

What to do when your brand gets kidnapped by Narcos ?

The case of Buchanan's whisky

In mid-2018 in his office of Mexico City, the Buchanan's Brand manager for Mexico was about to read the report of the market study that he had received that week. He took a moment and, looking at the bustling city through the window, he reflected on how the performance of the industry had been favorable in recent years. Already, in 2011, the country was ranked the eighth market in the world for alcohol consumption, with a volume of almost 7 billion liters. Trends showed that the market would keep growing. The analysis of a prestigious international firm showed that, in 2016, Mexico had moved to the seventh rank in the world alcohol market, with an increase of 18.6% in volume of consumption. By 2020, the country was expected to reach the sixth position in this ranking (Ramírez, 2017).

The Brand manager sighed. He knew that, besides these favorable industry statistics, the slow growth of the economy, the evolution of consumers' taste and the intensification of the competition (Ramírez, 2017) called for a more careful approach to brand strategy. He moved restlessly in his chair; he had clarity about his competitive rivals and he knew the numbers. At the end of 2017, in the Mexican market, tequila had a market share of 26.4%, while whiskey reached 20.8% (Sánchez, 2017). Scotch whiskey and American whiskey continued to be well accepted by consumers. DIAGEO, the company for which he worked, led the whiskey category with Johnnie Walker and Buchanan's, which had reported positive sales growth of 16% and 14% respectively in 2017. The company also had Black and White, which competed in the market using an affordable price strategy. However, other competitors had performed well in the category. For example, Casa Cuervo competed with brands such as Stranahan's, Tincup and the Irish whiskeys. The Sexton and Bushmills and, the American-Japanese Beam Suntory had managed to position their brands Jim Beam and Maker's (Sánchez, 2018). Although the competitive landscape presented its challenges, the position achieved by Buchanan's had been favorable – the niche market of middle and high class that it targeted had responded well to the brand. The manager thought that the attributes of this Scotch whiskey associated with its quality, experience, refinement and reputation would help him maintain a good competitive position. Thus, he opened the market study report he had in his hands.

Buchanan's official brand identity

Buchanan's is a brand of Scotch whisky. It is a part of the large brand portfolio of DIAGEO, a multinational that also owns a number of iconic brands such as Smirnoff, Johnnie Walker, Captain

Morgan, and Guinness. James Buchanan & Co Whisky Company was established in Scotland in 1884 by James Buchanan. The Whisky was marketed as Buchanan's Blended Scotch Whisky. Later, the brand name was simplified to Buchanan's. It commercializes three products: Buchanan's De Luxe (12-year old blended scotch whisky); Buchanan's Master (a blend of malts from every region of Scotland); & Buchanan's Special Reserve (18-year old blended scotch whisky).

From its origins, the brand retains a number of assets: quality; World War I; sharing & Scotland (forceMAJEURE Design, 2016). In 1897 James Buchanan signed a contract with the House of Lords to supply Scotch whisky to Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales. The Buchanan's De Luxe bottle labels bear the following statement: "The DELUXE blend is crafted to the highest quality for a vibrant character imbued with passion & commitment and guaranteed by James Buchanan " This pledge of quality and the signature of James Buchanan are a reminder of the 1897 contract to supply the court and of the founder's personal commitment to quality. Similar signed pledges adorn the label of the Masters and Special Reserve bottles.

Buchanan Master: "Buchanan's Master is the personal selection of the Master Blender, Keith Law. Using his expertise, he has crafted a unique blend from the finest mature casks in the distinctive Buchanan's House style. Keith Law. Master Blender. Guaranteed by James Buchanan".

Buchanan Special Reserve: "Made to exacting standards for a full-bodied taste & smooth finish. Guaranteed by James Buchanan & Co. James Buchanan."

This commitment to quality is also asserted by the James Buchanan seal that closes every bottle. Consumers have to break that seal when opening a new bottle. This guarantees them of the authenticity and quality of every bottle. The bottle's shape was inspired by water canteens used by the British army in the trenches of World War I. That shape serves as a reminder of the brand's long history. James Buchanan's own wife, Annie died while serving as a voluntary nurse during WWI. The canteen shape is also a symbol of sharing amongst fellow soldiers.

Sharing is a brand value. Buchanan's whisky is meant to be shared with friends or family. It was also one of James Buchanan's personal values as he was known as a philanthropist and he was awarded Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire in 1931. The use of a green colored bottle for Buchanan's De Luxe, and green brand cues for the other products and for brand advertising, evokes the lush green scenery of the brand's Scottish origins. These origins are also communicated by the use of the Buchanan family emblem that is embossed on every bottle.

Even though the United States is the brand's largest market, it is also well implanted in Latin America, especially in Colombia and Mexico. In these Hispanic markets, the brand is positioned as a premium brand. It's price point is at 737 pesos (+/- 40USD) per bottle (750ml), when the price range

for blended whisky goes from 102 pesos a 1178 pesos and Tequila, the traditional alcohol in Mexico, ranges from 70.5 pesos to 745 pesos per bottle (Walmart, 2018). These retail prices multiply when alcohol is bought in bars or nightclubs, where a shot of Buchanan's can cost up to 100 pesos (5 USD) for 1 oz. (30ml).

The brand supports this premium positioning by promoting the brand assets developed above: focus on the quality, tradition, sharing value and Scottishness. For instance, a recent advertising campaign in Mexico introduced the bottles and boxes' new packaging: "The same essence. The same commitment to quality. The same care to details. Buchanan's. A great whiskey deserves a great bottle" (YouTube, 2015). The video also highlights the brand cues – the signed pledge of quality, the seal, and the embossed Buchanan family emblem. The background is green like the brand color. Another campaign promoted the brand as a good gift for fathers' day – a whisky to be shared among loved ones. Print advertisements often portray idyllic sceneries from Scotland, horses and carriage transporting the whisky, oak casks, and James Buchanan.

The other Side of Buchanan's brand image in Mexico

The brand manager carefully reviewed the results of the study. The research sought to better understand consumers and the brand image they had of Buchanan's. It used both secondary data from academic publications and news sources, as well as a qualitative research approach, through participant observation and in-depth interviews that included bar owners and nightclub employees from northern Mexico. On the one hand, the results showed that, considering the consumption of alcoholic beverages among Mexicans, whiskey was mostly consumed in the north of the country (Consulta Mitofsky, 2009). The interviewees corroborated this information. One of them commented: "what is sold the most is beer and whiskey or vodka drinks" (Interviewee 03). Without including beer, whiskey had become the leading alcoholic beverage in most regions of the country, with Buchanan's de Luxe 12 leading the market in the North, Pacific, Bajío and Southeast areas (El Financiero, 2014; Galván, 2017). In this section, some comments from the interviewees were highlighted:

"Buchanan's is the number one [product] they ask us because it's like the most famous here."
(Interviewee 03)

"People between 18 and 30 consume whiskey or look for whiskey more based on the brand than the flavor." (Interviewee 02)

"[Buchanan's] projects itself as a good brand, a high-level brand or for people of a social rank of upper or upper middle class. So then the people [the consumers] want to project themselves that way. "(Interviewee 02)

"Buchanan's gives status to the person. They already know that they are going to consume a whiskey that they recognize or that they think is of quality ". (Interviewee 03)

However, the report warned of the risk to Buchanan's position, given that more and more consumers close to the narcoculture were "appropriating" the brand. The report explained the situation in more detail starting with a quote drawn from a conversation that had been made public in the media:

- Sept. 25th 2015: "Friend, if you bring wine, I will drink it with you even though I like tequila and Buchanan's, but I will drink the tequila that you will bring and champagne. I tell you that I am not a drinker, but your presence is going to be beautiful, I really want to meet you and become good friends. "

The author of this rather detailed text message planning a first date is none other than Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the most famous drug smuggler of Mexico. Having escaped a high security prison earlier that year, Guzman was enjoying his freedom by organizing a date with Kate del Castillo, a Mexican actress who once played the character of Teresa Mendoza, a drug smuggler, in the very successful telenovela entitled "La Reina del Sur" (2011). This message illustrated a small part of the adoption of Buchanan's whiskey as a favorite drink of the drug trafficker. However, the preference for the brand's consumption extends to a much broader market linked to the Mexican narco-culture.

The narcoculture and its identification with prestigious brands in Mexico

Starting in 1975, the Mexican army backed by the US Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) launched Operation Condor in Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua. The operation used defoliant to destroy large quantities of opium and marijuana fields in order to cut the source of the cannabis and heroine smuggled across the border to the US. This led to a rise of drug prices in the US but it was short lived. The drug production moved further south to Colombian cartels such as the Medellin and the Cali cartel.

Mexican drug lords created the Cartel of Guadalajara that took care of the smuggling of these drugs through Mexico and across the US border. On the other hand, the urban gangs in the US took care of distribution to the final customers under the form of cocaine for the wealthy and crack cocaine for the poor. The role of the Mexican part of this international supply chain rose in importance throughout the eighties and nineties with every effort from the US Drug Enforcement Agency to control the skies and the sea as part of the so-called war on drugs.

Land transportation became the last reliable option, an option that became more efficient with the increase of commerce across the border following the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (1994). This led to violent turf wars between Mexican drug cartels for the control of the south-north transportation routes and most importantly of the points of passage with the US such as Tijuana or Ciudad Juarez.

The large amounts of money generated and the complex organization required to run such an extensive illegal enterprise mean that Mexican drug cartels have had a rising violent and corrupting impact on the Mexican society as a whole. This violence and corruption led to the decision by newly elected president Calderon (2006) to call the army to the rescue in order to solve a problem that the corruption of local and federal police could not. Rather than solving the problem, this led to a further rise in violence across the country, the corruption of the army, and the diversification of the cartels activities. Those activities went on to encompass kidnapping, extortion, robbery, meth manufacturing, and more.

This diversification and widespread corruption led the cartels to control entire parts of the economy and to gain the ability to operate freely in some parts of the country. For instance, Joaquin Guzman was able to escape from high security prisons twice (2001 & 2015) and to live on the run for years (2001 to 2014). This rise of the Mexican drug cartels over the last forty years means that despite the illegality, violence and risk involved, becoming a cartel member came to be perceived by some as a way to a better life. El Chapo Guzman for instance recalls growing up in a poor family in the countryside of Sinaloa. In order to get out of this condition, Guzman got involved in drug trafficking and began his rise that led him to become one of the richest and most wanted men in the Americas.

This kind of rags to riches story is a big part of the aspirational appeal of the narco lifestyle and that aspirational appeal has marketing implications. In pictures of the interview that Joaquin Guzman gave Sean Penn for Rolling Stone (Rolling Stone, 2015), Guzman is sporting a blue-and-grey-striped shirt with distinctive patterns called "Fantasy", designed by U.S. shirt maker Barabas Premium Apparel.

In a video shot during the same interview, El Chapo speaks directly to the camera wearing a blue shirt with patterns called "Crazy Paisley" also by Barabas. In the days that followed the release of the interview, Barabas was overwhelmed with demand for its shirts and quickly ran out of stock (CNN, 2016). Similarly, the Ralph Lauren Polo shirt with prominent brand logos that Edgar Valdez Villarreal "La Barbie" (August 2010), Marcos Carmona Hernandez, "El Cabrito" (March 2011), & Victor Valdez "El Gordo Varilla" (May 2011), were wearing on their official arrest pictures (NBC News, 2011) became known as the "Narco Polo". That Narco Polo and the cheaper copies became an instant commercial success amongst youth in Mexico (The Guardian, 2011). These examples attest the impact that the association with famous drug lords can have on a brand. But for Buchanan's, this association with narco-cultura is much deeper and stronger. In order to address this brand association, it is necessary to discuss the narco culture that resulted from the rise of the narco cartels.

Additionally, the report showed that some lyrics of songs and videos of a musical genre associated with narcoculture explicitly showed Buchanan's relevance in the lifestyle of people attracted by this culture of consumption. The so-called Altered Movement is a musical genre that emerged in the late 2000's, when the violence of the cartels was reaching a new level in Mexico. This musical genre, narcocorridos, focuses on the narco lifestyle with violent and explicit lyrics. The corrido music is an important part of the culture in Mexico. It is particularly strong in norteño music, a popular music appreciated by working class people. At the beginning of the nineties, Chalino Sánchez, a famous Corrido singer, introduced a new style posing in front of expensive cars, drinking whiskey, wearing Italian brands and showing off weapons. With the emergence of new bands, the image of the drug trafficker became one of the themes addressed by corridos. These narcocorridos used codes and metaphors to discuss these issues without running the risk of being censored. For example, a famous group called "Los Tucanes de Tijuana" launched songs that alluded to drug trafficking and mentioned Buchanan's, an example is shown in the appendix (YouTube, 2015b).

Drug trafficking and other cartel activities generate a lot of cash. This means that narcos have to find ways to spend or clean that income. The first step of money "cleaning" is to spend the cash on untraceable purchases such as buying rounds of Buchanan's shots in the club and other flashy purchases typical of the narco lifestyle. Another way that cash is spent, and probably cleaned, is by funding cultural productions. This means that groups that eulogize a certain drug lord or the narco lifestyle are likely to get more production funding, get contracted to perform at private parties. Furthermore, the popularization of the web 2.0 and the freedom of speech it allows is the third factor that heavily contributed to the rise of narco corridos and its evolution into the Movimiento Alterado. The narco corrido genre thus benefited greatly from the ability to get around the

traditional media and reach listeners directly through platforms such as YouTube. This has allowed song writers to be much more explicit in their lyrics and to show luxury brands in the music videos.

Buchanan's place in the narco culture

In-depth interviews showed that Buchanan's is still the preferred brand in the Altered Movement and narcoculture environments. Some interviewees commented:

"Many people are inclined towards Buchanan's because they saw it in a music video or saw the artist drinking it." (Interviewee 02)

"[The music of the Altered Movement] is an indirect advertisement." (Interviewee 02)

"They relate Buchanan's with this type of people, with those who have an affinity with this type of music." (Interviewee 02)

"There are people who can see it as pretentious or it is "buchón" or belongs to the narco. It is also a label related to people who are involved in questions of moving drugs they relate it to Buchanan's. / ... / The people who are involved with this style of music are so associated with the brand that the rest of the people do not feel part of it anymore." (Interviewee 03)

"Here, Buchanan's is more associated with the new rich, it is associated with people who do crooked things or drug things ... things like that. There are people who believe or think that buying Buchanan's can make it seem that they belong to that world, / ... / I do not know why, but it makes them feel good." (Interviewee 03)

Although the marketing influence of photos of famous drug traffickers wearing Barabas or Ralph Lauren Polo Shirts had a temporary effect, for Buchanan's the association is much deeper, since it goes far beyond brand mentions. For example, the text by Chapo Guzmán shows that Buchanan's is considered the favorite drink of drug traffickers and narcoculture. Some of the interviewees in the study commented:

"Here the corridos, the music, the norteco music, always speaks of Buchanan's bottles. So they broadcast it in the songs." (Interviewee 01)

"It's because of the music of the Altered Movement because the Buchanan's bottle is very famous, people like that kind of music. / ... / Many of those bottles are sold because of that music." (Interviewee 01)

In addition, the importance of Buchanan's in the narcoculture has grown in the last decade. For example, one of the leading bands of narco corridos that formed in 2005 called themselves "Los BuKnas de Cuilacán". With songs titled "Armas y Billetes" (2012); "La Santa Muerte en Sinaloa" (2013); "Caballeros Templarios" (2012); and "M16" (2011) they epitomize the movimiento alterado. In 2006, El Komander, another pioneer and leader of the movimiento alterado has a song called "Buchanas Cerveza y Banda". He also mentioned the brand as part of a list of brands associated with narco culture in El Katch (Youtube, 2009).

The women who associate and party with the narcos are often called "buchonas" because they drink the brand at drug-trafficking parties (Maihold and De Maihold, 2012, Rivera Magos and Carriço Reis, 2017). The meaning of "buchon" changes depending on the country. In Mexico, buchon is a term used for people coming from poor rural communities who get involved in narco trafficking in order to get a better life (Alvarado Vázquez, 2017). One of the interviewees corroborated this mentioning: "Buchanan's is related to the buchones. Buchones are people who wear hats and boots and are extravagant, very macho and so ... Buchanan's is the most representative drink of these people ... who listen northern music,... but with money. "(Interviewee 03).

There is also a religious part to narco cultura. As there are a lot of religious beliefs and practices in Mexico, it is a syncretism mixing pre-hispanic polytheism, Roman Catholicism, and contemporary issues. For instance, la Santa Muerte, adored by many narcos among others, combines ancestral traditions of the day of the dead, the imagery of the Virgin Mary, and the omnipresence of violent deaths among narcos. In this mythology, Jesus Malverde holds an important place (Creechan y de la Heerán-García, 2005). He is presented as a Robin Hood like figure from the beginning of the 20th century. According to his legend, Jesus Malverde used the profits gained from smuggling and robbing wealthy landowners to support the oppressed peasants of Sinaloa. Every 3rd of May, Malverde's death at the hands of the federal police is commemorated. His bust is taken out of his chapel for a procession on the hood of a car in Culiacán. During the procession, one of the practices consists of pouring the content of several Buchanan's De Luxe bottles on the bust as well as in the mouths of the devotees. The brand thus has become an integral part of a sacred ritual at the heart of narco cultura.

A strategic marketing dilemma

The Buchanan's brand manager knows that, due to the increase in sales volume in comparison with other geographic regions (Chapman, 2017; Zhang and Monteiro, 2013), global corporations of the alcohol industry have been trying to penetrate the Mexican and other Latin

American markets. This offers the possibility to develop multi-country brands positioned mainly in the Premium market (Sánchez, 2017). The brand's efforts in key aspects such as distribution, advertising campaigns, direct promotions and sponsorship of cultural events, sports and music have significantly contributed to whiskey sales (Chapman, 2017, Zhang and Monteiro, 2013). However, the image of the brand is at risk due to the external factors explained above.

Upon finishing reading the report, the manager noted that he faces a dilemma and must make decisions that safeguard the sales of the brand. His team had worked hard to position Buchanan's as a quality and refined Scotch whiskey, focused on a middle and upper class market that responded positively to the attributes of the brand. However, recently some consumers were showing a change of attitude towards the brand and preferred to switch brand, in order not to consume a brand associated with narcoculture. At the same time, the market of followers of narcoculture and the altered movement is growing, especially fostered by the success of the music.

In the past, other companies have already faced a situation in which a small but highly visible subculture's consumption of a brand impacts that brand's image, has been met by other brands. A lot of times, brands resent what they feel is a loss of control over the brand and thus tend to oppose these trends when they become too visible and risk having an impact on their brand image. For instance, in 2006 Frédéric Rouzard (Roederer) expressed discomfort about the fact that Cristal, one of their champagnes was so enthusiastically mentioned and portrayed in hip hop music lyrics and video (Economist, 2006). This prompted a backlash with many prominent artists such as Jay-Z calling for a boycott of the brand. In the 1990's Ben Sherman took an even more forceful course of action in order to oppose a subculture's appropriation of their brand. When they noticed that neo Nazis skinheads in Germany, France and Italy started adopting their shirt as part of their uniform, the brand decided to stop their distribution on these three markets. In order to oppose what they perceived as the misappropriation of their brand from the far right, they turned their back on very important markets and focused on the UK market instead.

Other brands have a more "laissez faire" attitude to these kinds of consumers' initiative. In Belgium, Colruyt was surprised in 2015 when the mostly college aged and party oriented consumers of Cara Pils, their private label pils, organized a social media campaign to oppose their planned rebranding that threatened to scrap the Cara Pils name and design. Following the strong negative reaction, the distributor organized a poll in which consumers elected to keep the old brand name and make only minor incremental changes to the brand design. Colruyt also lets consumers use the Cara Pils design to print it on shirts and other paraphernalia (Kervyn, Breazeale, & Herak, 2018). In the US, Pabst Blue Ribbon (aka PBR) encountered renewed success as an affordable pils when it was adopted by hipsters and others as a social protest brand. PBR took the humble route of supporting and

enabling this adoption of their brand by this sub-culture, thus adopting a strategy that the New York Times labelled “The Marketing of no marketing”.

The manager thought that a third option is one that some brands have successfully instrumentalized – they leveraged their association with a specific subculture. Harley Davidson has a solid loyal customer base in the bikers gangs such as Hell’s Angels, Los Bandidos, Mongols, ... Harley has been able to use the positive aspects of this subculture to claim brand assets of freedom, brotherhood, and anti-conformism. These brand assets were in turn used to promote the brand to more traditional customers in need of these values to spice up their conventional lives (Schouten & Alexander 1993). Marlboro used the same strategy with the cowboy character to develop and communicate brand assets of the great outdoors, freedom, virility; Hummer built its whole brand image around the brand’s origins as a US army vehicle.

Finally, the manager considered that a fourth option for Buchanan's in Mexico would be to not to deal with the narco cultura’s adoption of their brand. Instead of following the opposition, laissez-faire, or instrumentalization options, they could opt for total ignorance of this subculture’s association with their brand considering the failed war against drug trafficking in the country and the freedom of expression given by social networks. Given these alternatives, what decision should the manager take? What implications does this decision have for the brand and its sales?

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Appendix

El Puño de Polvo (Tucanes de Tijuana)

Cuando me muera no quiero
llevarme un puño de tierra
yo quiero un puño de polvo
y una caja de botellas
pero que sean de Buchanas
y el polvito que sea Rayna /.../

El Katch

/.../
Armani dolce & gabbana
Land rover para pasear
con dolores en la bolsa
Buchanan's para tomar
las plebitas están que tientan
para el party comenzar
/.../