Introduction

In the beginning we viewed Aveda as a relatively healthy company that was deeply rooted in Ayurvedic traditions, an Indian alternative medicine. We knew that they claimed to offer products that were elite among other beauty products in health and quality, that they were a service provider that focused on customer satisfaction and luxury in its amenities. They initially seemed to be a company that sets an example of environmental friendliness. We decided to investigate these claims by analyzing their digital presence as well as the in-store experience. We also compared these to the point of view of a student at the Aveda Institute, as well as investigating their claims regarding the actual quality of their products.

Digital Observations

When analyzing all the elements that make up the overall Aveda experience, the first place we began was with their digital presence: more specifically, the website. Their website successfully maintains a cohesive visual brand over a variety of devices. The site is responsive and remains functional at small screen sizes without losing the look and feel of the desktop version of the site. Their overall design aesthetic seems to focus on a color palette that consists of natural and earth tones. Crisp minimalist lines are used to create distinctions between sections of the site. The black sans-serif text matches these straight black lines as well, tying the visuals further together.

The language used on the website, like the color and photography choices, seemed tailored to create a certain sort of atmosphere. "Our mission at Aveda is to care for the world we live in, from the products we make to the ways in which we give back to society. At Aveda, we strive to set an example for environmental leadership and responsibility, not just in the world of beauty, but around the world." This text was found on a page called "Why Aveda" that gives a description of the service and attempts to convince potential customers of the benefits of Aveda. Quotes like the above suggest that Aveda is trying to create a sort of luxury, “treat yourself” atmosphere, while simultaneously emphasizing environmentalism and “giving back to society” to focus on Aveda as a more ethical alternative to luxury beauty services.

From a customer service standpoint, the website also has a lot of user-friendly features. There are product reviews submitted by customers, the ability to order products online, an email newsletter than can be subscribed to, a 24/7 customer service chat, recommended products, and integrated social media. Most notable is probably the ability for
users to book an appointment online. We decided to test this function by comparing the efficiency of the online function to the traditional method of calling the office and making an appointment over the phone.

When using the online appointment booking service, there was no initial wait time and it only took about 50 seconds to fill out the form. However, there’s no guarantee that one will be able to book an appointment at the desired time, since the form shows all possible times, not just currently open ones. Due to this, after filling out the form, the website says that sometime in the next day or so the Aveda institute will call the user in order to confirm the appointment time. This is, however, not exactly user-friendly. Many people may not be able to answer the phone always, and don’t want to have to wait for a phone call to confirm the start time.

In contrast to this, when calling to make a reservation, one minute and thirty seconds was spent on hold, waiting for a customer service representative to answer. However, the actual booking process of talking to the representative and making and confirming an appointment only took about one minute. Overall, while the immediate process of making an appointment did take slightly longer, confirmation occurred immediately. The graph shown below provides a comparison of the two appointment making methods. The gray bar on the graph shows the unknown continuation of the process until the second phone call.

![Time Spent Making Appointment](image)

**Physical Observations**

Aveda reinforces the aesthetic of their digital experience by continuing that same look and feel inside the store. The space of the salon itself mimics the website design: the walls are painted an earthy brown, all the floors, chairs, and tables are varying shades of wood. The lobby/waiting area relies heavily on natural light, but the main salon floor is very brightly lit, which makes sense, since lighting is very necessary for cutting hair. The walls are hung with large prints of models with various hairstyles, mimicking the pictures on the website and adding to the “luxury salon” feel of the space.

There was a wall full of hair products in the waiting area. While the language used on the packaging of the products and on the placards advertising them matched the language found on the Aveda website, the stylists did not actually use any of the “natural” coded language that
was so ubiquitous in other places. Despite the lack of mention of the “natural” beauty products or the authentic Ayurvedan traditions, all the employees were very nice and cordial, as is generally expected in places like this.

One of the more interesting things that was noticed while at the salon was that on the wall was a chart that described the process the employees should follow in order to create the perfect experience. Some interesting things about the chart are the language it uses - language that’s almost reminiscent of the IDEO pieces we read. Phrases like “discover needs” and “offer solutions” seem to be commercializing the user-centered design mentality. Another interesting thing is what was missing from the in-store experience - all those tiny slivers that are marked “ritual”. It is suspected that these rituals were things like the “hand massage” that were refused, but even then, at no point were they described as Ayurvedic rituals or any such thing.

**Student Perspective**

We were also able to get an insiders perspective on Aveda. Having been invited to a practice session for Esthetician Boards allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of what the experience is like for the Aveda students and what it would be for customers without the need to pressure those who are paying. It was initially a positive experience while being greeted, and the staff was friendly and helpful. But once in the practice rooms, the atmosphere changed. The instructor was not overtly friendly or inviting. The overall process of being a practice subject for a facial was approximately 1 ½ hours. While all supplies were disinfected, something that was very initially off-putting was that the students did not have soap with which to wash their hands before giving the facials. Most of the “facial” experience was phoned in: aloe instead of facial, Vaseline instead of wax, dry towels instead of steamed. Moreover, the instructor was not friendly when the process was over.

From the point of view of a student, some hidden sides to Aveda are now more clear. One student’s opinion of their educational experience is that it is not consistent with expectations prior to enrolling. They feel that they do not receive enough hands-on practice. They feel discouraged and negatively towards instructor. As a result of all of this, they avoid going to class when possible. This feedback, combined with the negative experience that occurred when being a practice subject, leads us to believe that Aveda may have some hidden negative qualities.
Products

Aveda’s product line is half of their business if not more, aside from the actual salon service. Ever since the founder Horst Rechelbacher took a trip to India to learn the alternative medicine Ayurveda, he based the entire company around these healing properties hence the name Aveda. The first formulas he made were in his own kitchen sink and they were actually quite natural and followed closely to Ayurvedic traditions considering his recent trip. As the company continued to expand in North America the focus very slowly shifted towards expansion and therefore started switching to easy to obtain and cheap ingredients in the products. Then when the company was bought in 1997 by Estee Lauder, this acted as a catalyst for what was already happening and only caused Aveda to lose sight of its original morals even more so than before. Today Aveda still advertises themselves to be this natural company they once were and they still hold up their initial morals as something they abide by. Aveda does this in a very clever way and seems to hide any problems in their facade of a company reputation. For example, a visit to their website would instantly have you convinced that they only make the best and healthiest products, and have the customers health in mind. However, it only takes a little digging in places other than their website to realize that they aren’t all they talk themselves up to be. On other websites we found Aveda’s products to actually be quite average and comparable to other companies that don’t even advertise themselves as natural. In the Cosmetic skin deep safety database, products are ranked from 0-10 with 10 being hazardous. After looking at couple Aveda products that rate a 9, 8 and two 7’s its not hard to realize that they aren't truly what they advertise to be. After finding this out and going back to their website to view it through different eyes, we realized that the ingredient lists aren't even listed on the website. Aveda claims that this is because they want their customers to have the most up to date information regarding the ingredients, but along with other aspects of their company I don't think this statement is authentic. Rather i think its the fact that they don't want to contradict themselves on their own website. Since they heavily advertise all the health benefits of their products and bring so much attention to it, it would be counter-productive of them to also list the chemicals in their products.

After mythbusting Aveda’s claim to be healthy and good for your “mind, body and soul”, I decided to continue investigation into other things they claim to be, such as their example-setting environmental friendliness. After further investigation their claims to be caring for the Earth and such actually proved to be completely authentic. In fact they are the first beauty company to operate on 100% solar power, and lead the way in many other categories one being that 85% or their products contain 100% post recycled material which is unprecedented in the industry. They also have impressive certifications such as C2C (cradle to cradle) which means everything in their system is either reused or returned back to the Earth leaving no pollution footprint in anyway. In addition to certifications from respectable organizations, they also raise tons of money for environmental awareness and also have plans for continuing this trend into the future. Aveda is authentic and succeeds in certain aspects but not others, there business model and the way their company works is very unique
and still impressive relative to others, but since they don’t tell the whole truth about their products they lose a lot of credibility. They have an idea of where they want to be ideally and this is what is advertised to customers, but internally they don't even live up to the expectations they set for themselves.

Synthesis and Conclusion
By combining the in-store experience, the student experience, and the product audit, we were able to see a common theme running through our analysis of the Aveda salon: that of illusions. The physical space of the store and of the website, as previously noted, are carefully designed so as to provide the image of a natural, slick, luxury service. And the initial service of paying for a haircut did more or less reinforce this theme. It was only once we started digging deeper that we realized how much of the Aveda image is just that - an image, a facade. In our final experience map, then, we compared the service they constructed for us with the information we sought out external to that. This comparison highlighted both the efficacy of their illusion and the degree to which these invisible problems completely contradicted Aveda's so-called values. Overall, uncovering the tension between what Aveda claims to be and what Aveda actually is was by far the most significant and fascinating realization we uncovered over the course of our research.