Aesthetic Consumption As Authenticating Experience

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Scholars question whether authenticity can co-exist with market forces and brands. We examine through depth interviews, the role of self-authentication in the consumption of products with a high aesthetic component such as hand crafted items or mass market items positioned around design (Apple’s IPod). In contrast to the belief that the value of aesthetic consumption is intrinsic we find that product choice is a self-authenticating act assisting with personal identity development. In this context, authenticity is a highly personalized value, reflecting an idealized self. Consumers negotiate authenticity within the confines of the market, to build a desired self-image.

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does, however, consume other US brands such as Polo Ralph Lauren and Nautica. Although these brands have in the recent past begun to coopt Hip Hop style, they have not grown from Hip Hop culture. Rather, they are products of mainstream fashion designers and hence their consumption could hardly be symbolic of Hip Hop authenticity. However, this is exactly what these products are for Nixon, representing his ‘white’ middle-upper class private school background better than the consumption of most other brands. Therefore, Nixon is truthfully representing himself through his symbolic consumption and his actions are consistent with the values of his subculture. Australian Hip Hop is not middle-class per se but its middle class members can remain true to their own sense of identity and be part of the Hip Hop subculture.

This research also found that the values of the Australian Hip Hop culture required members to represent their place. Hence, Australian Hip Hop brands were often favoured over US ones, consistent with previous findings of country of origin research (Phau and Prendergast 2000). Indeed, the competitive nature of Hip Hop, and the desire to represent one’s place, has created a situation where members even try to represent their place over other Australian places, by consuming brands with meanings associated with their home city. This constitutes a form of subcultural capital, ascribing higher membership status for those ‘in the know’. This has serious implications for US Hip Hop brands. As the Australian Hip Hop culture continues to mature, local Hip Hop brands will be deemed to represent its members’ place more truthfully and should be able to successfully leverage this greater perceived authenticity.

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This study of aesthetic consumption involved twenty-one depth interviews with a sample of consumers known to be high in three categories - value, acumen and response intensity - each critical to the centrality of visual product aesthetics (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold, 2003). Biographical elements were included in the interviews (Huffmann, Ratcheshwar and Mick 2000) as the aim was to reveal structures of personal and social action (Roberts 2001).

Respondent stories revealed the use of aesthetically pleasing products as expressions of an idealised sense of self. Authenticating acts are said to be self-referential behaviours consumers enact to produce the “true” self (Arnould and Price, 2000). Whilst pointing to a range of products (a polished metal photo album, a candelabra and a table) one respondent reflected on what she considered distinctive about herself. “Sometimes these products remind me how much worth I place in detail and the time spent making them. I think it’s the same with this beauty is so often about the effort put in by the designer and to get the most out of this type of product you really have to understand this effort and genuinely appreciate it. I suppose in some ways they [the various products] indicate what it is to get to know people well in that you must make a real effort, take the time to listen and appreciate what they have to say, and help them get to know you and use this positively in long term relationships with important people like partners, family and friends”.

As this and the following examples clearly demonstrate, the value in these products went far beyond their aesthetically pleasing exterior and often related to affirmations of individuality (“something I think I have always had in me”), personal growth and desired relationships. One specific authenticating act involved anthropomorphism where products were assigned human-like characteristics (DiSalvo and Gumperle 2003). Another respondent noted how her juicer had a child like shape.

“It is really interesting but at the same time really ugly and quite industrial too. It’s ugly but beautiful at the same time there’s no life to it, but then it almost looks like a person where there’s feet the stomach and the little body, it’s like a person. Sometimes the most beautiful person is the ugliest thing inside but then the ugliest person is the most beautiful thing inside. I think it’s the same with this. It’s so ugly but once you start using it, it becomes the most beautiful thing…I’ve just grown to love it”.

Price and Arnould (2000) note that products become highly valued when consumers nurture them as part of a self-narrative. For this respondent value increased over time as she transformed the product in accordance with her deeply held beliefs about appreciate people’s inner qualities. Claxton, Reid and Murray (1994) suggest that anthropomorphism is often used for objects that have particular salience in defining who consumers are individually or culturally. Another respondent spoke of her refrigerator (the door was glass) having human-like emotions, “Everyday it changes according to what’s in my fridge…it’s got a lot of life to it if I’ve just been to the market…By the end of the week, it’s kind of sad because it’s empty”. In this study engagement was at the product level as the ambiguity in design (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Bloch 1993) stimulated the co-creation of value. In the context of this respondent’s story, this meant engaging in ways that reflected the importance she placed on being a responsible and caring mother.

Another significant finding was that the consumption experience was authenticating in ways commonly discussed in narrow contexts such as extreme sports (Celsi, 1992) or other physically challenging adventures like river rafting (Arnold and Price 1993). First sighting of the product often produced a sense of elation, and in some case their efforts to describe this experience had ineffable aspects in that they either suggested it was difficult to truly capture the feeling at the time of purchase or what the product meant to them now, or were loath to do for fear it may in some way deface the value of the product or experienced (Zaltman 1977). Respondents had far less trouble however in highlighting the significance of their acumen (Zaltman 1977). In this study, engagement was at the product level as the ambiguity in design (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Bloch 1993) stimulated the co-creation of value. In the context of this respondent’s story, this meant engaging in ways that reflected the importance she placed on being a responsible and caring mother.

113
In 1995, Coke proclaimed a return to their roots and implemented an authentic marketing strategy (Taylor 1995). In 1998, Advertising Age declared the key to marketing success is communicating brand authenticity (Jensen 1998). In 2002, Jeep struggled to expand their product line without compromising brand authenticity (Muller 2002) and Coke pursued a new authenticity-based advertising campaign (Sampey 2002). In 2004, Reebok declared authenticity to be the secret to marketing prowess (Williams 2004) while, in 2005, Coke once again focused on an authenticity driven brand strategy (Hein 2005). The prevalence of authentic messages in marketing practice is mirrored by academic interest in authenticity: consuming and communicating authenticity, in experiences (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Cohen 1988), products (Beverland 2005), people (Guthey and Jackson 2005), places (Grayson and Martinez 2004), advertising (Holt 2004), and entertainment (Jones and Smith 2005; Rose and Wood 2005) is often explored in consumer research.

Authenticity, and its use in and relation to advertising, gives rise to three important questions. The first asks what constitutes an authentic advertisement. Stern (1994) posits that, even though advertisements are representations of reality, they are still considered authentic if they “convey the illusion of the reality of ordinary life in reference to a consumption situation.” Rose and Wood (2005), in their study of reality television viewers, describe the negotiation that unfolds as consumers assess the authenticity of reality representations. Stern (1994) and Rose and Wood’s (2005) conceptualizations of perceived authenticity parallel the notion of iconic authenticity (Grayson and Martinez 2004), whereby something is perceived to be authentic not only when it is real and original (indexical authenticity), but also when it captures the essence of things that are real. For subcultures, an authentic advertisement is one that is closely aligned with the core values of a subculture, values that are grounded in the ordinary life experiences of subculture members (Chalmers 2006). Subculture members pay close attention to authenticity when interpreting advertisements (Wheaton and Beal 2003) and base authenticity assessments on the advertisements alignment with core values (Kates 2004; Quester, Beverland, and Farrelly 2006). Further, authenticity is important to subculture identity (e.g. Fox 1987; Wheaton 2000) and subculture member consumption activities (Arthur 2006). The second interesting issue addresses how authenticity is understood. Trilling (1972) conceptualises authenticity as relating to “our true self, our individual existence, not as we might present it to others, but as it ‘really’ is apart from the roles we play.” Handler (1986) expands this view, stating “an authentic culture is one original to its possessors, one which exists only with them: in other words, an independently existent entity, asserting itself against other cultures.” Inherent in this conceptualization, authentic cultures are oppositional to those outside the culture. This is consistent with the treatment of subcultures as distinct from, and possessing core values distinct from, a dominant culture (e.g. Haenfler 2004; Hebdige 1979; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Thus, researchers often view subcultures as contained entities characterised by homogeneous values (e.g. Cova and Cova 2002; Holt 2004). In contrast, other research suggests subcultures are characterised by intracultural variation (Kates 2002; Pelto and Pelto 1975; Quester et al. 2006; Roth and Moorman 1988).

The aforementioned inconsistency gives rise to the third question: how does intracultural variation impact the effectiveness of authentic advertisements? Research shows authenticity is important to subculture identity, that subculture members seek authenticity, and that subcultures exhibit intracultural variation. Not much is known, however, about how these three elements interact. This study examines the impact of intracultural variation on the manner in which subculture members interpret and react to authentic advertisements.

An analysis of the distance running subculture was conducted to address this issue. Subculture members at different levels of the subculture were isolated to examine