived as an authentic brand. She defines this link through the authenticity dimension 'virtuousness', which is achieved when the brand is

committed to pursuing its inner passion and not motivated by profits and commercial success alone (Guèvremont, 2018). This is further in line with Holt (2002) stating that in order to be authentic, the brand must be without an economic agenda, and thus the culture of the brand should inherent, intrinsic held values.

In line with the above-discussed brand personality, SOUNDBOKS is argued to have a 'casual' and 'informal' brand culture, which is illustrated in the interactions with the external stakeholders. The external stakeholders seem to appreciate the use of informal language, making them feel like an equal in the interaction. Moreover, the SOUNDBOKS community managers are focusing on establishing a close connection to the external stakeholders by actively sharing information about themselves, thus creating a personal bond to the stakeholders. This is further in line with Guèvremont's (2018) concept of 'proximity', stating that being accessible and having a close personal connection to the consumers with familiarity and intimacy, is believed to be central in the assessment of brand authenticity.

As the postmodern consumer is becoming more sceptical towards advertising, having a brand culture with a genuine focus on the consumers, and hence focus on downplaying commercial interests, is argued to be essential within the postmodern era. Consequently, the genuineness, realness and originality of a brand's culture are argued to be the second main dimension for authenticity creation within the SOUNDBOKS brand.

6.2.3 PURPOSE OF THE BRAND

All respondents within the analysis, both from an internal as well as an external perspective expressed a particular fondness of the brand being 'purpose-driven', thus providing the product with more than just functional values. From an internal perspective the tagline' BREAK THROUGH THE NOISE' is based on three layers of symbolic value; breaking physical-, social-, and mental barriers. The internal stakeholders perceive the social and mental barriers as being built upon deeply held values of the founders and is further seen as the main components of the brand purpose. The social and mental aspect is further found to be the aspirational values the SOUNDBOKS and arguably addresses the social discourses wherein the founders belong. In other words, the brand is perceived to have values beyond the physical product, which is, emphasised through aspirational purpose embedded in the brand. In this regard, stakeholders understood the purpose of the brand as enabling individuals to break comfort zones and further establish an environment where individuals thrive on being more social. Contrary, the external stakeholders, were initially more focused on the product's

functional benefits rather than the emotional. However, the stakeholders further emphasised SOUNDBOKS to be driven by a purpose which they believe is based on their roots linked to Roskilde Festival, hence, providing a sense of community and festival feeling in everyday life. As a result, a coherence was established as the external perception of the purpose is similar to that of the internals, describing a desire to break social and mental barriers.

The purpose of the SOUNDBOKS brand is further described as a 'lifestyle' brand associated with being open-minded, social and inclusive. This is further illustrated in the netnographic analysis where SOUNDBOKS encourage the consumers to share their experiences with the brand, hence share their barrier breaking experiences thus act according to the brand purpose. In addition, SOUNDBOKS' social media communication is argued to be aspirational, hence involving visual content, linked with social activities or barrier breaking situations, to inspire and evoke emotions within the external stakeholders. The emotional and aspirational content provide the stakeholders with a simulated image of what can be expected of the brand experience. According to Arnould & Price (2000), brand communication confronting individuals with dream images effaces the distinction between reality and simulation. However, during the interviews, the respondents were presented with visual stimuli and were capable of separating the simulations from the real, but often chose the simulation as the true reflection of SOUNDBOKS. The respondents thus acknowledge that the actual experience is rarely as pictured on social media, although perceived real to the interpreter. This is further linked to the postmodernity and hyperreality, where consumers show a tendency to prefer the simulation to the real (Cova, 1996a). The aspirational content is thus regarded as the simulation which embodies the impression-based authenticity, as consumers perceive the authenticity cues as to real, regardless of its potentially inherent fakeness (Beverland, 2005).

From the netnographic analysis, it is further illustrated that the consumers actively share their social experiences with the brand, thus behaving in line with the purpose and the aspirational values of the brand. This is further in line with postmodern consumption, stating that when the community adopts the simulations of hyperreality, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As a result, when the consumers actively share and create similar experiences as the simulations posted by the brand, the SOUNDBOKS community thus authenticate the simulation, hence creating a social reality of the community that is deemed authentic.

The brand purpose of SOUNDBOKS is further argued to provide the brand with a unique symbolism, which according to Morhart et al. (2015), describes authentic brands by reflecting values the stakeholders use to construct an authentic self. As a result, SOUNDBOKS is perceived as a lifestyle

brand which is guided by their brand purpose. The brand is thus creating authenticity through the symbols of breaking comfort zones and creating social experiences, which is ascribed to the individual stakeholders' self-image. Therefore, the purpose of the brand is argued to be the third and final fundamental dimension for authenticity creation within the SOUNDBOKS brand.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7: LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The overall focal point of the thesis at hand is to gain an improved understanding of the abstract concept of brand authenticity within the postmodern era. This research area proved to be challenging, as the concept of authenticity is argued to be based on subjective evaluations, meaning that there is a lack of a shared theoretical foundation. Authenticity is further perceived to be subjective and socially constructed, meaning that it is challenging to develop a definitive theory of the phenomenon. Therefore, it can be questioned whether it is possible to derive at a theory representing the postmodern consumption of brand authenticity. On the other hand, with a point of departure in the SOUNDBOKS case, the present thesis has provided several insights in terms of the understanding the nature of authenticity from a postmodern perspective, and further gained an understanding about the dimensions which influences SOUNDBOKS' authenticity both seen from an internal and external perspective. However, it is deemed essential to remain critical to the findings; therefore, the limitations of the present thesis will be evaluated. The following section is thus dedicated to outline and discuss the limitations of the findings and the choices made throughout this thesis.

As the thesis at hand is having a social constructivist perspective, and hence utilising the qualitative research methodology in order to understand brand authenticity based on a single-case study, the aim of the discussion was not to generalise the findings into a broader context. Therefore, the findings do not represent the general postmodern consumer, although the respondents are considered postmodern consumers, nor does it represent start-up brands in general. The discussion merely portrays an image of all respondents' subjective perspectives, where the meaning of the findings is deduced and evaluated based on the researchers' interpretations. Besides, the findings are based on a relatively small sample size consisting of seven internal interviews and six external interviews, solely consisting of male respondents. Furthermore, all six external respondents were collected from the online SOUNDBOKS community, and the sampling method included volunteer sampling, meaning that the respondents have actively volunteered to participate in the interviews. This presents a risk of biasing the findings as these respondents might not reflect an accurate representation of the population who are in contact with the SOUNDBOKS brand. It can be assumed that respondents who are members of a community linked to the brand might have a stronger relationship with the brand, meaning that the reliability of the findings can be questioned. Future research on the subject should thus contain consumers similar to the those chosen for this thesis, and simultaneously include consumers who are less invested in the brand, in order to provide a more holistic picture.

In addition, the small sample size cannot provide a holistic understanding of the general postmodern consumer. According to Firat & Venkatesh, (1995) the consumption processes differ across cultural groups, meaning that the postmodern consumption theories illustrated in this thesis are unable to establish a unified representation of all postmodern consumers. The authors of this thesis further acknowledge the fact that findings derived from a single case study cannot be generalized to other industries or other contexts. Consequently, it is important to emphasize that the findings of the thesis are not transferable to other contexts in terms of broader industries or target audiences. However, it is argued to be an exciting topic for further research, to test the findings of this thesis in different contexts, which would further increase the validity. As mentioned in the SOUNDBOKS case (section 1.4), the company is perceived as being a start-up brand. It is considered interesting for future studies to do a comparative research, thus studying the evaluations and identified dimensions linked to the brand authenticity of SOUNDBOKS compared to other start-up brands. Moreover, current research lacks the focus of start-up brands, as authenticity primarily is researched based on more mature brands (Guèvremont, 2018), the focus on start-up brands would thus provide new and improved knowledge about how authenticity is created in the initial phase of a brand.

Furthermore, working within the scientific position of social constructivism findings are strongly influenced by the researchers' cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge, meaning that the inductive approach has been affected. In line with this, social processes and group dynamics between the researchers also influence the research process. Also, during this period of research, it is notable that the researchers might be affected by the anchoring, as the information received might determine the course of judgments and perceptions later in the research process. In line with this, the relationship with the case company might also act as a significant bias, as one researcher had a prior relationship with the case company, prior interactions might influence judgements and perceptions. However, the other researcher had no prior relationship with the case company, which is why this neutral counterpart has been an essential factor in discussions of the findings. As a result, the approach was not truly carried out inductively due to the prior knowledge and relationship with the case company.

In relation to the data collection techniques a hand, the researchers have been highly aware of how respondents were influenced during the interview process, as it is considered a possibility that the respondents may have sought to frame themselves positively, e.g. by expressing an increased focus on non-materialistic behaviour or emphasizing idealism and symbolism. Furthermore, external respondents may have responded more critically and reflectively on the questions asked when

exposing them for visual stimuli; thus, the respondent was highly influenced by the choice visual stimuli that were selected for the interviews. Likewise, it is notable that the interview session is a simulated situation, and therefore the informants may have responded differently to the visual stimuli than they would have done in a real-life situation, where they may have been exposed to it several times. Consequently, the selected visual stimuli may not accurately reflect how the respondents are influenced by the posts. Also, time limitation might also have influenced the answers of the respondents, compared to how they would have if they were exposed to it in a real-life situation. In line with this, it is also relevant to highlight that the internal interviews were on average 30 minutes per interview, whereas the external interviews were approximately 50 minutes per interview. This difference in duration was deemed without any critical consequences, as the internal respondents mostly were capable of answering the similar questions in a shorter time frame, and external respondents needed time for critical reflection.

The focal point of the netnographic study was to analyse the interaction which occurs in both brand-generated and consumer-generated posts on SOUNDBOKS' social media platforms: Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook. The netnographic analysis was performed in order to provide the thesis with insights regarding the engagement and overall behaviour of the external and internal stakeholders thus gaining a deeper understanding of the creation of brand authenticity through social media. However, utilising netnography on social media has its limitations, as it draws from a narrow focus on online content. The netnographic study was designed to follow phase 1 and phase 2 of the analysis, thus function as an individual study of brand authenticity comparable to the external and internal analysis. However, it is reasonable to question the independence of this study (i.e. in terms of inductivity), as it is unavoidable not to be biased by prior acquired empirical and theoretical knowledge. In continuation, several considerations should be kept in mind, in terms of the scope of the study, hence the cross-nationality contexts as well as the time perspective. First of all, the users interacting on SOUNDBOKS' Facebook-sites and Instagram-pages is highly international, which to an unknown extent, might be incongruous with the scope of this thesis, hence focusing on the Danish market. Lastly, the social media posts are collected and analysed in retrospective, regardless of its time and date of posting and commenting, which is an immense limitation in relation to past brand communication. This is, however, considered out of scope concerning the research question.

In general, the triangulation of the internal, external, and netnographic approach have, however, provided the findings of this thesis with a certain depth, as authenticity has been studied based on both cognitive, affective and behavioural information about the multiple postmodern stakeholders of the SOUNDBOKS brand.

7.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study serve the purpose of improving practitioners' understanding of brand authenticity as an essential issue when building brands. Based on the discussion it is suggested and illustrated how brand authenticity is created in a dynamic process involving multiple stakeholders. However, as each brand is considered unique, the creation of brand authenticity will undoubtedly lead to different paths for each brand, the present study suggests the following considerations for brand managers engaged in building genuine and authentic brands.

Firstly, a key finding derived from this thesis is that brand authenticity creation is socially constructed and thus iterated in an ongoing dynamic process within a stakeholder ecosystem. As a result, the findings suggest that a brand is considered successful when it is resonated within both the internal and external stakeholders, thus enabling them to reflect their self-identity in the brand. It is, thus, a question of the extent insofar the brand can provide self-relevant information for the internal and external stakeholders to reflect in, and further how the brand fits with their self-image. Brand authenticity is, therefore, considered as a crucial element in order to build a strong brand and hence create relevance and meaningfulness inside and outside of the brand. Following this, brands must listen into and further engage in active interaction with members of the stakeholder ecosystem in order to understand what provides self-relevant information. Brand authenticity is created through the interactions and dynamics deemed meaningful for the individual stakeholders. Thus, involving stakeholders in decisions and the creation of brand meaning helps to establish an ongoing 'interaction', and through this gain meaningful insights into the stakeholders' values and beliefs. One way of doing so, is to invite consumers to give feedback through questions like: "What do you think about this campaign?", "Do you like this feature of the product?" and "What is your most precious experience with the brand?". Furthermore, the present thesis suggests that building brand communication is merely based on functional values is a common mistake among practitioners, and has further been the case of SOUNDBOKS. However, as discussed in this thesis, these functional values still perform a role as a prerequisite for creating authentic depth in the brand when communicating symbolic and emotional values that are directly related to the lives of the consumers.

Secondly, in order to build an authentic brand, managers must embrace postmodernity and thus acknowledge that brand perceptions are subjective and might not always align across multiple stakeholders. The framework presented in this thesis suggests that the authenticity of a brand is negotiated and mirrored through the genuineness, realness and originality of the brand authenticity

dimensions; personality of the brand, culture of the brand, and purpose of the brand. These negotiations and reflections are further subjective to the individual postmodern stakeholder, meaning that the authenticity that is ascribed to a brand, arguably, differs vastly between stakeholders due to the postmodern focus on individualisation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Following this, postmodernity and brand authenticity introduces the challenge of including stakeholders while potentially excluding others. Communicating too broad and too heterogeneous within a postmodern setting can make the brand ambiguous and hard to grasp. As a result, working with brand authenticity, it is a prerequisite to focus on defining and communicating the dimensions of brand authenticity, within the stakeholder ecosystem, in order to achieve consistency and alignment in the brand communication.

Finally, taking a brand authenticity approach to brand meaning management is essentially a mindset that brand managers must apply when building a brand. Therefore, this approach should be followed by both dynamic and iterative practices that permit spontaneous stakeholder initiatives. Therefore, we suggest that when complying to the brand authenticity approach one should introduce 'brand authenticity managers' in their marketing and branding function in order to ensure and manage both a flexible and structured approach towards brand authenticity. Essentially, brand authenticity is perceived to be a socially constructed process that entails negotiation and mirroring of the brand, which requires ongoing interaction with multiple stakeholders. Therefore, the introduction of 'brand authenticity managers' as 'curators', whose purpose is to connect people, ideas, and creativity, in order to create a universal language between stakeholders, seems appropriate in this contexts. Hence, consistency is deemed critical in order to gain a meaningful understanding of brand authenticity among stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

With a point of departure in the case study regarding the SOUNDBOKS brand, the present thesis had the purpose of studying how one can understand the nature of brand authenticity from a postmodern perspective. Furthermore, this thesis sought to gain an understanding of the dimensions which are perceived to be the main drivers of authenticity from a multiple-stakeholder perspective.

The desire for authentic brands is according to literature seen as a consequence of postmodernism, which states that the authenticity of a brand is the prevailing purchase criterion as the postmodern individuals seek meaning in their consumption as it is used as a medium for identity creation (Cova, 1996a; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This has led to a vast amount of research on the subject within a branding context leading to the present conceptualisation of authenticity, linked with brands being *genuine*, *real* and *original*. The concept of brand authenticity is mainly studied from either an outside-in perspective or an inside-out perspective; however, postmodern branding is argued to be influenced by a wide variety of stakeholders, which enact and co-create brand meaning. Thus, in order to provide a holistic understanding of the nature of brand authenticity and its underlying dimensions, the thesis at hand has addressed this limitation by including multiple stakeholders in the study.

Based on the empirical and theoretical findings, the thesis at hand suggests that brand authenticity is developed in a multi-stakeholder system, where the stakeholders have individual and subjective perceptions that affect the authenticity of the SOUNDBOKS brand. Hence, what is deemed authentic is subjective to each stakeholder, and related to how they substantiate, create, and (re)produce the authenticity of the brand in relation to their self-concept. From an existentialist and postmodern perspective, the authenticity of a brand is thus embedded in the brand values and benefits, which further appears as the medium individuals use in order to express and reflect their true or desired selves. Consequently, authenticity is argued to be socially constructed between the internal and external stakeholders.

The present thesis recognises the nature of brand authenticity as two-fold: 1) brand authenticity is 'negotiated', and 2) brand authenticity is 'mirrored'. Consequently, the nature of brand authenticity is considered to be a negotiation between multiple stakeholders with individual identities and subjective perceptions. From the analysis, it was found that SOUNDBOKS is showing a genuine interest in their stakeholders and actively listens to the feedback generated from the stakeholder ecosystem' in terms of the authenticity of SOUNDBOKS. It is thus suggested that brand authenticity

negotiated between the internal and external stakeholders through an iterative process. Additionally, the present thesis suggests that the nature of brand authenticity consist of a continuous reflection or 'mirroring' of self-identities in the brand, as both the internal and external stakeholders were able to reflect their perception of self onto the brand. Consequently, brand authenticity is thus simultaneously determined based on whether the stakeholders can 'mirror' their desired identities in the brand through self-relevant and authentic information.

The thesis at hand further suggests that brand authenticity is mirrored and negotiated through a set of central dimensions which the stakeholders utilise in order to curate their self-identities. In this context, three dimensions are found to be the main drivers of brand authenticity for SOUNDBOKS; hence; '*brand personality*', '*brand culture*' and '*brand purpose*'. Firstly, the findings suggest that the stakeholders had a positive attitude towards SOUNDBOKS because of their unique brand personality, which they can identify with and further reflect onto their self-image. The brand personality further provides the brand with symbolic meaning, thus reflecting the perception of being '*fun*', '*down-to-earth*', '*social*' and '*positive*'. Secondly, the brand culture is further a main driver of authenticity as the stakeholders admire SOUNDBOKS' intrinsic culture which includes genuine care for the consumers compared to being commercially driven. This is essential within the postmodern era, as consumers are challenging the brand's ability to be being *genuine*, *real* and *original*. Lastly, the final key dimension to brand authenticity is suggested to be SOUNDBOKS' purpose-driven approach. The brand is perceived by the stakeholders to be more than just a product, by expressing a profound aspiration and interest in social discourses. This further found to provide SOUNDBOKS with a genuine symbolism which acts as self-relevant information to the individual stakeholders' identity construction.

In sum, the brand authenticity framework presented in this thesis illustrates how one can understand the postmodern nature of brand authenticity as a dynamic and iterative process consisting of multiple reflections and negotiations between multiple stakeholders. Consequently, the multiple stakeholders are jointly determining the authenticity of a brand through an ongoing negotiation of, and mirroring in the identified brand authenticity dimensions; *brand personality*, *brand culture* and *brand purpose*.

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