



Measuring consumer-based brand authenticity



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ABSTRACT

Postmodern consumers use brands to create an authentic self and to reconnect to place, time, culture and others. Although previous research has identified that consumers draw on a range of cues in order to attribute authenticity to branded objects, no scales exist to measure the construct of brand authenticity. Building on the existing literature, this paper uses quantitative methods to develop a psychometrically robust measure of brand authenticity from a consumer's perspective. Findings demonstrate convergent, discriminant and predictive validity, whereby 14 items represent three interrelated first order factors labeled quality commitment, sincerity and heritage that correspond with a higher order brand authenticity construct. This study extends our understanding of the consumption of authenticity. Moreover, it provides a tool by which firms can evaluate the effectiveness of strategic decisions designed to deliver an authentic brand offering to consumers. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Postmodern markets are characterized by a brand-dominated hyperreality where consumers struggle to differentiate between the 'real' and 'fake' (Arnould & Price, 2000; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). While authenticity has historically been associated with transcending the self and the market (Beverland, 2005; Fine, 2003; Kozinets, 2002; Peterson, 2005; Taylor, 1992; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006), an emerging stream of consumer research identifies that people attribute authenticity to brands. Research suggests that authenticity is central to brand status, equity and corporate reputation (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007), with some even suggesting it as one of the "cornerstones of contemporary marketing", (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003, p. 21). The concept itself, however, is still not well understood nor clearly defined (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Rose & Wood, 2005).

Extant research has examined (to various extents) consumers' quests for authentic experiences (Arnould & Price, 2000), rituals associated with the authentic self (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002), the cues used to attribute authenticity to objects (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Thompson et

al., 2006), the processes used to assess an object's authenticity (Rose & Wood, 2005), and the various forms authenticity can take (Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). More recently, research has focused on the effects of brand authenticity on brand trust and SME growth (Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Guldenberg, 2012) and its role in establishing and maintaining brand auras (Alexander, 2009) from the perspective of key stakeholders within an organization (ie. CEOs, marketing specialists). Eggers et al. (2012) conclude that brand authenticity has a significant impact on brand trust and can help fuel firm growth within the market place. However, it is important for the organization as a whole to embrace a culture that encourages, fosters and enhances authentic values.

We extend this line of inquiry through the development of a consumer-based brand authenticity (CBBA) scale, building on calls for an objective measure of brand authenticity that includes the voice of the consumer (Eggers et al., 2012). Understanding the outcomes of authenticity for a consumer is important because the search for authenticity is part of a consumer's identity project and is thus goal-driven (Arnould & Price, 2000; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Gergen, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Lifton, 1993; McCracken, 2005; Thompson, 2000). For example, consumers may desire clear connections between perceptual product cues when forced to quickly make a correct decision (Beverland et al., 2008). Or, certain brand cues may be preferred when consumers attempt to fit in with a wider sub-cultural community or express their social affiliations (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2006; Kates, 2004). Thus, preferring cues and choosing or rejecting brands is part of an authenticating act (a self-referential act) or authoritative performance (a collective expression) (Arnould & Price, 2000).

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This study also aims to reduce the present fragmentation of research on the consumption of authenticity, which may assist managers in creating and maintaining a brand's authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Leigh et al., 2006; Peterson, 2005). Understanding perceptions of authenticity may help explain consumers' brand attitudes together with their degree of brand loyalty and also lead to a more effective approach to market segmentation. Moreover, the development of an authenticity scale will enable the relationship between this and other marketing constructs to be assessed. Combined, such insights will provide brand managers with a means to assess the efficacy of strategic communication messages designed to establish a perception of authenticity in the minds of external stakeholders, including consumers (Molleda, 2010).

The article is structured as follows. First, we examine the nature of brand authenticity and its core attributes. Second, we explain our methods and report our results. Finally, we address theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research.

2. The nature of brand authenticity

In business research, the term authenticity has been used in different ways to imply different meanings (Beverland, 2005). Commonly, authenticity is used to refer to the genuineness, reality or truth of something (Kennick, 1985). It has also been defined in terms of sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003) and related to concepts such as being natural, honest, simple and unspun (Boyle, 2003). Consumers experience authenticity differently and use a range of cues to evaluate the authenticity of an object, which may be based on their interest in, and knowledge of, a subject (Grazian, 2003). Authenticity judgments may be formed around indexical cues (a factual connection between the object and time) or iconic cues (the extent to which an object or event is a reasonable reconstruction of the past) (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The distinction between the authentic and inauthentic tends to be subjective and socially or personally constructed (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006). It is a behavior experienced by an individual (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997) that is self authored (Wild, 1965) and self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Brands can acquire an aura of authenticity through a "...commitment to traditions, a passion for craft and production excellence and the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations" (Beverland, 2005: p.1008). Authentic brands have clarity of purpose that is sincerely executed (Authentic Brand Index 2008). They are perceived by consumers to be manufactured by artisans (Beverland, 2006; Fine, 2003) using time honored traditions (Postrel, 2003), hand-made methods and/or natural ingredients (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000). Such brands have remained true to their original design, evolving slowly to reflect modern times rather than changing consumer fashions (Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2008). Radical changes to designs can upset or confuse customers and lead to questions about a brand's authenticity (Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2001).

Brands with a sense of history and connection with traditional cultures, customs, regions and beliefs acquire a distinctive identity and nostalgic aura that adds to its authenticity (Brown et al., 2003; Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Penaloza, 2000; Postrel, 2003). Nostalgic images reflecting a brand's heritage may have no basis in reality (Beverland et al., 2008; Chhabra et al., 2003; Pocock, 1992), but for consumers the absolute truth of such claims may not matter. Consumers may suspend disbelief (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), negotiate paradox (Rose & Wood, 2005) or creatively recombine cues to gain a sense of authenticity (Beverland et al., 2008; Postrel, 2003). Brands with a strong heritage may, over time, become synonymous with certain cultural values and acquire symbolic meaning beyond its original identity, which helps establish a sense of legitimacy and authenticity among target groups (Kates, 2004). Brands such as Nike, Harley Davidson, Mountain Dew, and Corona have tapped into a wider cultural

zeitgeist and as a result attained market share, institution-like status and legitimacy (Holt, 2004).

Owners of such brands are thought to be driven by integrity, commitment to quality, a sense of moral virtue, and an intrinsic love of the product rather than an economic agenda (Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2006, 2008). Beverland's (2005) study of fine wine producers identified that the development of a sincere story consisting of demonstrable referents to place, tradition, and non-commercial values was crucial to conveying brand authenticity. Similarly, Fine's (2003) study of self-taught art identified that authenticity diminished when artists visibly adopted the trappings of the market such as 0800 numbers and deliberate customer targeting. Thompson et al. (2006) note that niche coffee brands gain authenticity by contrasting their operations with large commercial brands such as Starbucks. For such brands, there is often a deliberate decoupling (or downplaying) of their day-to-day operations, marketing strategy and commercial skill from the outward projection of images related to craft production, heritage and tradition (Beverland, 2005; Postrel, 2003). Such brands are perceived as being 'above commerce'.

In this study brand authenticity is defined as a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers. From the extant literature it is evident that the brand authenticity construct is multifaceted and built around perceptions of heritage (Brown et al., 2003; Penaloza, 2000; Postrel, 2003), nostalgia (Beverland et al., 2008; Chhabra et al., 2003; Pocock, 1992; Postrel, 2003), cultural symbolism (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2004; Kates, 2004), sincerity (Beverland, 2005; Fine, 2003; Holt, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006; Trilling, 1972; Wipperfurth, 2005), craftsmanship (Beverland, 2006; Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Fine, 2003; Postrel, 2003), quality commitment (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and design consistency (Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2001). In developing a measure of brand authenticity we have used these seven cues as a starting point for generating scale items. We believe consumers use a combination of these cues in making evaluations about a brand's authenticity, suggesting that there are multiple pathways by which brand authenticity can be established, which is consistent with the outcomes of the Authentic Brand Index (Authentic Brand Index 2008). However, as the demarcation between some of these cues is blurred (e.g. nostalgia and heritage are related for instance, as well as quality commitment and craftsmanship), we expect broader umbrella themes to emerge that capture the essential elements underpinning consumers' authenticity evaluations.

3. Method and results

The purpose of this research is to develop a psychometrically robust measure of brand authenticity from a consumer's perspective. In so doing, four separate studies were undertaken to generate and refine scale items (Study 1), determine and then confirm the underlying factor structure of brand authenticity (Studies 2 and 3), and finally to test for convergent, discriminant and predictive validity of the scale (Study 4).

3.1. Study 1 – item generation and refinement

Churchill's (1979) scale development paradigm was adopted, using a deductive approach for the generation of scale items (Schwab, 1980). Drawing on the extant literature, an initial list of 157 items/statements was generated reflecting seven dimensions of brand authenticity, namely: brand heritage (26 items); quality commitment (21 items); craftsmanship (14 items); sincerity (43 items); nostalgia (23 items); cultural symbolism (21 items); and design consistency (9 items). As mentioned previously, each of these seven concepts is highlighted in the literature as a cue consumers use to judge the authenticity of an object or brand. Our objective in generating scale items was to ensure

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