Research Article

Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale

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Abstract

Although brand authenticity is gaining increasing interest in consumer behavior research and managerial practice, literature on its measurement and contribution to branding theory is still limited. This article develops an integrative framework of the concept of brand authenticity and reports the development and validation of a scale measuring consumers' perceived brand authenticity (PBA). A multi-phase scale development process resulted in a 15-item PBA scale measuring four dimensions: credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity. This scale is reliable across different brands and cultural contexts. We find that brand authenticity perceptions are influenced by indexical, existential, and iconic cues, whereby some of the latters' influence is moderated by consumers' level of marketing skepticism. Results also suggest that PBA increases emotional brand attachment and word-of-mouth, and that it drives brand choice likelihood through self-congruence for consumers high in self-authenticity.
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Introduction

Brands play an important role in consumers' identity projects (Edson Escalas, 2004; Kirmani, 2009) insofar as consumers rely on brands to express themselves, self-enhance, or self-verify (Aaker, 1999). At the same time, consumers are confronted with increasing commercialization, an overflow of the fake, and an omnipresence of meaningless market offers (Boyle, 2004). To overcome this meaninglessness, consumers look for brands that are relevant, original, and genuine: they increasingly search for authenticity in brands (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland, 2005; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 5) acknowledge this development, stating that "authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and as cost overtook availability."

In order to engage in meaningful branding efforts, it is imperative for marketers to understand the nature of authenticity of their branded products and services, as well as its drivers and consequences. Both academics and practitioners therefore agree on the importance of authenticity for consumer behavior and branding (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Holt, 2002; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Newman & Dhar, 2014; Rose & Wood, 2005). However, marketing practice relies on intuitive and isolated appeals to heritage (e.g., Kiehl's "since 1851"), origin (e.g., Victorinox's "made in Switzerland"), production methods

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(e.g., Lush's "handmade"), credibility (e.g., Julius Bär's "true to you"), self-verification (e.g., Dove's "real beauty"), or moral values (e.g., Microsoft's "empower youth to change their world") to convey authenticity of a brand. In addition—despite various efforts aimed at conceptualizing and operationalizing brand authenticity (e.g., Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Güldenberg, 2013; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014)—questions regarding its measurement, drivers, consequences, as well as underlying processes and boundary conditions remain.

Against this background, this article seeks to shed light on the nature of perceived brand authenticity (hereafter referred to as PBA), its measurement, and its relation to other theoretically and managerially meaningful constructs. To this end, we report (1) a synthesis of research on authenticity leading up to a definition and integrative framework of PBA, (2) the development of a scale to measure PBA, and (3) an empirical examination of drivers, consequences, boundary conditions, and a process mediating the effects of PBA for some consumer segments. This article aims to advance the theoretical understanding of PBA and highlight its relevance for consumers' brand-related behaviors. The findings of the current research facilitate further inquiries into authenticity in a consumer context and in several related domains, such as identity-related consumption. This research also provides marketing practitioners with an instrument to evaluate and track the level of brand authenticity and suggests specific strategies to strengthen it.

This article proceeds as follows: We first review the literature on authenticity and propose that three perspectives (i.e., objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist) encompass all current authenticity conceptualizations. The objectivist perspective refers to authenticity as an objectively measureable quality of an entity that can be evaluated by experts (Trilling, 1972). According to the constructivist perspective, authenticity is a projection of one's own beliefs, expectations, and perspectives onto an entity (Wang, 1999). The existentialist perspective considers authenticity to be related to the self—and not to an external entity—and involves the notion that authenticity means being true to one's self (Golomb, 1995). In order to define the dimensions of PBA in relation to these three perspectives on authenticity, we build on an extensive literature review combined with exploratory in-depth interviews that reveal four dimensions of PBA (continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism). We then present a conceptual framework that identifies indexical cues (i.e., evidence-based brand characteristics), iconic cues (i.e., impression-based brand characteristics), and existential cues (i.e., self-referential brand characteristics) as drivers of PBA. We also propose a positive relation between PBA and emotional brand attachment, word-of-mouth, brand choice likelihood, and brand consumption. In addition (in line with the subjectivity of authenticity assessments; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), we identify individual difference variables that act as boundary conditions for PBA emergence and effects, and propose self-verification as a central working mechanism of PBA for some consumer segments. We report the results of a qualitative study, five survey studies, and an experiment.

Conceptualizing perceived brand authenticity

The marketing and consumer research literature acknowledges that a quest for authentic consumption arises from a loss of traditional sources of meaning and self-identity that is associated with postmodernity (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). Authentic consumption is relevant for a wide range of consumption objects and activities that hold potential for meaning creation (e.g., luxury wines; Beverland, 2005, tourist attractions; Grayson & Martinec, 2004, and advertising; Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). Despite high levels of agreement on authenticity's relevance for consumer behavior and its association with genuineness, truthfulness, and conveying meaning to consumers, the literature is characterized by diverse and fragmented approaches and foci in the quest for a commonly accepted conceptualization of authenticity. In line with this observation, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) state that "[…] the nature of authenticity in consumption is contested" (p. 838). This challenge extends into the branding context, where a commonly accepted definition of perceived *brand authenticity* is still lacking. We therefore suggest a conceptualization of PBA that encompasses three authenticity-related perspectives found in the literature.

The objectivist perspective

According to Trilling (1972), the provenance of the term "authenticity" is in museums, "where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or claim to be […]" (p. 93). Authenticity is seen as a quality inherent in an object and evaluated by experts. Grayson and Martinec (2004) use the term "indexical" to refer to this type of authenticity: "indexicality distinguishes 'the real thing' from its copies" (p. 298). For these authors, indexicality refers to a perceiver's experience of physical or behavioral fact that provides some verification of what is claimed to be delivered. Similarly, Beverland et al. (2008) discuss how consumers use objective sources of information to judge a product's authenticity, such as cues reinforcing continuance of historic practices. In a branding context, the objectivist perspective suggests that brand authenticity perceptions arise from an evidence-based reality that can be assessed using verifiable information about the brand, such as labels of origin, age, ingredients, or performance.

The constructivist perspective

According to this perspective, authenticity is a socially or personally constructed phenomenon (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006), such that reality is the result of different interpretations of what "the real world" looks like. Authenticity is not seen as a quality inherent in an object, but a projection of one's own beliefs, expectations, and perspectives (Wang, 1999). This explains why some consumers find authenticity in reproductions such as the VW Beetle (Brown et al., 2003) or fabricated touristic settings like Disneyland