



*University of Utah*

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

**Managing Authenticity in the Utah Craft Spirit Industry**  
**Eylül Yel**

(Faculty mentor: Marie Sarita Gaytán, Sociology and Gender Studies)

The craft alcohol industry is booming throughout the country. The concept of “craft,” however, is interpreted differently by consumers as well as producers. Large brands and small companies alike promote their products as craft. Utah is also experiencing a boom in craft distilling. The first craft distillery, High West, opened in 2007, and today there are 15 registered distilleries making gin, rum, vodka, whisky, and agave spirits, among other offerings. In a state where “happy hours” are illegal, and over 60 percent of the population abstains from alcohol because of religious reasons, for many, Utah does not exactly seem conducive to a drinking culture. For craft distillers just starting out, such perceptions matter, especially in a marketplace where they must compete with popular brands owned by well-funded liquor conglomerates. However, shifting trends, including rising consumer interest in organic and ethically-sourced foods has intensified consumer desire for authenticity. As a result, local and independent manufacturers have a unique opportunity to add value. Because authenticity is not a “natural” quality, but instead is a social accomplishment, I ask: how do craft distillers in Utah create an authentic craft identity? To answer this question, I examined the “about us” web pages, website links, and social media posts of Utah craft distilleries. In addition, I incorporated information from historical newspapers and contemporary magazines. I identified six themes through which craft distillers mobilized an authentic craft identity. These findings provide new insight into the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in emerging markets and deepens our understanding of “craft authenticity” (Carroll 2015).