Chapter 8

One Brand, Multiple Authenticities: The Case of the World's First Pay-Per-Minute Cafe Franchise

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of authenticity in the context of today's highly competitive hospitality industry. Drawing on the multi-sited ethnographic case study of Ziferblat, the world's first pay-per-minute cafe franchise, the author examines how the imperative of authenticity is addressed by small international enterprises falling in between the categories of chain and independent. By tracing how Ziferblat's original concept, shaped by the personal and socioeconomic background of its founder, was subsequently transformed by the local teams and adapted to different cultural-geographical contexts, this chapter adds new empirical evidence to the dynamic and pluralistic notion of multiple authenticities.

Keywords: Cafe; hospitality; franchise; brand; multiple authenticities

Introduction

In autumn 2011, Moscow's hospitality scene was shaken up by the opening of *Ziferblat*, the world's first pay-per-minute cafe. Unlike traditional eating establishments, *Ziferblat* charged customers for the time spent in the venue, rather than food and drinks, and provided them with wifi, light refreshments, access to kitchen facilities and, most importantly, the right to use the space as they saw fit.

Not only were *Ziferblat* customers expected to be their own baristas and dishwashers, but they were also allowed to bring their own food or order delivery from other cafes and restaurants. The only two rules were to not consume alcohol and to respect other people's right to the space. The idea caught on quickly; in just a couple of years, *Ziferblat* grew into a chain of a dozen venues and gave rise to hundreds of look-alikes (also known by the terms 'anti-cafes' and 'time cafes') in the former USSR region. By 2017, *Ziferblat* had 18 branches in Russia, Ukraine, Slovenia, the UK and Mongolia (most of which were franchised, with a couple of locations owned by the company), and over 1,000 successors in Russia alone. In the meantime, due in no small part to the global media buzz around *Ziferblat*'s opening in London (Reid, 2014; Schäfer, 2014; Soares, 2014), about 50 pay-per-minute venues emerged across Europe, Asia and North America. While most reporters and commentators focussed on the practicalities of the new business model pioneered by *Ziferblat*, the founder Ivan Mitin emphasised that his ultimate goal was not profit but 'authenticity' (Sanduliak, 2013).

It is hardly surprising for a small firm entering the highly competitive national and then global cafe market to build its brand around the idea of authenticity. Commonly perceived as an antidote to the overarching trends towards globalisation, standardisation, rationalisation and homogenisation in the postmodern marketplace (Arnould & Price, 2000; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006), authenticity has become nothing short of an imperative for the post-Fordist generation of food producers (Gerosa, 2021). In the cafe industry, the pursuit of authenticity is intensified by the growing competition between large corporate chains and small independent businesses (Thompson & Arsel, 2004) and the cultural shift from commodities to experiences (Miles, 2021). Nevertheless, the chain/independent tensions around authenticity remain an under-investigated area of consumer culture research (Thurnell-Read, 2019), while existing scholarship on cafes and other places of commercial food consumption has mostly applied the concept of authenticity to products (Grinshpun, 2014; Hubbard, 2019; Kjeldgaard & Ostberg, 2007) rather than atmospheres (cf. Linnet, 2015). By looking into the case of *Ziferblat*, we can not only explore how the idea of authenticity is addressed by small enterprises falling in between the categories of chain and independent (and thus often described by the oxymoron 'independent chains'), but also critically examine the authenticity claims made by a hospitality business that brings the focus away from drinks and food to non-food-related aspects of cafe culture, such as sociability, conviviality and coziness (Linnet, 2015; Oldenburg, 1989).

Interrogating these claims, however, does not mean asking whether or not *Ziferblat* is authentic. Instead, the question I aim to answer in this chapter is how, and with what effects, authenticity is produced and contested in *Ziferblat*. In doing so, I draw on a 'widespread agreement' (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p. 839) in sociological and cultural studies of consumption that authenticity is a socially constructed and context dependent interpretation of an object, rather than its inherent property (Arnould & Price, 2000; Peterson, 2005; Rose & Wood, 2005; Thompson et al., 2006), and that it is often used as a lever of cultural and economic power (Zukin, 2010). Over the past two decades, it has been established that both the meaning and significance of authenticity in specific markets may change over

time (Peterson, 2005) and vary from one producer to another (Wherry, 2006), but very little is known about such transformations within specific brands. One of the few exceptions is Aiello and Dickinson's (2014) visual-material rhetoric analysis of the global redesign of Starbucks stores. In this chapter, I use a different empirical context and methodological approach to offer not just a diachronic but also a synchronic analysis of the 'multiple authenticities' (Wherry, 2006) of one brand.

As Wherry (2006, p. 28) points out, the multiple authenticities perspective focusses on how authenticity gains meaning – or, rather, multiple meanings – through the interaction of people, places, things and concepts.[1] To better reflect the nuances of this process and capture a moment of co-existence of multiple authenticities within the same brand, I present an ethnographic snapshot of *Ziferblat* taken in 2016–2017 for a larger project examining the pay-per-minute cafe phenomenon. In addition to a critical discourse analysis of various secondary sources outlining the history of *Ziferblat* (corporate website and social media content, press reports and interviews with the founder), I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study of four *Ziferblat* branches, including two company-owned (Moscow, London) and two franchised ones (Moscow, Manchester). The fieldwork involved 48 on-site interviews with staff and customers, purposively selected to ensure maximum variation of roles and backgrounds, and over 160 hours of participant observation and informal talks in a customer role, split roughly equally between the four sites.

Apart from adding new empirical evidence to the dynamic and pluralistic theoretical approach outlined above, the case study of *Ziferblat* also provides a lens for understanding the two aspects of authenticity recently identified by Thurnell-Read (2019) as pertinent directions for consumer culture research. The first one, moving beyond the long-standing tendency to locate authenticity in consumer perceptions, brings to the fore the ways in which authenticity is shaped by the biographical trajectories and socioeconomic backgrounds of producers, while the second one calls for international and intercultural comparisons of authenticity production. In what follows I show how the founder's desire for authenticity shaped his idea of *Ziferblat* and then discuss how this original vision, expressed in discursive structures and embodied in physical design and social practices, was further reshaped by the branch managers and franchisees and affected by the local cultural-geographical contexts.

The Beginning of *Ziferblat*

The history of *Ziferblat* started in 2010, when Ivan Mitin, a 26-year-old aspiring writer and cultural activist living off of odd freelance jobs, was struggling to find an affordable and welcoming place in Moscow's city centre where he could work, organise events and meet up with the members of his movement called Pocket Poetry. This group, leafletting small laminated cards with classic poetry around

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[1]For a similar interpretation of authenticity in the context of heritage and urban studies, see Piazzoni (2018).

the city to 'enlighten people, reintroduce them to the classics and turn their attention away from material values to cultural ones' (Mitin in: Arsentieva, 2009), met in cafes every week to craft the cards and socialise. Increasingly discontent with the pressure to order food and drinks while in cafes, Mitin gathered some funds, rented a small commercial property in an attic of a residential building and launched a non-profit venue called Treehouse. Sparsely furnished with unmatching pieces and equipped with kitchen basics, Treehouse was framed as neither a cafe nor a club but a 'public living room' that everyone could visit in exchange for a pay-what-you-want donation towards the rent, utility bills and basic supplies for common use. The founder, aiming to 'do away with unreasonable prices, waiters, menus, bills and other nonsense', emphasised that there were no such things as 'service', 'staff' and 'customers' in Treehouse – instead, the visitors, referred to as 'guests' or 'micro-tenants', were expected to help themselves and treat the space as 'a flat we are all renting together' (Mitin, 2010).

After a year, when Treehouse became too overcrowded, Mitin opened a bigger venue just a few blocks away and named it *Ziferblat*, after a Russian word meaning 'clock face'. Although the business model was different, it was underpinned by the same idea of a shared home/public living room – now rented by the minute instead of being funded through voluntary donations. Unlike Treehouse, *Ziferblat* hired several employees who worked shifts meeting visitors, introducing them to the concept, clocking them in and out and maintaining the space, but the terms 'staff' and 'customers' were still taboo and replaced with 'hosts' and 'guests'. It was also repeatedly emphasised that in *Ziferblat* everyone is equal, nobody serves anyone, therefore each micro-tenant should treat the space like their own. The epitome of this principle was *Ziferblat*'s centrepiece – a customer-facing three-group espresso machine (Fig. 8.1), turned around so that everyone could make their own drink without 'reducing [hosts] to waiters' (Mitin in: Vazari, 2012). This non-hierarchical structure was largely inspired by the founder's upbringing as a digital native:

> I grew up with the internet and then brought its best aspects to *Ziferblat* – this openness and freedom from barriers, like in social media. In fact, *Ziferblat* is a social media, but in real life. It gives people something social media cannot provide – true, authentic, live human contact. (Mitin in: Gurova, 2012)

The focus on sociability and conviviality, according to Mitin, made *Ziferblat* akin to British gentlemen's clubs and, even more so, to their predecessor – seventeenth-century English coffeehouses:

> In the beginning, it was something like *Ziferblat*: people would come together, discuss the news and drink coffee along the way. It was that sociable atmosphere that drew people in. When this concept began to formalize, coffeehouse owners started to chase profit and everything degenerated into what we call a cafe today – a place where people wearing uniform are serving you and you're

Fig. 8.1.   Ziferblat's First Branch in Moscow.

> sitting at your table, oblivious to everyone and everything around
> you. In a way, *Ziferblat* is a return to the cafe's true essence. (Mitin
> in: Fahrutdinov, 2015)

In the above-cited interview, Mitin also expressed a concern about the likely possibility of his innovation ending up the same way – 'formalized, simplified and streamlined' because of the numerous 'clones' who 'ripped off his idea'. Many of them, however, had initially approached him with franchise proposals but were turned down as he found them too profit-oriented (Gurova, 2012). The subsequent growth of the pay-per-minute cafe market was dominated by the venues he described as 'dark and damp basements with cheap IKEA furniture' where people were 'engaging in simple and meaningless entertainment like Xbox, Mafia[2] and life coaching seminars'. Contrastingly, *Ziferblat* was positioned as a 'place free from simulacra, pretension and false values', that was 'imbued with refined culture, expressed through the interior design, events and people who work here', and strived to 'instill culturedness and sophistication into the masses' (Mitin in: Fahrutdinov, 2015; Gurova, 2012; Krasnova, 2013; Vylegzhanin, 2012). Although Mitin linked this distinction to the fact that his class background was 'cultural rather than entrepreneurial' (Sanduliak, 2013), his vision of *Ziferblat* had even

[2]Mafia is a social deduction party game.

deeper roots in his hybrid identity of a post-socialist millennial. Disenchanted with the 'savage capitalism of the 1990s', he nevertheless had very little nostalgia for the USSR (Fahrutdinov, 2015), and yet he was greatly influenced by the paternalistic Soviet idea of culture as an instrument of civilising the backwards. However, a few years after *Ziferblat*'s opening, the growing competition and long-standing managerial problems forced Mitin to move towards a more market-oriented approach, which resulted in launching several company-owned and franchised branches in Russia and abroad, accompanied by the development of brand standards and quality assurance protocols. Originally a manifestation of consumer resistance to the commercialisation of public life, *Ziferblat*'s pursuit of authenticity became a powerful marketing tool and the backbone of its brand identity.

Early on, *Ziferblat*'s founder attempted to monopolise the production of authenticity by assuming the role of aesthetic arbiter, controlling every little detail from coffee to music (thus, each branch had to use the uniform playlist created by him and get his personal approval for every new addition to it). As the time went by, local managers and franchisees have asserted their own visions of *Ziferblat*, while Mitin has lost interest in his brainchild and moved on to the next project, an upscale eco resort in the countryside outside of Moscow. When I visited four *Ziferblat* locations in Moscow, London and Manchester between June 2016 and March 2017, it struck me how much they differed from one another, despite bearing the same brand name. In the next sections, I will discuss these differences, tracing how *Ziferblat*'s original concept, transformed by the local teams and adapted to different cultural-geographical contexts, has split into three coexisting and at times conflicting ways to be authentic.

Ziferblat in Moscow

There are two *Ziferblats* in Moscow, and both are situated in the city centre. The very first venue, opened in 2011 and still owned by the company (Fig. 8.1), was located on Pokrovka, a small, partly pedestrianised street featuring many independent cafes, restaurants, bars and shops (in 2018, this branch moved to a different address nearby). The property, sitting in an unassuming nineteenth-century building (originally residential but converted to shops in the Soviet period), inherited office style ceiling panels and vinyl flooring from the previous tenants, but the furniture, décor and lighting were carefully selected by the *Ziferblat* team to create the sense of home and immerse customers in the past. The interior, dominated by natural and worn materials and textures, included items purchased from the much-despised IKEA, which had been distressed to look antique and match the actual vintage pieces that were a rare find in Moscow in the 2010s. When Mitin opened the London branch a few years later, he was delighted to have been able to design his first IKEA-free *Ziferblat*, which he had always wanted but could not accomplish because 'the culture of heritage preservation is non-existent in Russia' (Mitin in: Nikitina, 2013). In reality, though, because of the many turbulent events that took place in the twentieth century, only lucky or privileged Russian families were able to pass their possessions to younger generations, which has made the ability to apprehend and appreciate retro style a marker of social and cultural distinction.

In addition, the Pokrovka branch displayed a lot of objects and artifacts appealing to a more universal post-digital nostalgia for the analogue, which afterwards became part of the *Ziferblat* brand standard: a working typewriter, vinyl record player and radio, a piano, a big library of books, and the already mentioned manual coffee machine. Overall, what I saw in Pokrovka in 2016 was reportedly a more refined version of the original, less coherent design *Ziferblat* started with. The team members attributed this transformation to the branch manager who took over in 2012 and left in 2015 but was still remembered with great respect and fondness for her faultless taste and, as host Tanya[3] put it, for 'raising the bar from amateurism to a serious place with serious ambitions'.

Likewise, the second, franchised branch, opened on Tverskaya Street in 2012 (Fig. 8.2), was said to have been largely influenced by one of its owners. As branch manager Maya noted,

> All this beauty is her achievement. She's an art historian, and it has a great impact on every finest detail – how this throw is folded, how that table is placed.

That *Ziferblat*, indeed, was curated even more meticulously than the one on Pokrovka; thus, customers were asked not to move the furniture around – 'because

Fig. 8.2.   The Tverskaya Branch, Moscow.

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[3]All participant names have been changed.

it is an element of the concept, just like coffee and sweets, and because most of it is much older than us', the branch rules said. This museum-like atmosphere was also inspired by the property occupied by *Ziferblat* – a converted two-storey apartment in a graded art nouveau building once populated by the Soviet elite, situated on a street anecdotally known as the most expensive in Moscow rent-wise, and neighbouring many historical attractions, art colleges and, indeed, museums. To complement the image of a fine old home, Tverskaya's team played 1940s–1950s jazz, pop and rock'n'roll standards, while their Pokrovka colleagues still stuck to Mitin's original playlist, which mixed classic jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk and 1960s–1970s rock with indie, new wave, synth-pop and some afrobeat and bossa nova tracks. And just like in Mitin's original vision, the idea of equality and non-hierarchy was at odds with the role of cultural educators and censors assumed by both Moscow teams:

> Some people say, 'Ew, it's like grandma's apartment!'. You know, in other places, there's IKEA everywhere, so *Ziferblat* ought to re-educate everyone. (Maya, Tverskaya's manager)

> It's tricky when people say, 'Here's my drawing, it'll fit so nicely in here!', and you realize – nope, it better not be here. Sometimes, it feels like you're deceiving people into thinking they can participate and then you let them down. But we can't be a place where anything goes, go ahead, organize your movie night with dumb comedies, bring some weird items to decorate the space… (Tanya, Pokrovka's host)

One aspect of customer 're-education' that proved to be especially problematic was *Ziferblat*'s coffee etiquette. After years of correcting and lecturing those who attempted to order a coffee instead of making it themselves or asking the hosts to help, both teams became less purist about this rule, and yet it provoked a lot of confusion and awkwardness among the newcomers. Another tactic used by the managers to create the atmosphere of domestic rather than commercial hospitality was instructing the hosts to 'be natural', i.e. refrain from the tone and phrases typical for customer service small talk. To push the boundary between staff and customers even further, both Pokrovka and Tverskaya organised communal brunches and dinners where hosts and volunteering guests cooked together and everyone present at the venue was invited to the table to share the meal. On top of these informal and casual get-togethers, Pokrovka also had a regular event called 'the five o'clock tea', which looked and felt like a staged and slightly bizarre emulation of the British afternoon tea ritual. At one tea party I attended in 2016, the host first gave a little introductory speech ('We've got a tradition in *Ziferblat* that roots back to Queen Victoria…'), then announced the conversation topic ('Let's talk about vacations') and made everyone speak in turn. At the end, regular guest Mikhail told me, 'It's all sweet and cute now but it used to be much better – we would exchange puns, you know, this pseudo-English humour, like Jeeves and Wooster'.

Remarkably, even those customers who never attended the five o'clock parties often compared both Moscow venues to British gentlemen's clubs and Russian pre-revolutionary aristocratic salons. Others, echoing Mitin's interviews, reflected on how *Ziferblat* 'restores the very essence of what cafes were intended for – to just gather and talk' (Roman, Pokrovka). Although the most common association evoked by both branches was home, customers recognised the authenticity work behind this effect. Some of them contrasted *Ziferblat*'s 'creative and inspiring' design and atmosphere with that of their 'IKEA-furnished, soulless' competitors (Lydia, Tverskaya), while others emphasised that it 'would not appeal to a person unable to distinguish and appreciate it' (Pyotr, Pokrovka).

In the hospitality and food sectors, authenticity is often seen as the priority of aesthetic ambitions and communal values over economic profit (Thompson & Arsel, 2004) or, more recently, as the outcome of the inherent tension between art and commerce (Gerosa, 2021). The Moscow case, however, demonstrates an even more complicated relationship where market competition intensifies the company's quest for authenticity, leaving customers out of the process of authenticity production and essentially reducing the brand's ethics to aesthetics. As the next section will show, such an approach has not gone uncontested.

Ziferblat in London

The company-owned branch opened in 2014 in Shoreditch, a creative and tech district in East London's gentrified borough of Hackney, had a glorious beginning and a sad, lingering end. Despite receiving a great amount of free publicity during the first two months of operation (Reid, 2014; Schäfer, 2014; Soares, 2014), the UK's first *Ziferblat* was forced to shut down following allegations of operating a cafe under a shared office licence, which took half a year to resolve. The reopened venue never fully recovered from this crisis and, after a few years of struggling to break even, let alone make profit, it closed again in 2018 and reopened in a different location in January 2020 – only to be closed again, now permanently, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2016–2017, I saw this branch at one of its lowest financial ebbs, but the spirit was high and community-driven. An international team, led by a Russian-speaking social worker and activist, stuck to *Ziferblat*'s core idea of home but approached it in a way that was strikingly different from the Moscow branches. The shabby, make-do-and-mend interior (Fig. 8.3) was largely sourced by the customers, including such items that would certainly have been rejected as 'unattractive', 'cheesy' or 'weird' in Pokrovka and Tverskaya (e.g. a sunken couch rescued from the dumpster, a Minnie Mouse cushion, or an art object that is half Barbie doll, half stuffed toy). Moreover, the hosts, many of whom had had experience in the music industry, were keen to share their aesthetic authority with customers, inviting them to choose the background music or even create their own personalised playlists for *Ziferblat*. The range of genres featuring in the venue's soundscape was overall close to Mitin's original playlist but also included punk and alternative music. Host and deputy manager Evan was openly critical of the top-down cultural policy dictated by their Moscow-based management:

Fig. 8.3.   Ziferblat in London.

> People can make their own home better than you can make it for
> them. Choosing the music is like telling people how to feel. Even
> telling people to feel safe, to be authentic, is counterproductive
> in achieving that aim. It's one of the reasons we've evolved the
> *Ziferblat* concept and why we've had tensions with the Russian
> team – because we're not quite the same, we're trying different
> things.

Ironically, Evan was the author of the hosting guide that provided the team
with some tips on how exactly to be authentic:

> We are people before we are employees. As such, we try to greet
> guests with a sincere 'how are you?' and exchanging names. If
> [that] leads to a decent discussion, follow [it] as long as is natural
> (…). The alternative way to open conversation when guests arrive
> is to comment on something you've noticed, their smile, their style,
> the atmosphere they're bringing with them – just another way to
> be real to each other from the off.

This approach to social interaction was embodied in the framed sign saying,
'IN THIS PLACE "HOWAREYOU" MEANS "HOW ARE YOU?"'. As host
Kevin explained:

In conventional [cafes], you're not really gonna go into it because you don't want to hold up the queue. But in here it's a case-by-case basis. I had a great experience where I asked a person at the door, 'How are you?' – 'Yeah, I'm OK', and then I met them in the kitchen again and went, 'I have to ask you this, you don't seem OK…', and they really shared. I was afraid to ask because it could be someone died, but I had to because they seemed like they weren't in a good place and I felt like it would be good if they just get it out.

Although at its core this attempt to challenge the norms of commercial hospitality was in line with the principles introduced by the flagship Moscow branch, the London team linked it to *Ziferblat*'s need to 'define itself in contrast to Shoreditch' (Sara, host), a place chosen by Mitin for its cool factor but also 'known as something very pretentious, something that puts on a show and doesn't actually mean anything' (Evan). Contesting the media-imposed label of a hipster hotspot, branch manager Alex saw *Ziferblat* as a meeting point of the many communities 'who live or used to live in Hackney and around – white, black, Asian, Muslim – they all bring their cultures to *Ziferblat*, to our poetry slams, for instance'. Similarly to Moscow *Ziferblats*, such cultural and social events often involved shared meals. As Alex said about one exhibition they hosted, by a muralist whose family lived in the East End before the gentrification, 'His mom cooked two huge pans of Nigerian jollof rice, shared stories… it was like a family gathering, but for seventy people!'.

On the customer side, the London branch was unanimously described as a place akin to home, but, in contrast to Moscow, this effect was mostly attributed to *Ziferblat*'s community-driven ethics rather than its aesthetic distinction. That is, while the physical design of the London site had contributed greatly to its homely atmosphere, it was not recognised as a part of the firm's authenticity work, nor was it perceived as an object of aesthetic judgement. Some customers also compared *Ziferblat* to the British pub, or, more precisely, 'something pubs are supposed to be – a public house, a place like home but for people to hang out, but in a more wholesome way because it's not focused on alcohol' (Bryan). However, no one associated it with aristocratic clubs.

The London case highlights the impact of cultural differences between the headquarters and local teams on their respective approaches to authenticity, while also reminding us about its inherently constructed nature. Despite contesting the very idea that authenticity can be prescribed and imposed, the London team still attempted to pin it down, albeit not as firmly as it was done in Moscow.

Ziferblat in Manchester

Shortly after the London opening, *Ziferblat* sold a master franchise licence for the UK and Ireland to a Manchester-based business group specialising in real estate, agriculture, venture capital and hospitality, who then launched their first venue in Manchester's Northern Quarter in 2015, with a plan to cover every

Fig. 8.4.   Ziferblat in Manchester.

major UK city by 2021. When I visited the Northern Quarter site in 2016–2017 (Fig. 8.4), the group had already opened two branches in Liverpool and one more in Manchester. While drawing on the London example, the franchisee was determined to revamp the concept in an effort to make it more profitable and appeal to a more upscale clientele:

> I found the London branch very small and shabby chic. It wasn't very comfortable, and I couldn't see how that would make any money. Although there is a financial district nearby, it's not aesthetically pleasant enough for financial institutions to come and use it, whereas we look great, that's why some of the biggest companies in the UK are our clients. (Harry, operations director)

Likewise, some members of the London team I spoke with made a couple of critical remarks about Manchester's 'matching furniture' (that is easier to clean but has no character), 'fake bookcase wallpaper' (as opposed to real books), 'the staff that have no time to talk to guests' (because of having to maintain a much larger space), and, overall, 'turning *Ziferblat* into a coworking space'.

Although some branches owned by the Manchester franchisee were indeed meant to be more coworking-oriented, the Northern Quarter place was in fact positioned as 'the city's sitting room' – not least because of its location. Despite often being called 'the Shoreditch of Manchester' for its vibrant creative scene,

the Northern Quarter attracts a more diverse range of visitors than its more secluded London sister. To make use of this potential, the franchisee opted for a somewhat safe, middle-ground aesthetic that can be best summarised in the following quote by Tammy, a 55-year-old customer with a corporate rather than creative background:

> From what I've heard about this place, I was expecting it to be more hippyish, but it's not hippyish at all, but the chairs are very comfortable, which I like.

Other customers, despite finding the interior home-like ('It's like a living room – that's what they wanted to make it look like' – Harper), noted that they had expected 'more art on the walls' (Kara). Furthermore, while other *Ziferblats* in Moscow and London drew inspiration from the past, the Northern Quarter branch was firmly rooted in the present. Its clean, ergonomic design, spicing up brand new soft and hard furnishings with an occasional frayed rug in a style typical for many conventional coffee shops (Linnet, 2015), reflected the franchisee's perception of the pay-per-minute cafe as a modern, innovative concept that would contribute well to Manchester's ongoing 'creative revolution' (Rhind-Tutt, 2016) without the risk of appearing too bohemian.

Unobtrusive background music, mostly including popular hits, instrumental jazz, lounge and chillout, completed the atmosphere of a neutral, family-friendly hospitality establishment. However, the unified *Ziferblat* playlist recommended by Mitin was said to be rejected purely on the basis of inconvenience, as it included less than 50 tracks. In a similar vein, Mitin's request not to put a computer on the reception desk and instead keep a hand-written log of check-ins and check-outs to provide a more personal, analogue touch was never fulfilled because, to quote operations director Harry, 'We turn over a lot of money every year, you can't do that with pieces of paper'. Another part of the *Ziferblat* concept that did not work out in this branch was tea parties. Although the Manchester team was keen to give it a try, the customers expressed little enthusiasm about spontaneous socialising outside of ticketed events, which the franchisee ascribed to cultural differences ('This thing about strangers chitchatting and shaking hands and making friends… British people don't!' – Harry) and thus decided not to push any further ('We weren't gonna tell people "that's a thing" and change how they were' – Chris, marketing director).

As the example of London suggests, the apparent lack of sociability and conviviality in the Manchester branch, also mentioned in some customer interviews, must have been driven by another, more tangible reason. Although this *Ziferblat* still charged customers by the minute and asked them to make their own coffee and put their dishes in the dishwasher before they leave, it otherwise remained within the conventional cafe framework. Hosts, whose job was defined as 'purely customer service' (Chris), stuck to the patterns of commercial hospitality (at some point, they even wore branded aprons), while a sleek, well-organised kitchen with fully automated bean-to-cup coffeemakers and an abundant selection of desserts and cooked lunch meals was not very conducive

to spontaneous interaction between strangers. That said, these two factors certainly reduced newcomer stress and anxiety provoked by the unfamiliar setting of a pay-per-minute cafe.

In our 2016 interview, marketing director Chris contrasted *Ziferblat* with homogenous cafe chains 'murdering the UK's high streets' and reflected on the upcoming challenge of expanding the franchise while 'trying to maintain that independent feel'. However, by the end of 2018 both Liverpool locations and the MediaCityUK branch in Manchester had been shut down following a series of rent disputes, one of which, according to the franchisee, had to do with the landlord's 'favouring chain operators over independent businesses' (Murphy, 2017).[4] In 2019–2020, after an undisclosed legal dispute with the franchisor, the Manchester team lost their *Ziferblat* licence and changed the name of the remaining Northern Quarter location twice in a few months, first to ClockWork and then to Oppidan Social. Although the pay-per-minute concept remains in place, the venue has been remodelled and refurbished (reportedly to allow for better hygiene and distancing during the pandemic), leading some customers to conclude that the new version 'has lost the traditional feel that *Ziferblat* had' (Oppidan Social Manchester, 2020). The venue's website, however, still features the now completely anonymized brand story about 'a community of poets aspiring to progress their work', who once turned 'a little attic' 'into a shared place for like-minded individuals'.

The Manchester case adds yet another layer to our understanding of how the meaning and importance of authenticity can vary across a small hospitality chain. While it may appear that the profit-oriented franchisee has diluted *Ziferblat*'s originally multifaceted authenticity construct to a few elements of physical design, their lack of curatorial ambitions resulted in a less staged and, paradoxically, more inclusive and user-friendly environment. Despite looking dull in the eyes of the other teams, this environment was perceived by some customers as distinctive enough to be worthy of protection at a moment of change.

Conclusion

Small international hospitality chains provide a great lens to explore authenticity as a product of the interaction of people, places, things and ideas. Their global presence enables us to trace how the production of authenticity changes with geographical expansion, whereas their small scale still lets us see the people behind the brands. Although the desire for authenticity tends to be associated with the consumer side of the market (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), this chapter contributes to the emerging literature shifting the focus of consumer culture research back onto producers (Gerosa, 2021; Thurnell-Read, 2019). When applied to small enterprises falling in between the categories of chain and independent, this approach, examining authenticity in the context of personal and socioeconomic backgrounds of business owners and their everyday negotiations between social and cultural ambitions and economic sustainability, allows us to challenge the

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[4]In fact, the property vacated by *Ziferblat* was afterwards leased to an independent clothing store.

popular dichotomy between inauthentic, calculating, profit-driven corporations and authentic, aesthetically- and community-oriented independent proprietors (Thompson & Arsel, 2004).

In the case of *Ziferblat*, a pay-per-minute cafe not focussed on food consumption, authenticity was assigned to its material and social environment rather than a specific commodity. Not only did this orientation reflect the industry-wide shift from products to experiences (Miles, 2021), but it also represented the founder's desire to break away from the logic and norms of commercial hospitality, shaped by his background as a freelancer and cultural activist, a digital native and a post-socialist millennial. In his pursuit of authenticity, Mitin found inspiration in several discursive imaginaries underpinned by rather contradictory power dynamics. The first and central one was the concept of home, symbolising *Ziferblat*'s coziness, communal spirit and equality between staff and customers, part of which was also expressed in the idea of a 'social media in real life'. Another one drew together two different but equally romanticised historical phenomena – seventeenth-century English coffeehouses, representing *Ziferblat*'s focus on sociability and conviviality rather than profit, and their upper-class successor, British gentlemen's clubs, supposedly conveying the same idea but also revealing Mitin's vision of *Ziferblat* as a space for the cultured and civilised. As the business was developing and scaling up, the founder's original idea, embodied in *Ziferblat*'s physical design and social practices, has transformed into multiple authenticities, making each *Ziferblat* a unique product of its local cultural-geographical context and the personality of its manager or franchisee.

As Wherry (2006, p. 28) reminds us, multiple authenticities should not be interpreted as a linear scale or a life cycle from something true and genuine to its simulacrum. Instead, the case of *Ziferblat* demonstrates how several different approaches to authenticity production can co-exist and contest each other within the same brand. Although the youngest Manchester branch, designed and run with profitability and efficiency in mind, may seem less authentic than the rebellious and messy London one, it was also much less curated and more user-friendly than both Moscow *Ziferblats*, where the teams' aspiration to be tastemakers and educators often contradicted their social ethos.

While the idea that the importance and meaning of authenticity may change over time, not only within specific markets but also within specific brands, is not new (Aiello & Dickinson, 2014; Peterson, 2005), it is important to note that existing research on this phenomenon has drawn on the observation of decade-long trends. The case of *Ziferblat*, however, shows that such transformations can have a much shorter span, which makes the dynamic, pluralistic and yet culturally contextualised notion of multiple authenticities especially relevant in the current climate of rapid change.

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