



## Embodied self-authentication

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### ABSTRACT

Through sensual ethnography and poetic representation, we learned that individuals “self-authenticate” through embodied performance experiences of their own identities. Participating in the extraordinary experience of rock concerts revitalises existential authenticity, which enhances a person’s feeling of wholeness and well-being. This extends our understanding of value derived from extraordinary experiences and adds “existential authenticity” to consumption motivations and consequences.

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### CHINESE ABSTRACT

通过感性的人种研究和诗化的表现，我们了解到个体通过自己身份的具体化行为经验“鉴别自身的真实性”。参与体验不同寻常的摇滚演唱会让人重新获得存在真实性，使得一个人的整全性和幸福度提升。我们对不寻常的经历所衍生的价值理解因此得以延伸，并对消费动机和结果赋予“存在真实性”。

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## 1. Introduction

*Hairs prickle, warm breath/sweet smell of sweat/blood pulses, pushing, punishing/in the pit's aggressive whirlpool/dancing, vibrating, exploding, dying,/pain, surviving./"I" am invincible./"I" survive.*

Through sensual ethnography and poetic representation, we learned that individuals “self-authenticate” through embodied performance experiences of their own identities. Participating in the extraordinary experience of rock concerts revitalises existential authenticity, which enhances a person’s feeling of wholeness and well-being. This extends our understanding of value derived from extraordinary experiences and adds “existential authenticity” to consumption motivations and consequences.

The concert industry has seen enormous growth over the past 10–20 years. Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, concert revenues doubled in North America (Black et al., 2007). This trend continues. In 2011, worldwide ticket revenue was \$12.1 billion US dollars (Grabstats.com). Rock bands amassed the three top-grossing tours of all time (U2, The Rolling Stones, and AC/DC), including visits to New Zealand. At the same time, digital technology has made it

easy and inexpensive to access music. Considering the low cost and ease of listening to digital music, it is curious that there is still substantial demand for live music. Consumers evidently find some value in experiencing live rock concerts. In spite of this, there have been few consumer studies into concert experiences.

We embarked on research to understand consumers’ concert experiences and the value derived. Our research indicates that a self-authentication process occurs during live concerts. This is an important process that influences the well-being of concert consumers. It revitalises self-identity, fosters wholeness and enhances well-being. The self-authentication process occurs in the presence of others; it cannot be achieved listening to music alone and thus it is a motivation for attending live concerts.

## 2. Authenticity

Previous exposition on the conceptual nature of authenticity consistently identifies two fundamentally different types of authenticity: object-based authenticity and existential authenticity. Object-based authenticity refers to an authoritative judgement that an object is what it claims to be, that it is genuine. This authenticity connotes truthful representation (Theodossopoulos, 2013), and “authentic” describes things that have been verified as being what they purport to be (Lindholm, 2013; Urban, 1994). An external authority judges the authenticity of an object (Urban, 1994).

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“Self-authentication” is an exception. Self-authentication is a legal term for certain things (usually documents) considered authentic without extrinsic evidence (Garner and Black, 2004).

In contrast, existential authenticity is a characteristic of a human being (Varga and Guignon, 2014). It is a metaphysical concept, an individual's experience of self rather than something that can be measured or judged (Golomb, 1995; Handler and Saxton, 1988). Existential authenticity refers to a dynamic of being and becoming true to one's self, being one's own, and not being what others expect (Aho, 2003; Golomb, 1995; Heidegger, 1962; Varga and Guignon, 2014).

Many attribute the idea of existential authenticity to twentieth century philosopher, Martin Heidegger (Aho, 2003; Golomb, 1995; Lindholm, 2013; Varga and Guignon, 2014). Heidegger philosophised about ‘being’, particularly the meaning of being. He aimed for a phenomenological understanding of the experience of existence (Nenon, 1999). “Existential authenticity” is the term used for Heidegger's idea that “being one's own” is authentic and is a dynamic characteristic of an individual, created from within. It is not an external judgement of a fixed quality as is object-based authenticity. It includes an element of freedom to make meaning of one's being (Flynn, 1999; Miars, 2002). In this article, we speak of “self-authentication” of one's self-identity because it cannot be verified empirically and because its ‘object’ is the self.

The concept of existential authenticity may have originated in the philosophy literature, but the tourism literature has embraced it. In the tourism literature, existential authenticity is defined as a ‘state of being’ that people seek to achieve via tourist activities (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). Tourism scholars have linked the concept to self-actualisation (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010), a characteristic of a person as “true to one's essential nature” (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006, p. 299). They have also extrapolated two categories of existential authenticity: intra-personal and interpersonal (Kim and Jamal, 2007; Wang, 1999). Intra-personal existential authenticity includes bodily feelings and self-making; it is an experience of one's true self (Wang, 1999). Interpersonal existential authenticity occurs in ‘communitas’, the liminal state of inter-personal relationships outside the obligations and expectations of everyday life (Wang, 1999). One's essential nature and the experience of one's essential nature are dynamic. Thus, existential authenticity is not a fixed state, but is an “endless becoming” (Yacobi, 2012), and this endless becoming is a ‘hot’ process.

The relatively little attention devoted to understanding authentication processes has yielded a distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ authentication modes, which aligns with the distinction between object-based and existential authenticity. Authentication that relies on knowledge or authoritative cognitions is considered ‘cool’ (Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999). ‘Hot’ authentication is participatory and emotional (Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999). It coincides with descriptions of existential authenticity as sensations of real self, dynamic, sensorial, and involving feelings (Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Lin et al., 2011). One can therefore expect self-authentication processes to involve emotions.

Previous consumer research into authenticity primarily deals with object-based authenticity and ‘cool’ authentication. It examines how people seek authenticity in many kinds of goods and services, from luxury products (Beverland, 2005) to tourism (Cohen, 1988; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Lamont, 2014; MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Researchers study authenticity cues embedded in objects (Beverland, 2005, 2009; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). Consumers ascribe authenticity to objects based on verifiably ‘true’ claims and their judgements of sincerity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). They also find that consumers represent their authentic selves through their relationships with products and brands (Belk, 1988; Leigh et al., 2006; Oyserman, 2009; Ranfagni and Courvoisier, 2014; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Existential authenticity, self-identity and the meaning of life are big concepts. If “... the authentic self is a continuous project of the imagination, to be sought and realised in the marketplace” (Lindholm, 2013, p. 371), then it is important for consumer and marketing theorists to understand its dynamics. Because ‘hot’ authentication associated with existential authenticity is an activity of sensing, both physiologically and emotionally, this paper addresses the embodied process of self-authentication during consumption. Our contributions are threefold. First, self-authentication is a project in the marketplace. It is a dynamic process of doing, rather than evaluation of a state of being. Second, self-authentication gives value to the individual in the form of existential authenticity, which contributes to wholeness and well-being. It is one of two benefits that people derive from rock concert experiences. The other is intrinsic pleasure and happiness, as reported in previous research (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). Finally, embodied sensations are a mode of knowing, which is self-authenticating.

In the next section, we describe the outcome of the grounded theory portion of the research, which produced a holistic understanding of the rock concert experience. Then we describe the creative analytic practice that produced our research poems. The poems convey physiological sensations of knowing, which helped us understand the self-authentication experience part of the rock concert experience. In the final section, we discuss what this means and how it enhances understanding about authenticity.

### 3. The rock concert experience

This research first employed a sensual ethnography (Pink, 2009; Sparkes, 2009). During 2011 and 2012, the first author attended ten rock concerts, interviewed eight rock concert consumers (four women and four men, aged 18–52), and analysed fan responses to seven online concert reviews. Observations paid particular attention to emotions and sensations felt through the body. The first author followed the general procedures of grounded theory (Hopper, 2014) to systematically analyse his personal field notes, 150 pages of single-spaced transcripts, and posts in response to reviews of seven concerts (The Foo Fighters, Evanescence, Rod Stewart, The Big Day Out, Roger Waters' The Wall, Def Leppard, and Meatloaf). The resulting categories contributed to a theoretical model of concert experiences simplified in Fig. 1.

The rock concert experience model (Fig. 1) shows that attending concerts produces psychological well-being from two main processes: the experience co-creation process and the self-authentication process. In the experience co-creation process (left side of Fig. 1), the band, fans, and the venue co-create the rock concert experience. The participants felt this as “extraordinary experience” (Arnould and Price, 1993). It contained ritualised practices, emotional intensity, and interpersonal interactions that are characteristic of extraordinary experiences (Ahola, 2005). This part of the model corresponds with others' conclusions that extraordinary experiences can be both motivation and reward for consumption-related behaviour (Schouten et al., 2007). Participants benefited from the extraordinary experience in and of itself (Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten et al., 2007). It provided pleasurable hedonic rewards, feelings of euphoria and well-being, which enhanced subjective well-being in the short term. Extraordinary experiences are well described in other work (cf. Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten et al., 2007) so we do not repeat it here. We turn our attention next to the right-hand side of the model and the self-authentication process. Concert participants enhanced their well-being through experiences that restored their existential authenticity.

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