

## **Ironic humor in festival brand co-creation**

Kati Suomi, Mervi Luonila & Jaana Tähtinen

### **Abstract**

This paper embraces the daring use of ironic humor in brand co-creation in festival branding.

Innovative branding is an aspiration in the growing festival business. This study explores a unique case: a festival that applies ironic humor in its brand co-creation despite the risks involved. The findings suggest that the use of ironic humor, when made inherent to a festival's brand identity, can increase stakeholders' attention to and awareness of the festival and attract positive media attention. Moreover, the use of ironic humor can prompt stakeholders on social media to share and co-create the festival's brand identity. The study contributes to the literature on festival brand co-creation by demonstrating the use of ironic humor to engage stakeholders in brand co-creation.

Keywords: events, festivals, leisure industry, irony, brand co-creation, social media

### **1. Introduction**

Arts and culture festivals are project-based, dynamic, and short-term, meaning the use of innovative and distinguishable branding strategies is essential to be able to compete for both attendees and the support of other stakeholders (e.g., sponsors or public authorities) (Mossberg & Getz, 2006; Todd, 2015). Festivals have to sustain their production (e.g., Getz, 2012) in a competitive environment in which they face uncertain demands (e.g., Caves, 2000) and threats to financing every year (Luonila & Johansson, 2016). The festival experience is the core value for attendees (see Manthiou, Lee, Tang, & Chiang, 2014), and there is no way to 'pre-test' if customers will find this year's offering appealing

(Getz, 2012). Planning a festival takes at least a year, and planning reaches its climax in the one-time-only delivery (Collin-Lachaud & Duyck, 2002). A one-week-long festival must develop novel and unique artistic output services and facilities each year, and attendees, sponsors, and other partners have to be persuaded to take part again each year (e.g., Getz & Andersson, 2010). Moreover, ideally the festival's visitors and patrons will not forget the festival during the other 51 weeks of the year.

Hence, in such a risky business with intangible capital, festivals intentionally apply unusual means of branding, such as ironic humor (see Stern, 1990). Irony can be an effective humor technique to attract attention and can be influential, but its use is not without risk. First, the target audience of the branding must understand that the use of irony is intended to be humorous (i.e., ironic humor), rather than insulting or taken literally. Second, the audience's response to irony depends on many aspects, including demographics, psychographics, culture, and behavioral variables (Crawford & Gregory, 2015). The risk of misunderstanding is real and can have serious consequences; in fact, American airports have been declared "non-irony zones" where irony is prohibited (Phelan, 2009). In spite of the risks associated with using irony, we found a striking example of deliberate and consistent use of ironic humor in branding. This example is the focal case of this study, the annual Porispere music festival, which has used ironic humor since the festival's inception in 2011. Porispere caught our attention because it has used ironic humor for years without much realized risk, and we wanted to know how that was possible.

This study thus investigates a unique and revealing case of a phenomenon that is severely understudied: ironic humor in festival branding. As far as the authors can discern, neither ironic humor in branding nor the use of ironic humor in festivals has been studied. Even in the field of advertising, little has been done to determine the types of humor that function well (Barry & Graça, 2018). Further, research concentrating on the co-creation of a brand identity *with* and *by* stakeholders is also limited, despite calls for research on the phenomenon (e.g., the meta-analysis by Walter, Cody,

Xu, & Murphy, 2018). If research addresses the topic of humor, it very seldom takes the style of humor into account, and even in the rare studies that do, the findings on the influence of irony on persuasion (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and behavior) in marketing remain mixed (Walter et al., 2018). Mossberg and Getz (2006), in their seminal study on festival branding, urged researchers to understand the relationships “between the organizational structure, control and branding practices of festivals” (p. 325). Kennedy and Guzmán (2016) recently identified fun, in terms of entertainment and excitement, as one of the five antecedents of millennial consumers’ motivation to co-create brand identity, and called for further research. Against this backdrop, we chose to approach the phenomenon abductively using Porispere as a unique case, which is useful for both theory development and practitioner insights. Further, as festival branding is still a rather neglected area of study, with the stakeholders’ role remaining particularly understudied (Mossberg & Getz, 2006; Todd, 2015), we address the research question: How can ironic humor be used with and by stakeholders to co-create brand identity?

The study contributes to the literature on festival branding by examining the opportunities arising from and the challenges involved in using ironic humor in festival branding, and particularly in relation to engaging stakeholders in brand co-creation. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, prior research neglects the aforementioned area of study. Festivals are a suitable context for the required examination due to their fundamental aim of creating a festive environment and celebratory atmosphere (see Lee, Lee, Lee, & Babin, 2008) while building community engagement to keep the project-based productions relevant for many years (Hede & Kellett, 2012; Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015).

The paper continues with a theoretical pre-understanding about the co-creation of a festival’s brand identity using ironic humor. This is followed by a description of the empirical case, the methods, and the data analysis, where additional theoretical tools are introduced, following the abductive research process. Thereafter, the results of the study are compared to the literature on festival

branding with ironic humor. The paper ends with conclusions, theoretical and managerial implications, an evaluation of the study, and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Co-Creating a Festival's Brand Identity with Ironic Humor**

This study applies the definition of brand identity devised by da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013, p. 35), that is: “*a dynamic process developing over time through mutually influencing inputs from brand managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers).*” The definition fits the festival context, as festivals consist of multiple stakeholder relationships in a dynamic environment (e.g., Larson, 2002; Getz, Andersson & Larson, 2007; Luonila, Suomi, & Johansson, 2016), and festival brands are not managed by the owners but are co-created with and by the attendees and stakeholders (Mossberg & Getz, 2006). Thus, the approach to brand identity applied here expands the traditional view of brand identity as internally developed to one being built and created with multiple stakeholders (see also Kennedy & Guzmán 2016). When referring to brand co-creation, we are guided by Coupland, Iacobucci, and Arnould (2005, p. 107), who stated: “*the consumer is an active partner with the marketer in brand-meaning formation.*”

Indeed, stakeholders can participate in branding in various ways; for example, through their influence on the functional brand value, generating positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), generating media publicity, co-promoting the brand, and designing and communicating the brand (Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011). Therefore, in developing brand identity, it is important that the identity resonates with the brand's target market (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016). This may be facilitated by engaging consumers to actively participate in brand-meaning formation (Coupland et al., 2005; Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016; see also Merz, Zarantonello, & Grappi, 2018).

Today, the internet is estimated to be the world's largest advertising medium (Zenith, 2017) and now brand co-creation often happens online and in brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001;

Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017), particularly in festival branding (Hudson et al., 2015). Virtual brand communities take an active role in brand co-creation whether their message is positive or negative (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Stakeholders play a role not only during the festival but also before and after it (Hede & Kellett, 2012). Social media can be used deliberately to i) recruit lead-users (loyal ambassadors/volunteers) to speak for and boost the festival before it happens, ii) crowdsource for ideas for future festivals, and iii) engage in dialog with the members of the community or tribe at all times (Gyimóthy & Larson, 2015). All this increases the community members' emotional attachment and sense of belonging and gratitude, strengthens their relationship with the festival brand, and increases positive eWOM (Frew, 2006; Hudson et al., 2015; Simon & Tossan, 2018).

Kennedy and Guzmán (2016) emphasized fun and social motivations as predictors of millennial consumers' brand co-creation. Social motivations relate to a person's evaluation of her/his social network; for example, how popular it is to be active in a brand community and if the brand and the communication about it are seen as trendy. Prior studies acknowledge that brands can act as social components of self-characterization and shape consumers' identities (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Hermann, 2005; Voyer, Kastanakis, & Rhode, 2017). Hudson et al. (2015) urged festival marketers to use social media intensively to maintain attendee loyalty. Simon and Tossan (2018) suggested that consumers reading, liking, commenting, and sharing a brand's messages on social media indicates they are grateful consumers, and their future purchases can be triggered by gratitude mechanisms. However, brand communities also pose new challenges for brand management (Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017), as users' discussions may be either positive or negative, and they can express disapproval or rejection (e.g., Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

We build our theoretical grounding on existing studies on humor and irony, particularly in the context of advertising because of the lack of studies on the focal phenomenon. Irony as a technique

of influence is categorized as a sub-type of humor (e.g., Kelly & Solomon, 1975; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). Berger (1976) defined it as, “*Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you’re saying,*” and Brooks and Warren (1960, p. 557) as indicating “*a meaning contrary to the one it professes to give.*” Indeed, most definitions include an element of discrepancy or difference between what the words say and what they are intended to convey (see Partington, 2007). Irony is never explicit, but it is the setting that motivates and fosters verbal irony and makes it understood as ironic humor (Utsumi, 2000). Hence, we use the concept of irony whenever it is possible that the audience might not understand the statement as humorous. Humor is the mother concept, and is difficult to define, but Berger (1993, p. 10) claimed that humor is almost always related to laughter, mirth, gaiety, and feeling good. Humor has been categorized into 45 techniques (see Berger, 1993), of which irony (and our ironic humor) are one.

Eisend’s (2009) meta-analysis concluded that in advertising, any type of humor positively influences attitudes toward both the humorous advert and the advertised brand. Moreover, the use of humor increases the attention consumers pay to the advert (Salo & Tähtinen, 2005; Eisend, 2009; Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang, 2012), their involvement with the message (Kim & Kim, 2015), positive affect, and their willingness to share the advert (Salo & Tähtinen, 2005) and even buy the product (Eisend, 2009). Sharing or eWOM is an important feature of today’s advertising media scenery that cannot be underestimated. Eisend (2009) suggested that in the context of hedonic products—a category in which festivals can be classified (e.g., Morgan, 2008)—the positive influence of humor on consumers’ brand attitudes is even higher than in the case of functional products.

However, some caution is required. Both Eisend (2009) and Crawford and Gregory (2015) criticized empirical studies for their overuse of US students as study participants. Since students are young and educated, and hence, more prone to the influence of irony (Eisend, 2009), the results may not be fully generalizable to other target groups or cultures. In Finland, young adults are

relatively well-educated; 83% of 20–24-year-olds have a degree (SVT, 2015). However, in the county where Porispere takes place, the percentage is considerably lower (Satamittari, 2018). Moreover, Porispere has chosen adults as its target audience. Using ironic humor in festival branding targeted at adults in an area with a lower proportion of people with third-level education goes against the existing knowledge of irony being well-suited to catch the attention of well-educated young people. However, the locals in Pori use ironic humor in their daily oral communication with each other quite regularly, and this could compensate for the higher age and lower educational level. Thus, the use of ironic humor (particularly irony at one's own expense) might appeal to the local audience.

Using irony involves risks. First, irony is a clever communicative strategy that can easily be misunderstood and the message taken literally (Berger, 1993 p. 25). Ironic humor needs to be perceived by the audience as intended and purposeful, yet it is intellectually oriented and implicit, and hence the reader needs to solve the puzzle of what is really meant by the words (Stern, 1990). This interpretation is related to the educational background of the audience. Unless individuals can solve the puzzle, the ironic humor may have a negative impact on the brand. Second, the use of irony in branding needs to be understood as humorous or to emphasize or clarify a point, instead of being negative, sarcastic, or critical (see Roberts & Kreuz, 1994, on discourse goals). However, management research (Hatch, 1997; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006) suggests that members of an organization can play with ironic humor when discussing their organizational identity, and in this way, self-construct an identity. Hence, if the organizers, volunteers, and attendees use ironic humor, they may self-construct the festival's brand identity as humorous and one not to be taken too seriously, and also self-construct their own and social identity (Voyer et al., 2017). Third, Burgers, Konijn, Steen, and Iepsma (2015) suggested that only novel irony (i.e., new, "unsolved" expressions) triggers consumers to solve a puzzle, only after which the positive effects may follow. Hence, clichéd ironic humor would not increase attention, or trigger any other positive effects.

Our theoretical pre-understanding thus suggests that irony puzzle, if solved and understood as ironic humor, increases consumers' involvement and positively influences their festival brand co-creation. Moreover, ironic humor plays a role in the organizers', employees', and volunteers' self-construction of the festival's brand identity. The stakeholders are given access to a joint forum for the co-creation of the festival's brand identity in the form of social media, which is also available outside the actual festival days. What we find interesting and worth studying in the context of Porispere is whether the positive influence of ironic humor can be found even though the major target group of the festival consists of adults in general, rather than fairly young and educated people who have been found to respond particularly positively to ironic humor.

### **3. Methodology**

Two of the authors of this study are locals and familiar with the Porispere festival. Hence, we identified early on that Porispere is an interesting case for learning about the use of ironic humor in festival branding, as is common in intrinsic case studies (Stake, 2008). We considered Porispere's festival branding to be a unique intrinsic case, looking at it in depth, and "*seeking the particular more than the ordinary*" (Stake, 2008, p. 125). Our research strategy follows abductive logic (e.g., Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Kovács & Spens, 2005), where the study was initiated with the empirical case, followed by a theoretical pre-understanding that served as a sensitizing device in the data analysis. However, the data analysis also triggered a need to search for additional theoretical tools to better understand the data. The single-case design was considered suitable as we aimed for a rich understanding of the phenomenon in its real-life context (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003), and a complicated phenomenon is under study (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005).

#### ***3.1 The Porispere festival***

Porispere is a rock and pop music festival established in the city of Pori (ca. 83,000 inhabitants) in Finland. Pori has a strong image as a festival city as a result of its “hallmark event,” the Pori Jazz festival. However, the idea of Porispere stems more from annoyance at another festival. Pori hosted the Sonisphere festival (produced by the supranational Live Nation Corporation) twice in 2009 and 2010, but in 2011, Sonisphere moved to the capital city, Helsinki. This was partly because locals had complained about the noise, traffic, littering, violence, and use of intoxicants in numerous letters and text messages to the local newspapers. Interestingly, when Sonisphere moved away, the locals were not happy either, apparently because something had been taken away from them.

So, a group of local producers established Porispere<sup>1</sup> as a “*counteraction*” and in a “*do-it-yourself spirit*.” Even the name of the festival suggests that this is as good as or better than Sonisphere, but it is made by locals. Moreover, the festival branding was linked from the very beginning to the way the inhabitants of Pori talk and behave in general. As Interviewee 2 illustrates: “*It is unique in Finland...they [people of Pori] have their own way of thinking... ‘Poriness’ as a platform for marketing communication is an almost never-ending [source].*” The kind of negative or ironic humor of the area typified by an attitude of “that’s no good!” related particularly to Sonisphere and which prompted the birth of Porispere was built into the identity of the festival.

Although the majority of the audience of Porispere are locals, the locals are not the only attendees, and the social media platforms of Porispere reach visitors beyond Pori that understand the local dialect known colloquially as “Porish”. In general, the Porish ironic way of talking may sound quite rude to other Finns. For example, when a well-known celebrity and dance professional, who was born and raised in Pori, compliments dancers as a regular judge on Finland’s *Strictly Come Dancing*, he says, “Not bad.” Today, everyone laughs and understands his ironic humor conveys that he thought it was an excellent performance. So, many Finns are to some extent familiar with Porish.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough description on the founding of the Porispere, see Luonila et al. (2016).

Moreover, we assume that the non-locals who follow Porispere in social media realize very soon that the ironic humor is part of the identity of the festival, particularly as the local ironic expressions are very seldom written, other than in the context of Porispere. Accordingly, we expect our examination to reveal the opportunities and challenges related to the use of ironic humor in engaging stakeholders in brand co-creation, also beyond the context of the case festival. We interpret the Pori(spere) spirit as an example of ironic humor cultivated in the festival's marketing on web pages and in social media, in print, and through other promotional activity.

### ***3.2 Methods of data collection and analysis***

In this study, we consider Porispere's Facebook page a virtual brand community according to Sicilia and Palazón's (2008, p. 257) definition that suggests such a community is: "*a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand.*" In our case, the festival company provides the platform. The festival managers post content, and the brand community participates in dialogue and interacts by commenting on the postings, sharing their festival memories and experiences, voicing their opinions, and sharing photos and links (see also Hatch & Schultz, 2010) before, during, and after the festival. Here, we consider social media a platform on which stakeholders can co-create a festival's brand identity (Ind & Todd, 2011; Gyimóthy & Larson, 2015).

The primary data of this exploratory study comprises: 1) Porispere's own Facebook postings; 2) Facebook users' comments on Porispere's postings; and 3) other Facebook users' postings and other electronic material shared (with a possible comment) by Porispere. We considered the Facebook material crucial for the current study in terms of answering our research question and following Gyimóthy and Larson's (2015) notion that social media platforms enable consumer-producer co-creation in the context of festivals. We received permission to use the data from the

Porispere festival manager. Further, two thematic interviews conducted with the festival manager and the marketing manager provide background for Porispere's ironic humor in branding. Porispere advertising, festival signs, PR products, other promotional materials, and news items published in the media were also analyzed as naturally occurring data.

Both the interview data and the naturally occurring data allowed for the analysis of the action of co-creating brand identity (see also Mossberg & Getz, 2006). Our reasoning applied abductive logic (e.g., Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Kovács & Spens, 2005). The starting point for the study was the intriguing empirical case, but as we proceeded through the rounds of the analysis, we searched for and found a theory to understand the data better. Following Elo and Kyngäs, we used content analysis to reach both "*a condensed and broad description*" of ironic humor in festival branding with the outcome of "*categories describing the phenomenon*" (2008, p. 106). Content analysis was also chosen ahead of any automatic linguistic computational processes (e.g., Reyes & Rosso, 2012) because the postings featured many examples of the local dialect.

The Facebook data were collected and analyzed from April 12, 2011 (Porispere's first posting) until May 31, 2017. During this six-year period, a total of 1,912 postings were made, and all were included in the analysis. The first author read through the data to get an overall impression. Thereafter, all humorous content was coded and transferred to a Word document to allow for further scrutiny of whether the humor represented ironic humor. The following definition of irony, "*saying one thing and meaning something else*" (Berger, 1976), was used when coding the humor into "ironic" and "non-ironic."

The qualitative content analysis started without preconceived notions or theoretical categories, but five categories emerged from the data (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, Kondracki, Wellman & Amundson 2002; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Those categories were based on the target of the humor and were: Poriness ironic humor, neighboring city ironic humor, festival ironic humor, ice hockey ironic

humor, and local and national news ironic humor. These categories also helped to understand the secondary data. After the preliminary categories emerged, the second author joined the data analysis effort, and the examples of ironic humor and the preliminary themes were discussed, using analyst triangulation to improve reliability (Patton, 2002) and to prompt co-researcher dialog (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) to agree upon the categorization. The first and second authors being local to Pori meant they have a nuanced understanding of the communication used (see also Prebensen, 2010). Three types of triangulation were used to enhance the validity of the findings (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003), namely analyst (two analysts, one playing devil's advocate), source (data from the attendees and the organizers), and data type (oral interviews and textual data, collected and naturally occurring data).

In the next round of analysis, all Facebook postings (whether they were considered humorous or not) were condensed into an Excel spreadsheet to double-check the data. Thus, data collection and record keeping were systematic (Silverman, 2001). In the third and final round of the analysis, all authors reviewed the categories in light of the new theory, and this abstraction resulted in three wider themes: Ironic humor at one's own expense, ironic humor at the expense of one's competitors, and ironic humor at society's expense. Once the original five preliminary categories had been reviewed, we found we could incorporate them as sub-categories of the three new main categories.

What follows is a description of the ironic humor identified in brand co-creation. It captures a detailed and authentic flavor of Porispere, and reflects the credibility of the findings (e.g., Shenton, 2004). Authentic extracts from the data are provided.

#### **4. Ironic Humor in Brand Co-Creation with and by the Porispere Brand Community**

The quantitative content analysis of all the reactions of the Porispere brand community shows that the ratio in which all the ironic humor postings were liked, commented on, and shared by Facebook users is higher than for the non-ironic ones. The non-ironic postings consist of both neutral and other kinds of humorous postings. Although only 7% of all the postings used ironic humor, they received on average more likes (133.9 vs. 51.3), comments (9.2 vs. 6.3), and shares (20.7 vs. 7.1) than all the non-ironic postings. Moreover, ironic humor postings that received at least 100 likes comprised 39% of the total number of ironic humor postings, compared to only 11% of non-ironic postings (see Table 1). Likewise, although the difference is somewhat less, the proportion of ironic humor postings that were shared with others was higher than for the non-ironic ones. The smallest difference (but still a discernable one) was in the most commented on postings; more ironic humor postings sparked vivid comments than did non-ironic postings. However, as the current study is exploratory in nature and because there are no earlier studies, comparisons cannot be made between our results and earlier ones. As the content analysis covered all the Facebook postings, in other words, the total population sampling, statistical testing was not applied.

Place Table 1 about here

Even though a majority of Porispere's postings were rather neutral and informative, they were typically flavored with a short accompanying note, often using Pori's dialect with ironic humor or humor in general. Further, even if Porispere's posting did not include ironic humor content, the commentators sometimes made jokes about something in relation to the posting's theme or other issues. Some of the regular commentators appeared to assume a certain kind of role when commenting, for example, being helpful or very funny. Many used Pori's dialect when

commenting, even in an extreme way, although the dialect is typically used in the spoken language and seldom in writing.

The following discussion around the qualitative content analysis is organized under the three main themes that emerged from the data and could be understood theoretically. The themes demonstrate the link between the festival manager's decision to use ironic humor both in the internally developed brand identity and in the co-creation of brand identity with and by stakeholders. The direct extracts from Facebook users' postings have been coded using numbers to safeguard the commentators' anonymity.

#### ***4.1. Ironic humor at one's own expense***

##### *Targeting Poriness*

For Finns outside of Pori, the natives of Pori are probably best known for their dialect and peculiar type of ironic humor. Interviewee 2 of the festival said:

Poriness also acts as a platform elsewhere in Finland. If you have strong self-confidence, which we have per se, although we don't know that, you can laugh at yourself...In the Pori area, we have concentrated on a certain type of Poriness, and maybe ... I don't say mock others, but make use of them. And outside Pori, in turn, we have concentrated on laughing at ourselves, with good self-confidence.

Interviewee 1 describes the importance of truly understanding Poriness and the core of Porispere's ironic humor in arranging the festival:

*We have documented, indeed, I don't remember to which official document, that only a person who is originally from Pori or is a permanent citizen of Pori, is allowed to arrange the event, or participate*

*in arranging it. Otherwise, one cannot be a partner. It was a very important clause for me ... I wanted it to be there.*

Another example of Poriness, in other words Porispere's (and its patrons') ironic humor at one's own expense, are the labels of the Porispere's VIP passes: "Somewhat Important" (the normal VIP) and "Pompous Ass" (the golden VIP; the original labels are in Porish).

Indeed, it appears, that the organizers of Porispere have used this type of ironic humor widely when communicating about the festival. For example, on August 1, 2013, Porispere posted in Facebook that it had come up with a slogan for the forthcoming festival: "Whatever we do, it'll be a f\*\*k up anyway." Here, Porispere uses ironic humor at its own expense, as the managers were aware that not everyone believed Porispere's would succeed, and some even wished it to fail. The slogan was used in marketing and was printed on Porispere promotional materials, such as thermos mugs. In a similar vein, Porispere also sold pins with the text: "Who cleans up?" in response to the criticism it received about littering. The "who cleans up" slogan was launched for the first festival in 2011. On August 8, 2011, Porispere wrote on Facebook: *"Thank you guys! You are the best! Porispere 2011 is over, and pics and reports will follow. Let's stay tuned! Porispere 2012 – pissing people off already."* This is an example of the use of ironic humor directed at anticipated criticisms.

Indeed, public discussions about Porispere have had negative overtones. Porispere has been accused of noise and littering, for example, typically by anonymous commentators on the web site of the leading local newspaper. Interestingly, instead of trying to ignore the criticism, hide from it, or defend itself, Porispere has shared some of these comments on their Facebook page using ironic humor at its own expense, with the aim of *"creating discussion topics"* (Interviewee 2). The festival has also used these comments in an innovative way, such as on Porispere's 2015 festival T-shirts, on which were printed quotations from the negative comments written anonymously in the opinion pieces of the local newspaper. Below are examples of the original negative comments from the website of the local newspaper:

*I hope Porispere will be organized for the last time next year. There are too many music events at Kirjurinluoto [the Porispere venue] nowadays, and they mainly focus on drinking beer with artists having a minor role, including b-level ancient pop musicians and other jumble. (Anonymous 1 August 4, 2013)*

*This pop festival [Porispere] was quite a disappointment. Performers appeared to be rather bored, tired, and the audience didn't get excited. Pori does not know how to arrange proper music festivals, even the jazz festival has pop performers. They are not real jazz artists. Nothing but bluffing! (Anonymous 2 August 4, 2013)*

As a way of using the same kind of ironic humor, a Finnish music magazine awarded Porispere the prize of the best festival T-shirt in 2015, and published photographs of the T-shirts. The award was made in April, a month before the start of the Finnish summer festival season. The T-shirts and, therefore, Porispere received much welcome, and unpaid for, positive media attention from other media as well, triggered by the use of ironic humor in branding.

#### *Targeting the festival critics and setbacks*

On November 15, 2016, Porispere posted its thanks to respondents of the customer feedback survey following that summer's festival. As a way of continuing its style of using ironic humor, Porispere responded to hidden criticisms of the festival's content and posted:

*Porispere:...we are currently going through the feedback from the customer survey conducted last summer. We received lots of feedback. Thanks for everyone who responded ☺. Some of the respondents have clearly adopted, even in a touching way, the true spirit of Porispere, such as this: 'I was at the*

*summer cottage. Alone. Wife was at Porispere. You definitely must arrange such a great festival next year again, so I can be alone at the cottage again.*

The content of the festival can be seen as a hot topic that prompts enthusiastic discussion. On March 8, 2017, Porispere announced its artists for the summer. The three-day festival (Friday–Sunday) included artists from very different music genres, and Sunday was planned to accommodate family groups. Commenting on the announcement of artists every year is a very active Facebook pastime, as the use of ironic humor in a discussion between Commentator 1 and Porispere shows:

*Commentator 1: Napalm Death [grind core/death metal band from the UK] and Dingo [pop rock band from Pori, extremely popular in Finland during the 1980s] at the same festival. Now I've seen everything.*

*Porispere: Quote from the press release: "Building the festival program is funnier each year. The direction found in the last few years, mixing mainstream artists with cult names, works in every way. 'I have adopted a guideline to intentionally irritate genre puritans because at least I am chuckling at the idea of hearing Dingo's hits and Napalm Death's grind core set on the same day' – says the festival manager"*

*Commentator 1: "Great!"*

Perhaps inspired by the volume of these kinds of discussions, one of the visitors to Porispere's Facebook, apparently a true fan of the festival, regularly commented, "*Crap. I'll be there,*" in response to Porispere's several announcements of artists for the festival (whoever they were). Our interpretation is that this ironic humor also draws from local negativity, but aims at revealing the underlying and sustained interest in the festival.

Working with a limited budget, Porispere is innovative in attracting unpaid for media attention and awareness of the festival. Porispere also appears to be proactive, as regards anticipating potential

upcoming criticism and turning potential negative publicity in its own favor. An example of this happened in 2014 when 23 of the 12,500 festival visitors were stung by angry wasps. The festival managers actively communicated the wasp attack and several newspapers and tabloids across Finland published the story (e.g., Yle, 2014), “23 persons went to the first-aid tent because of wasp stings, but luckily, there were no other disturbances at the festival.” Porispere obtained broad unpaid for media coverage, including on TV, which was clearly the aim (see also Luonila et al., 2016). The discussion on wasps continued the following year, when Porispere posted a photo of an insect asking, “How do you know that Porispere is coming up? – Because wasps are wandering to Kirjurinluoto [the festival area].” Commentators shared experiences and started pondering on the actual species of the insect in the photograph – wasp or not?

Given that the Finnish summer weather can be chilly and unpredictable, it is typical to joke about the weather. Porispere utilized this theme, for example, in its March 17, 2017 post: “*what nice weather today ☹*”; it included a video, in which organizers are outside, measuring the space for the VIP tent as a strong wind is blowing and it is sleeting. This is a good example of the use of ironic humor, in terms of meaning exactly the opposite of what is being said (Berger, 1976), but also quite conventional and very often used in Finland, and thus probably not really stimulating for the target audience (Burgers et al., 2015).

The most likes in our data, 1,300 in total, were received for a Porispere posting from July 31, 2015. The posting was a photograph of a leading local newspaper, in which a reader’s text message as an opinion piece asked:

*Is there any place where one could be without seeing Elastinen’s [popular Finnish rap artist, who was to perform at Porispere 2015] face? Could someone sell me a cottage in a roadless wilderness? Only GPS coordinates. And all this because of the face of Elastinen. (Anonymous 3)*

Along with the photograph of the text message, Porispere wrote in its ironic way:

*Could the author of the above opinion piece contact us? We could send a free ticket for Sunday [when Elastinen was due to perform at Porispere] and arrange a fan meeting with Elastinen as a bonus. Immunotherapy will help.*

Porispere's posting provoked a vivid and humorous discussion on Facebook on issues related to Elastinen, Porispere, Pori, and other topics.

#### **4.2 Ironic humor at the expense of one's competitors**

##### *Targeting the neighbor*

As in many other cities worldwide, it is typical in Pori to joke about a neighboring city, in this case the city of Rauma, which is located about 50 kilometers south of Pori. As Rauma is a smaller city (with approximately 39,500 inhabitants), jokes about Rauma typically relate to certain kinds of weakness, for example, the fact that the city lacks an airport. In addition, debates about the success or otherwise of the local ice hockey teams, Ässät (Aces) from Pori and Lukko (Lock) from Rauma, are usual.

Our analysis of the Facebook postings shows that Porispere has used ironic humor related to Rauma in its branding, but the style is rather friendly. The friendly tone is deliberate, as Porispere obviously wishes to attract festival visitors from Rauma as well. One example of ironic humor related to Rauma is Porispere's posting from March 20, 2017. RMJ, a music festival held in Rauma, had just announced that David Hasselhoff, an actor from the *Knight Rider* and *Baywatch* television series, would be singing at RJM.

*Porispere: It is a bit annoying that Rauma managed to take the Knight Rider. It would have fitted perfectly between Napalm Death and Haloo Helsinki [in Porispere's festival line up in 2017].*

David Hasselhoff's new career as a singer has not been as successful as his acting career, and given that his musical style is far from both Napalm Death (iconic grind core/death metal band), and Haloo Helsinki (popular Finnish pop rock band), the posting represents ironic humor. The comments show that the commentators understand ironic humor and want to continue the discussion in the same manner.

*Commentator 2: You can always beat them and take Ron Moss* 

*Commentator 3: Or you could have Don Johnson ...*

Ron Moss is a former actor from the television series *The Bold and the Beautiful* (very popular in Finland among senior citizens), and Don Johnson is known from the 1980s TV series, *Miami Vice*. Along with David Hasselhoff, they are originally known as TV actors, and it appears that the commentators do not find them convincing as musicians.

### *Targeting alternative attractions*

The Porispere managers, like many Finns, follow ice hockey and comment on it in Porispere's brand communication. Whereas Rauma is Pori's competitor as regards cities, ice hockey can be considered an alternative attraction for other ways of spending one's leisure time, in this case, attending festivals. Accordingly, commenting on ice hockey is our second example of ironic humor at the expense of one's competitor. Ice hockey is a very important sport for the Finns; when Finland plays for the Ice Hockey World Championship, more than two million out of a population of five and a half million Finns watch it on TV. At regional level, ice hockey provokes strong emotions and the teams have iconic status in their host cities.

Pori's Ässät team reached the play-offs of the Finnish national league (a rare occurrence) and were to play against Tappara (Battleax) from the city of Tampere. However, the local newspaper in

Tampere announced that Tappara were to face Lukko (the team from Rauma!). The mistake would not have been so serious if it had been any other team /city; however, as it was, Porispere placed a large advertisement on the front cover of the leading newspaper in Pori, welcoming “the team Ilves or whatever” to confront Ässät. Ilves (Lynx) is another team from Tampere, and the city is divided by the supporters’ fierce rivalry over Ilves or Tappara. The advertisement received immediate national publicity.

Mr. Jukka Rautakorpi was the coach of Tappara at the time, and his hairstyle was distinct – blond, very fluffy, and with a fringe. To find a way to support the local Ässät team in the festival’s own manner, the Porispere festival manager got the idea that maybe the festival could start a Jukka hairstyle (Jukka-Tukka in Porish, *tukka* means hair in Finnish) boom to somehow disturb the contestant team at critical moments in the play-off series. The Porispere manager called a local barber and asked whether they would offer a cut and blow-dry to reproduce Jukka-style hair for the first 30 customers for free. The barber agreed! Porispere’s posting of April 17, 2013 introduced the Jukka hairstyle and called on people to imitate his “stylish” look. The posting was actively commented on, and people acted upon it. Soon, two leading newspapers in Finland wrote about the Jukka-Tukka boom in Pori, including photographs of people with the Jukka-style hair in the middle of the play-offs. The barber was also interviewed, and said that they had been quite busy producing Jukka-style haircuts for eager fans of Ässät and Porispere. Consequently, Porispere generated a great amount of engagement and positive atmosphere around the festival. (Whether because of this or not, the local Ässät team won the championship after 25 years and the city went wild.)

#### ***4.3 Ironic humor at society’s expense***

One example of participating in a nationwide public discussion relates to Marimekko, which is a Finnish textile and clothing design company, and is a respected brand among Finns and for some an iconic one. In 2013, Marimekko's Metsänväki (Forest Dwellers) design turned out to be a copy from a painting by the Ukrainian artist, Maria Primatšenko. The designer of Marimekko admitted the plagiarism. The scandal received lots of media attention in Finland and abroad. The scandal also extended to partners of Marimekko, such as Finnair, the Finnish airline company. One of Finnair's aircraft had been decorated with the Metsänväki design, which naturally was now seen in a different light. Two days after the plagiarism news had emerged in the media, Porispere announced the visual design for the festival in 2014. It also copied the Metsänväki tree design, but with its own tiny modifications, as a way of joking about Marimekko. The text stated that its "unique" visual design represents trees of Kirjurinluoto Park, the Porispere venue. Unlike Marimekko, Porispere's poster had a small notice in one corner: copyright Maria Primatšenko 1963. Porispere also declared that besides its own marketing, it would provide its festival design to a local bus company to decorate its busses with the Metsänväki design. Further, they claimed that they would start negotiations with a small local airline company to decorate their aircraft with the design.

On May 31, 2013, Porispere posted photos of their "new" design on Facebook. The posting received 632 likes, 343 shares, and 39 comments – considerable numbers for a posting by a festival of Porispere's size. The discussion included, for example, the following ironic humor:

*Commentator 4: "This is really at an international level. Just like Marimekko or some Ukrainian folk art. Very unique!"*

*Commentator 5: "I appreciate competent piss-taking"*

Another example of taking part in current discussions at the societal level relates to the management of the city of Pori's municipal services. Although the next example is from Pori, we do not interpret

it as ironic humor at one's own expense, but as ironic humor at society's expense, as this kind of malpractice is not limited to the city of Pori. Some civil servants were suspected of malpractice in the use of public funds to cover irrelevant and extravagant expenses, trips to seminars and excursions, expensive dinners, accommodation, aroma massages, and free softshell coats. On July 20, 2016, Porispere announced new “*special tickets for public officers*” which included Gold VIP access, including a seminar of 1.5 *minutes*, meals and drinks, a sports coat, etc.

*It is so difficult nowadays for public officers to party. All kinds of documents of expenses are required, suspicions of malpractice are stated, and auditors are breathing down one's neck. We at Porispere act also on behalf of public officers and have created a totally new VIP category just for you. The VIP package for municipal officers will sort out any embarrassing consequences and the whole package can be invoiced as a seminar. Public officer: contact us, let's put tax revenues to use!*

Commenting was active and showed that commentators understood the ironic humor and started to co-create it, as the following examples demonstrate:

*Commentator 6: “On which topic is the seminar, and who is the speaker?”*

*Commentator 7: “Oh my, you're always at the cutting edge.”*

*Commentator 8: “Here we go ... if, for example, every municipal officer buys three tickets, that will already be six million tickets sold. Not bad!”*

*Commentator 9: “Do you still have the softshell coats in size M? I want a pink one. My skin doesn't really tolerate aroma massage. I assume you'll compensate me in cash?”*

*Commentator 10: “You forgot the accommodation in the most expensive hotel in the city.” “Does X [the manager who was responsible for approving the bill] already know [about this offer]?”*

*Commentator 11: “There will be a taxi to the Kämp hotel [five-star luxury hotel in Helsinki, 245 km away] at the end of the evening, right?”*

Although all the earlier examples were understood as ironic humor, one posting by Porispere on May 28, 2017 caused consternation among some Facebook users. The message was that Porispere would expand its product selection to include decorative paintings with aphorisms, such as “If we don’t know for sure how something will turn out, let’s expect it’ll be a f\*\*k up – old Pori saying.” The posting took place only three days after the funeral of Finland’s former President Mauno Koivisto, who was a war veteran. He was much appreciated as a president, and probably his best known optimistic aphorism was: “If we don’t know for sure how something will turn out, let’s expect it will turn out well.” Some commentators felt that the posting was an insult to the former president, while others did not share that opinion, to the point that they started to argue with each other. Porispere commented that they did not want to insult the late president in any way; instead, they wanted to offer a tribute to him in Porispere’s own way. However, in general, the posting was appreciated, and was shared 165 times and liked 896 times in a few days.

To sum up the analysis, Porispere uses ironic humor in its branding quite skillfully. Notably, most of the ironic humor postings are topical; they address something happening at the time, be it at the festival, in Pori, in the neighborhood, or something that is of national interest. In this way, the ironic humor is always novel, and it has the potential to be understood as humorous (Burgers et al., 2015). The postings containing ironic humor attracted many likes, comments, and shares, and only a fraction of the ironic messages were misunderstood and perceived as criticism, a danger that had been detected in earlier research (e.g., Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). Indeed, it appears that as Porispere posts on Facebook throughout the year, social media users also learn to understand Porispere’s ironic humor, and thus, are not likely to misunderstand it.

However, in spite of Porispere’s skillful use of ironic humor, we were still puzzled about why the posting related to President Koivisto prompted such diverse reactions. Hence, we went back to the classical theories on humor, and suggest that disparagement theory could help to understand the mechanisms of ironic humor in this context. Ferguson and Ford (2008, p. 21) describe

disparagement humor as “*remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target.*” They also argue that disparagement humor is funny when it bolsters or maintains the reader’s positive social identity as positively distinct from the target group of the humor. Hence, ironic humor targeted at, for example, the neighbors at Rauma strengthens one’s own social identity as a citizen of Pori. However, as Ferguson and Ford (2008) suggested, if the ironic humor is targeted at a person or group that the reader feels is close to her/his personal or social identity, it diminishes the amusement. Following this line of argumentation, President Koivisto, being highly appreciated and loved, may have been too close to some of the readers’ personal identities, and for them, ironic humor turned into an insult.

## **5. Discussion**

This study examined the opportunities arising from and the challenges involved in using ironic humor in festival branding, and particularly in relation to engaging stakeholders in brand co-creation. We addressed the research question: How can ironic humor be used with and by stakeholders to co-create brand identity? The results show that Porispere stimulates stakeholders to co-create brand identity in a number of ways; for example, by posting funny pictures, videos, jokes, and wordplay on Facebook, and by sharing other users’ content with ironic humor. The festival also often adds ironic humor to shared news, which is *per se* neutral and informative. It is noteworthy that the ironic humor is connected to news or current events. Such use of novel ironic humor makes it easier to get readers to solve the puzzle of the intended meaning and results in positive outcomes for the brand (see Burgers et al., 2015). In addition to Facebook, Porispere regularly utilizes ironic humor in its advertising, signage, PR products, and other promotional material.

Our data revealed three main categories of ironic humor based on its targets. The first category, ironic humor at one’s own expense, can be exemplified as using ironic humor as a way of laughing

at oneself, which might be called Poriness. This forms a cornerstone for the festival's brand identity. The findings show that Poriness was understood and utilized as its own "language," not only by the festival managers but also by commentators.

With its own language, using ironic humor differentiates Porispere and its brand community from its competitors, as the second category, ironic humor at the expense of one's competitors, demonstrates. Indeed, the festival can choose to utilize a particular type of humor, in this case ironic humor, which seems to appeal not only to Porispere's target audience, as our case shows, but also to the media. In this sense, the use of ironic humor in brand co-creation seems to produce both local and national attention as well as both direct (co-creating attendees) and indirect (unpaid media time) benefits in the branding. Our analysis reveals the festival's "local way" of discussing and analyzing society and its contemporary phenomena. However, there is a risk of not attracting attendees from outside the Pori area, if they do not understand the ironic humor used. The third category, ironic humor at society's expense, includes the only example of the challenges involved with using ironic humor, namely it being misunderstood or its subject being taken literally. The posting connected to President Koivisto annoyed some stakeholders and triggered negative reactions (Ferguson & Ford, 2008).

Our analysis shows that Porispere's ironic humor has shifted from being in-joke oriented into a more general direction, which appears to prompt stakeholders to participate in brand co-creation outside the Pori area.

Our results confirm that Facebook can be considered a virtual brand community of the festival as it allows the co-creation of brand identity with and by stakeholders throughout the year, both during the festival itself and beyond the actual timespan of the festival (see also Hudson & Hudson, 2013). Facebook might be seen as part of a "festivalscape" (Gration, Arcodia, Raciti, & Stokes, 2011), where additional value might be co-created with and by attendees and the festival.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1. Theoretical conclusions

The findings of the study indicate that ironic humor has the potential to be useful in festival brand co-creation, as it seems to increase the target audience's attention and awareness. The results also indicate that the use of ironic humor in festival branding might increase the target audience's positive attitude to the festival (as reflected in Facebook community members' likes) and promote brand co-creation (as reflected in the community members' commenting on and sharing the postings with their network).

The most liked posting, with 1,300 likes, represents ironic humor; thus, our results are in line with those of Salo and Tähtinen (2005), suggesting that humor increases positive attitudes to an advertisement and the willingness to share it with friends and family. However, our findings differ from those of de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang (2012) on product brands, as those findings suggest that entertaining content has a negative effect on the number of likes on social media. The authors of that study suggested that entertaining posts constitute content that is unrelated to the brand, whereas the fans interested in the brand itself appreciate more informative content. However, our contradictory findings support Eisend (2009) in showing that the positive influence of all kinds of humor in adverts of *hedonic* offerings (such as festivals) is higher than in functional products.

As Porispere's target audience is adults, it is likely that the followers of Porispere's Facebook account are mostly adults. This study's results therefore extend the findings of Kennedy and Guzmán (2016) on millennial consumers toward adults, and the focus on fun by means of ironic humor in particular. Kennedy and Guzmán (2016) suggested that providing fun, in terms of entertainment and excitement, is an important aspect to engage millennials in brand identity co-creation; thus, fun can be considered a predictor of brand identity co-creation. Our findings complement Kennedy and

Guzmán's (2016) by indicating that fun, in terms of ironic humor, could positively influence brand co-creation in the adult customer segments, particularly in the context of hedonic products, such as festivals. This perspective contributes to the knowledge of the social media strategies used in the festival and event sector (Gyimóthy & Larson, 2015). These authors argued that community consolidation, in terms of tribal communications and the facilitation of the community's formation, is crucial for festivals, but the degree of management control remains rather low within this strategy. However, our findings suggest otherwise, as long as the message the festival is sending has a profound symbolic meaning to the brand community and supports the sense of belonging and gratitude (see Simon & Tossan, 2018). Our findings confirm Gyimóthy and Larson's (2015) notion that festival branding should be based on profound insights into the social dynamics of festival consumption, which takes into account cultural notions, such as the sense of belonging and symbolic consumption. Indeed, the orchestration of brand co-creation may actually increase and strengthen the community's identification with the brand and its values, as managers acknowledge that brands "belong to and are created in concert with groups of communities" (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003, p. 31).

Hence, our study unravels the branding practices of festivals (Mossberg & Getz, 2006) by demonstrating the use of ironic humor in festival brand co-creation and elucidates the festival visitors' role in these processes. In this respect, the research adds a novel perspective to the literature on brand co-creation in general, and on festival brand co-creation in particular by demonstrating how festivals could use ironic humor as a way of facilitating and enhancing brand co-creation with and by stakeholders.

The use of ironic humor appears to stimulate stakeholders to participate in discussions and to comment on Facebook, and thus engages them in brand co-creation. As Hede and Kellett (2012) noted, this engagement is strategically crucial in the event sector to tackle threats regarding the festival's viability in the pulsating and competitive market. Our results support Barry and Graça

(2018) and extend their tentative results of the engaging influence of ironic humor in TV adverts to social media. Further, our results indicate that when a social media user employs ironic humor on social media, doing so appears to provide a way of shaping the identity not only of the brand but also of the user (see also Algesheimer et al., 2005; Voyer et al., 2017). It could therefore be argued that Kennedy and Guzmán's (2016) discussion of consumers' social motivations for brand co-creation could be extended to reflect that in using ironic humor (in brand co-creation) a social media user may shape her/his identity and become a prominent member of a virtual brand community.

## ***6.2 Managerial implications***

The scarce and fragmented intangible and tangible resources on organizing project-based festival productions call for continued innovation in managerial practices. Our findings indicate that the use of ironic humor in festival branding may not only be accepted by, but also beneficial in the eyes of, internal and external stakeholders. Novel, innovative, and low-cost means of branding are particularly important for festivals operating with very limited funding wanting to attract attention and create brand awareness. Ironic humor as meaningful content in social media posts might be seen as an effective trigger for participation in festival-led talks, and strategically concretize the audience's central role in festivals' production networks. In this sense, the strategic meaning of the virtual brand community is notable in project-based festival productions and ironic humor can clearly be a valuable tool in branding in that community. Social media can serve as a platform in co-production processes and bolster the engagement between the festival and the participants and, thus, might be seen as a way to enable co-creation practices as the co-creation of brand identity.

However, festival managers adopting ironic humor in branding should be well aware of the target audience's cultural characteristics. As illustrated in our findings, the appropriate use of ironic humor is tricky. The meaning of the message might not even be obvious to all participants involved

in the virtual brand community, as exemplified in the case of the post related to President Koivisto in our study. In addition, in the case of Jukka-Tukka, the meaning of content is extremely challenging to explain and to put into words that are understandable for “non-natives” (even including the other Finns outside of Pori). The first example reveals the double-edged sword in ironic humor: while some of the participants in the virtual community found the post a valuable condolence message regarding the deceased president, others argued that a line had been crossed. The worst outcome in the case of the President Koivisto posting could well have been that it was considered so offensive that the brand identity of the festival was ruined. The second notion of Jukka-Tukka exemplifies the challenge of the puzzle solving (see Stern, 1990). In that case, the posts and hype were strongly intertwined with its cultural context, without any explicit explanations of what the festival organizers intended to convey with that invention. One part of the audience might see the message as a clever way to influence the community and encourage its participants to support other locals, while another section might view the campaign as using social media to harass an individual. In sum, the main managerial implication of this study is that the art of successful ironic branding appears to be in finding the balance between boldness and appropriateness. This requires close interactions with the attendees and the community in the early stages of the festival’s lifecycle. Instead of potentially diluting the festival’s unique brand identity by reducing the use of ironic humor, which differentiates it from its competitors, the festival managers could use more markers of ironic humor, such as quotation marks or emoticons (see Lagerwerf, 2007), to help the audience recognize the ironic humor and understand it as intended to be funny. However, if the ironic humor loses its mystery and becomes too obvious, it will engage the reader less and be less attractive.

### *6.3 Evaluation of the study, its limitations, and future avenues*

This is an exploratory study of a unique festival in Finland. We posed an exploratory research question, and the study approached ironic brand co-creation as a phenomenon at the conceptual level. Hence, our evaluation of the study makes use of the quality criteria set by Tracy (2010) for qualitative research. We highlight the criteria of rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, and resonance. In spite of the single-case choice, which restricts the study to a specific context, our choice was aimed at providing rich rigor in theoretical concepts (more than a single theoretical discussion was offered), data (full data on postings), and data analysis processes (all three authors were involved). We have expressed our connections to the phenomenon and also described the methods used in as much detail as space allows to improve the sincerity of the study. In addition, the description includes details of the data to show the logic behind our analysis and to provide credibility, in addition to the triangulation efforts made in terms of both data and analysts. However, as a piece of qualitative research, the information this study produces is both historically and culturally situated (see Tracy, 2010). Its resonance is largely attributable to the transferability of its findings to other situations. As this is one of the first studies to focus on a specific type of humor, namely ironic humor, it sets the grounds for further studies. However, as the studied context also represents social media communication and the context can be described as a brand community, the results supporting existing research on identity enhancement are transferrable to other cultural settings and contexts. Thus, we argue that ironic humor can positively engage readers and prompt them to share any social media content, be it a posting or a viral advert (see Eckler & Bolls, 2011). In addition, the study suggests that ironic humor that fits the social identity of the target audience is likely to be understood, although personal identities can influence the perception.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, and owing to the lack of earlier studies, there are a very limited number of studies with which to compare our results. In spite of the limited research in this area, we can draw some conclusions on how often ironic humor is used. Of the total postings, 7% contained ironic humor, and this comes quite close to the results of Barry and Graça (2018),

where 14% of the studied TV adverts contained ironic juxtaposition, resulting in it being the fourth most used form of humor in TV adverts. Hence, it seems reasonable to address more research efforts into this relatively often used, influential, but risky technique of ironic humor.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to expand the research and examine the use of ironic humor in brand co-creation in other types of festivals and events, and also in other countries and cultures. In addition, research focusing on social media users' participation in festivals' virtual communities might reveal the users adopt varying roles as members of these communities. It would be interesting to examine whether there are some opinion leaders among the participants. This would yield further insights into festival brand co-creation practices. Undoubtedly, as research on the use of ironic humor in brand co-creation is still a neglected research area, further study on the usefulness of ironic humor in brand co-creation in different industries and contexts would be useful for academics and practitioners alike.

## References

- Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U. M., & Herrmann, A. (2005). The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs. *Journal of Marketing*, 69(3), 19–34.
- Barry, J., & Graça, S.S. (2018). A Typological Examination of Effective Humor for Content Marketing. In F. Maon, A. Lindgreen, J. Vanhamme, R. J. Angell, & J. Memery (Eds.), *Not All Claps and Cheers* (pp. 93-114). Oxon: Routledge.
- Berger, A. A. (1976). Anatomy of the joke. *Journal of Communication*, 26(3), 113–115.
- Berger, A. A. (1993). *An Anatomy of Humor*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Brooks, C., & Warren, R.P. (1960). *Understanding Poetry*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Brown, S., Kozinets, R., & Sherry, J. (2003) Teaching old brands new tricks: Retro branding and the revival of brand meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(3), 19–33.
- Buijzen, M., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2004). Developing a typology of humour in audiovisual media. *Media Psychology*, 6(2), 147–167.
- Burgers, C., Konijn, E. A., Steen, G. J., & Iepsma, M. A. (2015). Making ads less complex, yet more creative and persuasive: The effects of conventional metaphors and irony in print advertising. *International Journal of Advertising*, 34(3), 515–532.
- Caves, R. (2000). *Creative Industries: Contracts between Arts and Commerce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collin-Lachaud, I., & Duyck, J.-Y. (2002). Relationship Marketing as a Paradigm for Festivals: A Case Study of the Francofolies of La Rochelle, France. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 4(3), 56–70.

- Coupland, J.C., Iacobucci, D., & Arnould, E. (2005). Invisible brands: an ethnography of households and the brands in their kitchen pantries. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(1), 106–113.
- Crawford, H. J., & Gregory, G. D. (2015). Humorous advertising that travels: A review and call for research. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(3), 569–577.
- da Silveira, C., Lages, C., & Simões, C. (2013). Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(1), 28–36.
- de Vries, L., Gensler, S., & Leeﬂang P. S. H. (2012). Popularity of Brand Posts on Brand Fan Pages: An Investigation of the Effects of Social Media Marketing. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 26(2), 83–91.
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L-E. (2002) Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553-560.
- Eckler, P., & Bolls, P. (2011) Spreading the virus: Emotional tone of viral advertising and its effect on forwarding intentions and attitudes. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 11(2), 1-11.
- Eisend, M. (2009). A meta-analysis of humour in advertising. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 37(2), 191–203.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62(1), 107–115
- Ferguson, M. A., & Ford, T. E. (2008). Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, 21(3), 283–312.

Frew, E. (2006). The humour tourist: A conceptualisation. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(5), 643–646.

Getz, D. (2012). *Event studies. Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Getz, D., & Andersson, T. D. (2010). Festival Stakeholders: Exploring Relationships and Dependency Through a Four-country Comparison. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 34(4), 531–556.

Getz, D., Andersson, T. D., & Larsson, M. (2007). Festival stakeholder roles: Concepts and case studies. *Event Management*, 10(2/3), 103–122.

Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24, 105–112.

Gratton, D., Arcodia, C., Raciti, M., & Stokes, R. (2011). The Blended Festivalscape and its Sustainability at Non Urban Festivals. *Event Management*, 15, 343–359.

Gyimóthy, S., & Larson, M. (2015). Social Media Cocreation Strategies: The 3Cs. *Event Management*, 19(3), 331–348.

Hajli, N., Shanmugam, M., Papagiannidis S., Zahay, D. & Richard, M-O. (2017). Branding co-creation with members of online brand communities. *Journal of Business Research*, 70, 136–144.

Halinen, A., & Törnroos, J.-Å. (2005). Using case methods in the study of contemporary business networks. *Journal of Business Research*, 58(9), 1285–1297.

Hatch, M. J. (1997). Irony and the social construction of contradiction in the humor of a management team. *Organization Science*, 8(3), 275–288.

- Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2010). Toward a theory of brand co-creation with implications for brand governance. *Brand Management*, 17(8), 590–604.
- Hede, A. M., & Kellet, P. (2012). Building online communities: exploring the benefits, challenges and risks in the Australian event sector. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 18(3), 239–250.
- Hsieh, H.-F. & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research* 15(9), 1277–1288.
- Hsieh, J. K., Hsieh, Y. C., & Tang, Y. C. (2012). Exploring the disseminating behaviors of eWOM marketing: persuasion in online video. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 12(2), 201–224.
- Hudson, S., & Hudson, R. (2013). Engaging with consumers using social media: a case study of music festivals. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 4(3), 206–223.
- Hudson, S., Roth, M., Madden, T., & Hudson, R. (2015). The effects of social media on emotions, brand relationship quality, and word of mouth: An empirical study of music festival attendees. *Tourism Management*, 47, 68–76.
- Ind, N., & Todd, L. (2011). Beyond the Fringe: Creativity and the City. In F. M. Go, & R. Govers (Eds.), *International Place Branding Yearbook 2011* (pp. 47–59). UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kelly, J. P., & Solomon, P. J. (1975). Humor in Television Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 4(3), 31–35.
- Kennedy, E., & Guzmán, F. (2016). Co-creation of brand identities: consumer and industry influence and motivations. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 33(5), 313–323.
- Kim, T., & Kim, O. (2015). Effects of ironic advertising on consumers' attention, involvement and attitude. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 24(1), 53–67.

- Kondracki, N. L., Wellman, N. S., & Amundson, D. R. (2002). Content analysis: review of methods and their applications in nutrition education. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 34(4), 224–230.
- Kovács, G., & Spens, K. M. (2005). Abductive reasoning in logistics research. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics*, 35(2), 132–144.
- Lagerwerf, L. (2007). Irony and sarcasm in advertisements: effects of relevant inappropriateness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(10), 1702–1721.
- Larson, M. (2002). A political approach to relationships marketing: Case study of Storsjöyran festival. *The International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4(2), 119–143.
- Lee, Y-K., Lee, C-K., Lee, S-K., & Babin, B. J. (2008). Festivalscapes and patrons' emotions, satisfaction, and loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 61(1), 56–64.
- Luonila, M., & Johansson, T. (2016). Reasons for Networking in Institutionalized Music Productions: Case Studies of an Opera House and a Music Festival. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 18(3), 50–66.
- Luonila, M., Suomi, K., & Johansson, M. (2016). Creating a stir: The role of word of mouth in reputation management in the context of festivals. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality & Tourism*, 16(4), 461–483.
- Manthiou, A., Lee, S., Tang, L., & Chiang, L. (2014). The experience economy approach to festival marketing: vivid memory and attendee loyalty. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 28(1), 22–35.
- Merz, M. A., Zarantonello, L., & Grappi, S. (2018). How valuable are your customers in the brand value co-creation process? The development of a Customer Co-Creation Value (CCCV) scale. *Journal of Business Research*, 82, 79–89.

- Morgan, M. (2008). What makes a good festival? Understanding the event experience. *Event Management*, 12, 81–93.
- Mossberg, L., & Getz, D. (2006). Stakeholder influences on the ownership and management of festival brands. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 6(4), 308–326.
- Muniz, A. M., & O’Guinn, T.C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412–432.
- Mäläskä, M., Saraniemi, S., & Tähtinen, J. (2011). Network actors’ participation in B2B SME branding. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40, 1144–1152.
- Partington, A. (2007). Irony and reversal of evaluation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39(9), 1547–1569.
- Pathak, X., & Pathak-Shelat, M. (2017). Sentiment analysis of virtual brand communities for effective tribal marketing. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 1(1), 16–38.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Thousand Oak, CA: Sage Publications.
- Payne, A., Storbacka, K., Frow, P., & Knox, S. (2009). Co-creating brands: Diagnosing and designing the relationship experience. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(3), 379–389.
- Phelan, J., (2009). The narrative turn and the how of narrative inquiry. *Narrative*, 17(1), 1–10.
- Prebensen, N. (2010). Value creation through stakeholder participation: A case study of an event in the High North. *Event Management*, 14(1), 37–52.
- Reyes, A., & Rosso, P. (2012). Making objective decisions from subjective data: Detecting irony in customer reviews. *Decision Support Systems*, 53(4), 754–760.

- Roberts, R. M., & Kreuz, R. J. (1994). Why do people use figurative language? *Psychological Science*, 5(3), 159–163.
- Salo, J., & Tähtinen, J. (2005). Retailer Use of Permission-Based Mobile Advertising. In I. Clarke III, & T. Flaherty (Eds.), *Advances in Electronic Marketing* (pp. 140–156). Hershey, PA: Idea Group.
- Satamittari (2018) Koulutustaso (Educational level) <http://www.satamittari.fi/Koulutustaso>. Retrieved the 26th April 2018.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2003). *Research methods for business students*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75.
- Sicilia, M., & Palazón, M. (2008). Brand communities on the internet – A case study of Coca-Cola’s Spanish virtual community. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 13(3), 255–270.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data. Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Simon, F., & Tossan, V. (2018). Does brand-consumer social sharing matter? A relational framework of customer engagement to brand-hosted social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 85(3), 175–184.
- Stake, R. E. (2008). Qualitative case studies. In N.K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (pp. 119–150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stern, B. (1990). Pleasure and Persuasion in Advertising: Rhetorical Irony as a Humour Technique. *Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 12(1–2), 25–42.

- SVT (2015). *Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT): Väestön koulutus rakenne*. The official statistics of Finland: the educational structure of the population, ISSN=1799-4586. 2015. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus. Retrieved April 3, 2017, from [http://www.stat.fi/til/vkour/2015/vkour\\_2015\\_2016-11-03\\_tie\\_001\\_fi.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/vkour/2015/vkour_2015_2016-11-03_tie_001_fi.html)
- Todd, L. (2015). Developing brand relationship theory for festivals. A study of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In I. Yeoman, M. Robertson, U. McMahon-Beattie, E. Backer, & K. A. Smith (Eds.), *The Future of Events and Festivals* (pp. 157–174). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.
- Tracy, S. J., Myers, K. K., & Scott, C. W. (2006). Cracking jokes and crafting selves: Sensemaking and identity management among human service workers. *Communication Monographs*, 73(3), 283–308.
- Utsumi, A. (2000). Verbal irony as implicit display of ironic environment: Distinguishing ironic utterances from nonirony. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(12), 1777–1806.
- Vallaster, C., & von Wallpach, S. (2013). An online discursive inquiry into the social dynamics of multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation. *Journal of Business Research*, 66, 1505–1515.
- Voyer, B., Kastanakis, M., & Rhode, A. (2017). Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: A cross-cultural consumer perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 70, 399–410.
- Walter, N., Cody, M.J., Xu, L.Z. and Murphy, S.T., (2018). A Priest, a Rabbi, and a Minister Walk into a Bar: A Meta-Analysis of Humor Effects on Persuasion. *Human Communication Research*, hqy005, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqy005>

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research. Design and methods*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Zenith (2017). *Advertising Expenditure Forecast – Executive Summary*. Retrieved April 13, 2017, from <https://www.zenithmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Adspend-forecasts-March-2017-executive-summary.pdf>

Yle (2018). Ampiaiset terrorisoivat festarikansaa Porissa (Festival visitors were stung by angry wasps in Pori). Retrieved April 13, 2017, from <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-7403477>

Table 1. The Popularity of Ironic Humor vs. Non-Ironic Postings

Communicated Postings	Ironic Humor Postings		Non-Ironic Postings	
	N	Ratio %	N	Ratio %
Number of posts <i>Total = 1,912</i>	143	7%	1,769	93%
Of which had over 100 likes	56	39%	190	11%
Of which had over 10 comments	23	16%	83	5%
Of which had over 10 shares	38	27%	101	6%