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Authenticity Perceptions in the Chinese Marketplace☆

Martin J. Liu [a], Natalia Yannopoulou [b,*], Xuemei Bian [c,1], Richard Elliott [d]

[a] Nottingham University Business School China, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, 199 Taikang East Road, University Park, Ningbo, China, 315100
[b] Newcastle University Business School, 5 Barrack Road, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 4SE, UK
[c] Kent Business School, The University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7PE, UK
[d] School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines Chinese consumers' perceptions of authenticity. Extended interviews reveal that Chinese consumers do not evaluate products based on a perceived binary relationship between authentic and inauthentic products. The results suggest, instead, Chinese consumers view authenticity evaluation as relational and hierarchical rather than original and unique. Two additional authenticity types emerge—domesticated and mimicked. The findings help marketing practitioners create new consumer segments based on the authenticity levels of product offerings and simultaneously help preserve brand equity and long-term relationships with consumers.

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1. Introduction

Evidence of consumer demand for authenticity dates back at least to the ninth century and continues today in various types of market offerings, including historical reconstructions (e.g., Goulding, 2000), ethnic foods (Lu & Fine, 1995), luxury wines (Beverland, 2006) and reality television shows (Rose & Wood, 2005). Consumers generally seek authentic items or experiences. Many scholars recognize authenticity as “the key to the development of the modern world” (MacCannell, 1973, p.145) and a central element of contemporary life (Lowenthal, 1992). Marketing researchers view the tension between authenticity and inauthenticity as a central theme of contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Postmodern writers, however, argue that technological advancement and global commercialism undermine consumers' abilities to distinguish between the real and the fake (Orvell, 1989), thus destabilizing authenticity (Frow, 1997).

Most studies on authenticity limit their research focus to investigating authenticity's marketplace manifestations and antecedents in marketing communications (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Tinson & Nuttall, 2011). Studies typically approach authenticity as “a general preoccupation of modern Western culture” and neglect the global implications (Jacknis, 1990, p.9). No known study examines how consumers construct authenticity in a culture-based context (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Given that consumers are producers of meanings, this research gap is surprising. The present study bridges this knowledge gap by exploring Chinese consumers' perceptions of authenticity. China's culture and the industries producing copies and counterfeits offer a compelling contrast to prior research into authenticity (Bian & Veloutsou, 2007).

This exploratory study finds that Chinese consumers do not evaluate products using a simple binary relationship (authentic vs. inauthentic). The findings emphasize other potential distinctions, namely, domesticated and mimicked authenticity. In addition, the research findings reveal that Chinese consumers conceive of the relationship between authentic, domesticated, mimic and inauthentic products as relational and hierarchical rather than original and unique. These conceptual differences suggest a hierarchical relationship of authenticity evaluations. These results challenge existing claims regarding authenticity's universal applicability.

2. Theoretical foundation

Authenticity generally appears in three different forms: objective/indexical, existential and constructive/iconic (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Objective authenticity associates a product's authenticity with

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* Corresponding author. Tel./fax: +44 1912081720.

E-mail addresses: Martin.Liu@nottingham.edu.cn (M.J. Liu), Natalia.Yannopoulou@ncl.ac.uk (N. Yannopoulou), X.M.Bian@kent.ac.uk (X. Bian), R.Elliott@bath.ac.uk (R. Elliott).

[1] Tel.: +44 1227824146.

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a perceived degree of originality (MacCannell, 1973) and assumes an absolute and objective criterion exists for comparison. Existential authenticity is a product of postmodern consumers' pursuit of pleasure (Wang, 1999). The more authentic a representation looks and feels to the consumer, the more real that representation is (Rose & Wood, 2005), suggesting authenticity is contrivance rather than reality (Brown et al., 2003).

More relevant to the present study is constructive authenticity, also known as iconic authenticity. This concept refers to authentic reproduction and assumes a certain amount of pre-existing knowledge informs perceptions (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Unlike objective authenticity, constructive authenticity accounts for different interpretations of reality based on consumers' perceptions of objects and serves as both a social construction and a source of evidence (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Consistent with this view, this study's illustrative example is that Western consumers may perceive a Nikon camera made in China as an authentic product. Chinese consumers, by contrast, will call the same Nikon camera 'Guochan Nikon' (domestically produced) as a means of distinction from the 'real Nikon' (which is made in Japan) and to indicate a higher level of authenticity.

Consumers increasingly desire and value authenticity in the postmodern marketplace, in which the mass production of consumption goods leads consumers to question the plausibility of their value (Rose & Wood, 2005). Prior research identifies a wide range of product attributes signaling authenticity and generating diverse conceptualizations of authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Grayson and Martinec (2004) note that consumers actively construct authenticity by purposefully blending fact and fiction with objects, such as the historical residence of the fictional character Sherlock Holmes, because they are highly motivated to reap the associated benefits. In the same vein, but going one step further, Rose and Wood (2005) focus on the process that underpins judgments regarding authenticity and reveal how consumers actively negotiate the paradox between the subjectively real and the contrived to find authenticity in reality television programs. These authors report for the first time that personal predilections shape authenticity's construction. The findings provide the theoretical underpinning for Beverland and Farrelly (2010) who seek to account for what constitutes authenticity by examining how consumers' goals underpin their assessments of authenticity and reveal three broad goals (control, connection and virtue). These goals underlie the systematic evaluation of different consumption experiences as being authentic. These authors find that the same object may be judged authentic and inauthentic by different (or even the same) consumers, depending on the subject's goal.

These studies highlight consumers' creativity and aptitude to find authenticity in the postmodern world but they provide little evidence on how consumers construct authenticity despite they are being meaning producers (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The present research departs from the mainstream implicit notion that authenticity is dichotomic and oppositional: authentic or inauthentic (Houston & Meambe, 2011). This research contests this oppositional construction of authenticity. The central premise is that consumers negotiate among the product attributes that can signal authenticity, particularly when oppositional directions are indicated by different cues, such as authentic brand versus inauthentic country of manufacture.

This research studies China as the focal market and examines consumers' appreciation of brand authenticity. What information can Chinese consumers offer regarding their brand authenticity perceptions in a cultural context increasingly characterized by genuine brands and their counterparts, such as counterfeits or direct and indirect copies? To answer this question, this study addresses a specific theoretical issue that relates to how consumers reconcile competing interpretations of authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) in a culture increasingly based on simulation (Friat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Diverging from Beverland and Farrelly (2010), this research contributes to the authenticity literature by documenting consumers' coping strategies when they are faced with competing interpretations of authenticity that are generated by distinctive product attributes. Another important contribution relies on revealing a perspective considering the authenticity evaluation of product offerings to be relational and hierarchical (with the proposition of two new types of authenticity, i.e., domesticated and mimicked) instead of simply oppositional.

3. Method

Qualitative research is contextualized and accounts for the different characteristics of the contexts in which data are collected (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013) in an effort to generate rich descriptions of social settings (Silverman, 2011). This study focuses on the Chinese marketplace as a culturally significant and sociologically rich context (Arnould, Price, & Moisio, 2006) – particularly authentic and counterfeit product offerings – that reflects the diversity and depth of significance regarding consumers' perceptions of authenticity. The research follows the exploratory approach of Grayson and Martinec (2004) and identifies individual perceptions of iconic authenticity through in-depth interviews. As a result of an interest in constructive authenticity, this study focuses on examining iconic authenticity because iconic authenticity refers to perception(s), which is the central aim of this study. As discussed above, iconic authenticity incorporates both subjective and objective formation elements (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), allowing different interpretations of consumers' perceptions of objects (Leigh et al., 2006). By focusing on iconic authenticity that looks at authentic reproduction, while assuming that perceivers have some degree of pre-existing knowledge, this research examines Chinese consumers' perceptions of different types of authentic reproductions of known brands in the marketplace. Furthermore, the assumptions used here are that consumers actively create meaning (Silverman, 2011) and that the use of this method allows participants to talk about experiences and emotions in an ideographic and natural way (Hirschman, 1986), which serves as a means to enter into their perspectives (Patton, 1990).

This study chooses China as the focal market for the following reasons. First, authenticity is only meaningful in a cultural context (Rose & Wood, 2005). Extant studies approach authenticity predominantly within Western contexts (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Understanding the nature of the authenticity concept in a developing economy context remains elusive despite the increasingly important role played by fast-emerging markets such as China.

Second, China represents a fertile context for consumer perceptions of authenticity. In the past three decades, China has become the world factory of genuine brands and a major producer of copies and counterfeits (Veloutsou & Bian, 2008). Unlike most Western consumers, Chinese consumers choose from a diverse range of products, including foreign, national and local brands, and to different versions of copies, such as mimics and counterfeits. Third, Chinese belong to a collectivistic society that emphasizes and respects shared common values and norms (Hofstede, 1980) in contrast to individual norms (Veloutsou & Bian, 2008); thus, Chinese consumers may differ considerably from Western consumers with respect to how they construct authenticity. Chinese consumers likely engage in more self-monitoring and likely use product offerings to portray their social standing (Bian & Forsythe, 2011). Chinese consumers desire to be the same as everyone else, whereas they do not value being unique as consumers do in the West (Schmitt, 1997). Chinese consumers tend to show a greater preference for foreign-branded products if they are from developed countries that represent status, cosmopolitanism, and modernity (Zhou & Belk, 2004).

Fourth, Confucianism and Communist ideology influence Chinese consumers. Confucianism's sovereign–subject relationship is relevant to the current study, suggesting that superiors should be followed and never be challenged. A student who faithfully memorizes and reproduces the work of a teacher represents the highest form of flattery (Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Chinese consider imitating and copying acceptable, both practically and morally (Stephens & Swartz, 2013),

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