Brand Trust and Authenticity: The Link Between Trust in Brands and the Consumer’s Role on the Market

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ABSTRACT
Consumers increasingly demand that brand authenticity means that the brand’s values are aligned with the corporation’s actions, which are made transparent (Holt 2002). Interrogating Holt’s claim that “consumer resistance” is inevitably staged in the marketplace, I suggest that the implications of seeing brand authenticity as linked to trust are related to how the consumer’s role on the market is perceived. I argue that as a consequence of “consumer resistance” taking place on the market, there will be a power asymmetry between consumers and brands, increasing the vulnerability of consumers, and affecting the form that the consumer-brand trust relationships can take.

INTRODUCTION
In this paper, I explore the implications of seeing brand authenticity as linked to trust, in order to shed new light on brand trust. Further, I discuss Holt’s (2002: 89) claim about consumer resistance being something that helps the market “rejuvenate itself”, relating it to the concepts of trust and reliance, in order to investigate how brand trust is linked to the consumer’s role on the market.

Within consumer behavior, researchers focusing on trust in corporate brands are scarce, although Holt (2002) points out the increased importance for brands to have consumer trust, posing trust as a major aspect of future relationships between brands and consumers. In recent years, trust and reputation have become increasingly much researched within the marketing discipline, often in relation to corporate brand culture and image. De Chernatony (1999) argues that reputation (i.e. the brand’s image of trustworthiness) is so important that brand managers should start monitoring brand reputation rather than brand image (i.e. consumers’ view of what the brand values are). Furthermore, Fombrun (1996) has suggested that a brand can recover faster from a crisis if it has a high level of stakeholder trust, and if managers address stakeholders concerned regarding after the crisis. The importance of trust has also been pointed out for example in service management (e.g. Grönroos 1989), and relationship marketing (e.g. Morgan & Hunt 1994). Holt (2002, 2003) contributes with interesting theories on consumers’ trust relationships to brands; however, there are some ideas that I find problematic. Although Holt (2002) suggests that in the future, the brands that have consumers’ trust will have adapted to what consumers demand that authenticity means, he does not see consumers as ever being able to escape the market through “consumer resistance” (89).

The aim of this paper is to shed light on trust and authenticity as discussed in Holt (2002;2003), problematizing it in relation to Holt’s (2002: 89) claim about consumer resistance being something that helps the market “rejuvenate itself”; and to place trust in broader issues as Holt’s work has been influential. Consumers are increasingly asking of brands that they should be trustworthy and authentic in the sense that the brand and the organization behind the brand share the same values; consumers are “Peeling Away the Brand Veneer” (Holt 2002, 86). Through interrogating the notion of the “brand veneer”, I make clear that the assumption underlying Holt’s argument is that corporations may not be able to escape the new reality they are facing, where a “brand veneer” becomes worthless if it is not combined with genuine efforts to show stakeholders that the values of the brand are reflected in the excellent practices and values of the corporation. Then, I suggest that the implications of seeing brand authenticity as linked to trust are related to how the consumer’s role on the market is perceived. I conclude that in case consumers cannot escape the market, the consequential lack of power on the part of consumers will increase the demand for truly trustworthy brands, as well as affect the forms that the trust relationships between consumers and brands can take.

In the conclusion, I will also point the way for future research on trust as well as implications for managers.

AUTHENTICITY, CONSUMER CULTURE AND BRANDING PARADIGMS
Taking a standpoint against both modern and postmodern advertising and ways of hailing the consumer, Holt (2002) argues that the new “post-post modern condition” of consumer culture that will effect what brands survive in the future, stem from five “postmodern contradictions” (86-87). These contradictions are: First, “Ironic Distance Compressed”, meaning that consumers see through irony as an advertising technique that is used in order to create an image of disinterestedness on the part of the brand using it. Second, “The Sponsored Society”, meaning that brands’ technique of sponsoring popular persons and make them market the brand in their everyday life will be exploited by marketers to the point when consumers will be able to see through that technique, and reject it, as well. Third, “Authenticity Extinction”, means that it is increasingly difficult for marketers to find cultural expressions, such as songs, that have not yet been used in advertising to create an aura of “authenticity”. Fourth, “Peeling Away the Brand Veneer”, means that there is an ongoing struggle between brand managers that try to separate the brand from the corporation behind the brand, and “antibranders” that see this as inauthentic; authenticity means aligning corporate practice with brand values, they argue. Fifth, “Sovereignty Inflation”, means that the pressure on postmodern consumers to become “sovereign consumers” through their choice of brands has gone so far as to clash with other aspects of their life; most people do not have the time to consume brands in a way that allows them to feel sovereign. This is why they rely heavily on taste makers (Holt calls them “infomediaries”), such as web sites and magazines that weed out the brands and products that different consumer segments might like. (Holt 2002:86-87)

In the past, as well as in the future, the perceived authenticity of the brand is in focus within the brand paradigms, even though the meaning of authenticity is currently changing (Holt 2002: 87-88). Holt argues that as contradictions have risen in consumer culture, the branding paradigm will shift to accommodate these contradictions. As described above, one of the contradictions states that there is an inconsistence between how consumers and corporations perceive authenticity. Consumers, led by “antibranders”, increasingly demand that authenticity should be a consistence between brand image and the actions of the corporation behind the brand (86). This is in stark contrast to the meaning of “authenticity” that prevailed in “the postmodern branding paradigm”. There, authenticity meant that the brand communicated an image of “disinterestedness” to consumers, through ironic advertising techniques which implied a (non-existent) gap between the profit motive of the corporation and the image of the brand. The aim of Holt’s article is to try to find an explanation to why this “consumer resistance” against the corporations’ practice of separating the brand from the
corporation emerged. He claims that there is no explanation to it within the branding paradigm, rather, the explanation is found in consumer culture, and in the “dialectical” relationship between current brand paradigm and consumer culture (Holt 2002). Calling the very culture that we live in today “consumer culture”, Holt joins in on a sociological discussion (see e.g. Slater 1997) which suggests that consumption is what mainly structures our lives. Seeing that this view of our culture is Holt’s point of departure, it is not surprising that brands are suggested to be given an even more prominent role in the lives of consumers in the near future.

From the viewpoint of the importance of consumers’ trust in brands, I suggest that it is of special interest to review the way Holt (2002) explores the future of the brand paradigm in relation to consumer culture with particular attention to the change in how authenticity is seen. Before, authenticity was seen as something which was sought out in cool, unexploited subcultures. Finding this authenticity, however, has become increasingly difficult as the fierce quest of marketers to discover new subcultures for their brands to appropriate has made subcultures become virtually extinct. Subcultures now get appropriated so fast they have barely been formed before they are usurped by marketing. Simultaneously, consumers are asking more of brands; it is no longer enough for a brand to be authentic in the sense that it is subculture cool or ghetto chic. In the new consumer culture that is emerging authenticity primarily means being trustworthy, in the sense that the corporation should act in line with its brand values and behave as a citizen of the community (Holt 2002: 88). Of course, to win in the fierce competition, acting as a “corporate citizen” is not enough to make consumers choose your brand, but it is necessary in order to get their trust, which in turn is a strict condition for having consumers of the future even consider choosing your brand, Holt suggests (2002: 88). This view places an enormous importance on consumers’ trust in brands. Also, because Holt is stating the need for active work with corporate citizenship, I suggest that the implication is that trust has to become part of the brand strategy in the future. Thus, implementing brand authenticity as linked to brand trust requires engaging not only marketing, but rather, building trust through all parts of the organization behind the brand.

“Consumer culture” and “brand paradigm” are important concepts in Holt (2002):

“Consumer culture is the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers’ branding activities. The branding paradigm is the set of principles that structures how firms seek to build their brands. [...] Contradictions between consumer culture and the branding paradigm propel institutional shifts in both.” (80)

Consequently, Holt sees brand management and consumption as interrelated activities that necessarily influence one another. This dialectical relationship entails that together, consumers do have a say in what the branding paradigm will look like in the future. Individual firms that do not tap into contradictions in current consumer culture will go under. However, in claiming that there is a dialectical relationship between branding activities and consumption practices, there is a risk of forgetting that the corporation may have more power in that relationship. As Schroeder and Borgerson (1998) argue, “Reality and advertising do not constitute two separate spheres acting upon one another; advertising and the mass media contribute to the visual landscape that constructs reality” (161). Here, it is pointed out that for all the interrelatedness of consumers’ reality and brands, much of the relationship is mediated through ads, and even if consumers can influence ads in a round-

about way, it is not consumers who make the ads which have a part in constructing their reality. Further, “The more prominent certain images become, the more power they have in the sea of images...” (Borgerson and Schroeder 1997 in Schroeder and Borgerson 1998: 164). Thus, it would seem that in case a large corporation would choose to use one ad extensively, that picture would have more power than an image which is used on a smaller scale. This is one example of why the relative power of corporations, as compared to consumers, cannot be ignored when talking about the impact that consumers have on the branding paradigm, and vice versa (c.f. Schroeder & Borgerson 1998).

In his empirical research study Holt (2002) attempts to capture today’s contradictions between consumer culture and the postmodern branding paradigm, and the future shift in the branding paradigm. In order to do that, he starts out by giving a critique of contemporary postmodern consumer behavior theories which state that “consumer resistance” can be a way of escaping the market. Holt (2002) has conducted a research study of consumers that he claims are engaged in consumer resistance in the sense that postmodern theories ascribe to the concept. However, for all their resistance, he does not see consumers as ever escaping the market. One of his informants treats his hobbies much as if they were his jobs; this informant is in a sense a “perfect” consumer, because even though he aspires to outsmart marketer intentions (for example, he buys cheap food through bicycling between stores and buying things that are on sale in each store), he is still buying a large amount of things, and he is doing it on the market. I will come back to Holt’s critique of contemporary postmodern consumer behavior theories later on, as it is related to the claim that trust will become necessary for any individual brand that wants to survive.

Over time, brand management and consumption have an effect on one another (Holt 2002). Accordingly, Holt argues that the view of authenticity in the present, “postmodern consumer culture” is a reaction to the previous, “modern”, branding paradigm where brands had “cultural authority”, meaning that brands reached out to consumers in a highly authoritative mode, basically telling them why their brand was the best brand, and then telling them to buy it. Here is an example of this kind of authoritative ad; a 1954 car ad sounds like this:

“Oldsmobile’s FABULOUS NEW ‘Starfire’ NOW IN PRODUCTION! Starfire—the ‘show car’ that can be your car! Starfire [...] saddle-stitched leather interior in dramatic new two-tone patterns. Starfire—with the surging might of a new 185-horsepower “Rocket” Engine! See and drive this glamorous new Oldsmobile convertible—the ‘Dream car’ Ninety-Eight Starfire—at your Oldsmobile dealer’s now.” (Heimann 2002: 146)

The car for sale is an emerald green convertible with white details. There are two pictures of the car in the ad. The text (quoted above) is placed in the middle of the picture. In the picture at the top of the page the whole car is visible; a woman wearing a scarf is sitting by the steering wheel, and a man in a suit and a hat is leaning his hand on the windshield. They are looking at each other. In the picture at the top right hand corner of the ad, in very small letters, it says “Be careful—drive safely!”

This ad is authoritative in its tone, even though it seems as if the marketers are trying to play down that impression through the use of small letters in the most extremely authoritative part of the ad.
Further, the ad states exactly what associations the car should evoke in the (female) consumer: the car is a “show car”, it is “glamorous”, “dramatic”, and “surging”, and the “Starfire” should be driven by a woman.

Clearly, the elegant woman in the pictures reinforces the message of the car’s elegance and glamour. On top of the exhaustive description of the car’s properties, the exhortation to “Be careful—drive safely!” cements the authoritative tone that is typical of the modern way of hailing consumers. This example shows that marketers within the modern marketing paradigm put the product qualities, and the role of the brand and organization, before the role of the consumer, because the ad leaves little room for creativity on the part of consumers; instead it presents a product and tells the consumer that it is “now in production”. Consumers in the modern consumer culture had “not only accepted but sought out” this kind of “paternal” advice (Holt 2002:81).

During the 1960s, a reaction to the modern view of how brands should hail consumers started. Blatant authority was not appealing to consumers any more, and to address this change, ads, for example, became more ironic in their tone as “[p]ostmodern consumers perceive modern branding efforts to be inauthentic because they ooze with the commercial intent of their sponsors.” (Holt 2002:83). In order to accommodate this shift in how consumers perceived authenticity, the branding paradigm shifted from the modern way of hailing the consumer to “the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses.” (Holt 2002:83). This idea is highly controversial within consumer research, as there is an ongoing discussion on whether consumers are sovereign and thus able to “produce the self as one chooses,” or dupes, manipulated my marketing (see e.g. Firat & Venkatesh 1995; Slater 1997). I will come back to this discussion when talking about consumer resistance and brand trust, below.

**TRUST AS AUTHENTICITY**

Currently, the postmodern branding paradigm is under attack, Holt (2002) argues. A shift in consumer culture takes place because when marketers exploit the postmodern branding paradigm where “authenticity” is in the guise of “disinterestedness” in the brand, new contradictions between that branding paradigm and the current consumer culture arises. The contradiction, “Peeling away the brand veneer” (Holt 2002:86) means that the separation of brand and corporation that consumers perceived as authentic before is instead seen as a way of cowardly trying to avoid taking responsibility for the actions of the corporation. Holt (2002:88) argues that: “Brands now cause trouble, not because they dictate tastes, but because they allow companies to dodge civic obligations.” Nowadays, consumer resistance is firstly about not accepting that a brand become a colorful patch covering up an organization with doubtful practices, for example, in the form of sweatshops, dubious bonus systems, etc.

Acknowledging that the postmodern conception of brands has resulted in brand managers’ having separated the brand almost entirely from the corporation in a way that has made it possible for corporations to misbehave without losing profits is part of the shift in consumer culture that will influence the future branding paradigm, Holt suggests. In the future, brands will act as artists that help people construct their identities, but they will only be allowed to do so if they have consumer trust. In this new “Post postmodern Branding Paradigm”, Holt sees the brand as a “Citizen-Artist” (2002:81), where “Citizen” stands for the brands’ having to align their brand values with the actions of the corporation and act as a “corporate citizen” in order to gain and keep consumer trust and survive in the future market place (2002:88). For example, corporate citizenship may involve long-term support of activities of local importance wherever the brand is situated. Also, the company needs to act as a citizen, in the sense that it takes care not to pollute the environment, not exploit its labor force, etc. In the future, “Post postmodern” consumer culture, “Brands will be trusted to serve as cultural source material when their sponsors have demonstrated that they should civic responsibilities as would a community pillar.” (Holt 2002:88). Thus, the demands on more ethical behavior on the part of future brands are very high, and require that corporations redefine their sense of what authenticity means. Further, as Schroeder (2002) argues, listening to what critics say about the brand can help corporations improve their brand through providing important insights on how to understand it.

However, changing the authenticity of the brand to become a concept that is intimately linked with trust is not straightforward. This is shown in the example that Holt (2002) gives of how slowly Nike reacted to consumers’ insistence that they needed to have corporate practices that were aligned with the brand’s values. Also, I argue that this is evident from the way that Holt (2003) omits the problem of authenticity, as well as in the claim that Holt (2002) makes about postmodern researchers’ notion of “consumer resistance”.

**WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY TO AN ICON BRAND?**

Surprisingly, Holt (2003) ignores the problems surrounding the emerging notion of authenticity as being increasingly much linked to trust. Here, he describes authenticity in a way that is more similar to the way that the earlier article describes as the “postmodern”, view of authenticity. Holt (2003) suggests that “authenticity” is connected to what is “far removed from commercial, cultural, and political power: on the frontier, in bohemia, in rural backwaters, in athletic leagues, in immigrant areas, and ghettos.” (44). The way authenticity is described here is highly inconsistent with the discussion of authenticity in Holt (2002). According to the later article, myth making draws on environments with the kind of authenticity that is offered by subcultures, and the people in them; rebel myths can be shaped from an understanding of them, according to Holt. Trust as linked to authenticity has thus been overlooked in this article, in favor of a more simplistic view of what authenticity in a brand means.

In Holt (2003), authenticity has a lot to do with the brand’s signaling a “cool”, “subculture” attitude, and nothing to do with whether the brand values and the actions of the corporations are aligned. This shows the complexity of the claim that trust is becoming more linked to authenticity which Holt makes in the earlier article. However, Holt (2002) calls attention to another problem with the postmodern view of authenticity as he points out one more contradiction between consumer culture and the postmodern branding paradigm. This contradiction is called “Authenticity Extinction”, meaning that finding “cultural texts that still have their aura intact, unstained by corporate sponsorship” is becoming very hard for marketers as that is the strategy of all postmodern brands. There are only so many subcultures to be found and explored. (Holt 2002:86). That is, when nearly all subcultures have been appropriated by marketers, the chase for new subcultures becomes extremely intense, and thus, the corporations have had to start looking for other ways to reinvent themselves in order to appeal to consumers. I suggest that one way of doing this is through embracing the signs that the meaning of “authenticity” is changing to become more complex than it is within the postmodern branding paradigm (c.f. Holt 2002).

Why does Holt (2003) go back to the postmodern branding paradigm’s definition of authenticity? Perhaps it is because the article draws from past advertising campaigns to stage Mountain
Dew as an example of a brand that has been an “Icon” to consumers for decades. This does indeed mean that they perfected the postmodern notion of authenticity in their brand practice during the postmodern consumer culture era. However, given the description of authenticity in the “Postpostmodern” consumer culture of “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?”, where the very title of the article draws attention to the problem of the brands’ having been used as a cover for corporations to avoid behaving as corporate citizens, it is surprising that Holt (2003) does not assign much interest to this notion of authenticity in his later article, rather the brand’s trustworthiness in the eyes of consumers is suggested to be linked to its “political authority”.

“Political Authority” is one of the things that Holt (2003) advises brands that are icons to use in order to successfully target “contradictions” in “national ideology” (48), which is what icon brands do in order to create the myths that make them icons (43). It is the conflicts between personal and national ideology that makes people need myths (43-44). “Political Authority” as described by Holt (2003), however, does not connect brand trust to the authenticity of the brand. Rather, having successfully communicated a brand image of trustworthiness is seen as a reason for brands to believe they have the power to influence loyal consumers. At first glance, it is difficult to see how this “political authority” differs from the taken for granted authority of brands in the 1950’s, even though I can understand that “political authority” has been earned by the marketers through hard work with communicating the brand’s trustworthiness. However, this is not explicitly stated in the text, which leaves a lot to the reader in that respect.

BRAND TRUST AND CONSUMER SOVEREIGNTY

Due to the contradiction between consumer culture and the postmodern branding paradigm, which Holt (2002) calls “Sovereignty Inflation”, people may start wanting brands to be “Citizen-Artists” (81, my emphasis) which act as “one of many original source materials that may be useful in their self-construction projects.”(88). “Sovereignty Inflation” means that consumers do not have the time to construct their identities like the old definition of the “sovereign consumer” advocates. Lack of time to make active, reflexive, consumer choices makes them rely increasingly much on magazines and other sources to help them decide what brands to buy.

It is not farfetched to ask whether the lack of consumer sovereignty practices among ordinary people leads to an increasing need for trustworthy brands. Holt (2002) does not explicitly ask this question. However, in the conclusion it is suggested that brands need to be “Citizen-Artists” and consumers “will rely upon cultural specialists to do most of the heavy lifting in creating new cultural materials.” (88). That is, the brands will be relied upon to help consumers feel sovereign, even though (or because) they do not have the time to invent their own sovereignty practices anymore. I argue that the need to “rely” on brands to do this makes trust an even more important topic within the future branding paradigm, because it is not easy to know where we draw the line between reliance and trust.

Philosopher Annette Baier actually defines trust as “reliance on another’s good will” (1986: 234), which implies that reliance and trust are interrelated. Baier’s reason for defining trust as a form of reliance is the vulnerability that is inherent in trust. If you trust in someone’s good will, you rely on the size of that good will to be sufficient, so that the person will not misuse your trust in her/him (Baier 1986:235). Thus, in not having the time for sovereignty practices, and at the same time wanting to be able to choose brands that act as civil citizens, consumers become more vulnerable to the limits of the good will of corporations. The less time there is for consumers to choose for themselves and evaluate the trustworthiness of certain brands, the more important will it be that brands really are trustworthy. In case a brand takes care to communicate trust to consumers, on the one hand, the effect should be that consumers feel less vulnerable. On the other hand, corporations that do not acknowledge consumers’ increased need to rely on them to act as citizens that have a good will towards others, may act unethically and exploit the trust given to them.

WHAT HAPPENS TO BRAND TRUST IF “CONSUMER RESISTANCE” DOES NOT INVOLVE RESISTANCE AGAINST THE MARKET?

In Holt (2002; 2003) trust is described as a way to keep consumers interested in the brand at a minimum level (i.e. more things are needed, but if the brand is not perceived as trustworthy, it will be discarded). The two articles are similar in their close attention to consumer culture, and to the need for corporations to understand shifts in consumer culture. Shifts in branding techniques are seen to be emerging as a response to shifts in consumer culture. Holt (2002) explicitly critiques what he sees as a common belief among postmodern consumer behavior researchers (such as Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Ozanne and Murray 1995; Murray and Ozanne 1991), i.e. that marketers impose images and meanings on consumers in a way that aims at dominating the consumers (72). Firat & Venkatesh (1995) exemplifies this through the ways in which experiences are sold instead of, or even as a complement to, reality: “tourists in droves visit the IMAX theatre next to the Grand Canyon to watch it on film to ‘really experience it’; visitors to Las Vegas become absorbed in the experience of the simulated volcano in front of the Mirage Hotel...” (252). Firat & Venkatesh (1995) suggest that this marketing of images is a form of use of technological advances creating fragmented meanings which impose themselves on consumers: “These meanings and reactions seep into our senses and impact our reason; they impress themselves upon us...” (252).

If looking at marketing activities and technological advances in this light, it would seem that marketing and branding are inherently unethical activities that turn consumers into passive spectators; as if marketers lived in a vacuum where they created meanings and images in order to change the thinking of consumers. Firat & Venkatesh (1995) suggest that engaging in consumption outside of the market place is the way to escape these meanings from “impressing” themselves on consumers. According to Holt (2002) claiming this passivity on the part of consumers in the market place is not realistic as it is the consumers themselves that provide the most interesting cultural material that the marketers then appropriate.

The critique of the research carried out within the postmodern branding paradigm, is pursued throughout the article; the empirical research study of consumers is used as evidence that consumers are not passive enough to be manipulated by marketing in that sense and, paradoxically, that consumers are not engaged in “consumer resistance” in the way that postmodern marketing theories have proposed earlier on. Rather than escaping the market, consumers engaged in “consumer resistance” tend to become expert consumers that define their own identities primarily within the market place, Holt argues (2002: 79, 88). This is possible because even if they have “decoded” marketers’ codes, or are engaged in a more “creative resistance” where they ascribe their own meanings to the commodities they buy, they are still consumers: they are still engaged in an act of consumption situated on the market (2002: 79, 88). Furthermore, Holt (2002) argues, as it is so hard for marketers
to find authentic cultural expressions, the consumers engaged in “consumer resistance” provide perfect material for them to appropriate in the quest for what is “authentic” (meaning untouched cultural expressions), but not yet used by brands. An example might be the use of graffiti to spread anti-brand-, and anti-consumption, messages. Every brand with self-respect targeted to adolescents (for example, brands as diverse as Sprite and Levi’s) have taken up on the graffiti style, both in terms of the writing/art and in terms of the hairstyles and clothes worn by “graffiti-artists”, using it in their advertising campaigns.

Holt (2002) argues that “Peeling Away the Brand Veneer” (86) means that the corporate practices should be shown to the public as they are. How can this happen? It can happen through changing the communication policy in order to become an open organization (Holt 2002), for example, through the use of codes of ethics as a marketing tool as well as a management tool.

A “cool” brand does not use sweatshops; especially not while pretending as if it does not. Consumers will see through brands that are inauthentic in this sense that the corporation behind the brand does not act in line with what the brand stands for. Consumers and “the antibranding movement” use the Internet to spread the word on real corporate practices that do not go with the corporations’ brand values. Consumer resistance is increasingly making corporations shift their practices to work with the brand values. Holt (2002: 87) argues that this first happened when the antibrandlers “hit critical mass” in the middle of the 1990s. Then, through the media coverage of consumer resistance, even corporations that had been reluctant to accept the demands on consistency between corporation and brand finally took in the message and started adapting their corporate policies to freely give consumers extensive information on their corporate practices.

Holt uses Nike as an example of a corporation that did not change its strategy until management could clearly see that the widely spread consumer resistance had put the brand “at risk”. Then Nike made efforts to become a more transparent company and opened up its subcontractors’ production to independent inspection. As Holt puts it: “To maintain consumers’ trust in their brand, Nike has found it necessary to move toward becoming a transparent company.” (87). That is, transparency in a company helps consumers evaluate the company’s practices better, while it also shows that the company behind the brand makes an effort to show that it does not, for example, exploit its workers.

There is a tension between corporations and stakeholders—both want to profit from authenticity, however, they often have different views on what authenticity is and should be. As Holt points out in the Nike example, projecting an image of the corporation itself as worthy of consumers’ trust, through more transparent corporate practices, has become part of what the public demands from corporations with well known brands. Corporations may not be able to escape the new reality they are facing, where a “brand veneer” becomes worthless if it is not combined with genuine efforts, on the part of corporations, to show stakeholders that the shiny values of the brand are a reflection of the excellent practices and values of the corporation behind the brand. This assumption underlying the argument needs to be clearly pointed out here, because Holt (2002) does not really problematize the trust relationship between consumers and brands. However, Holt does say that consumers will rely more, rather than less on brands in the future. I argue that this reliance creates vulnerability on the part of consumers, and that vulnerability should not be exploited through dubious corporate practices hidden behind a strong brand; rather it should be respected by corporations through building a trust relationship with consumers. In order for the corporations to respect the difference in power between the individual consumer and the corporation behind the brand, this trust relationship should involve a dialogue where the corporations listen carefully to consumers’ point of view (e.g. Gustafsson 2005).

Does the market have the power to simply turn consumer resistance into competitive advantage? Holt’s (2002) last sentence clearly points out that consumers are never a challenge to the market itself: “What has been termed ‘consumer resistance’ is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself.” (89). There is a power asymmetry implied in Holt’s (2002) description of “consumer resistance”, because whatever the consumer does s/he is doing it on the market and there is really no escape. The market is always taking advantage of what happens in consumer culture (Holt 2002). In case the market only uses consumer resistance as an arena in which to “rejuvenate itself”, “consumer resistance” is not resistance at all; which is probably Holt’s (2002) point. Who is in power on the inescapable marketplace? It does not seem to be the consumer; especially not in times of “Sovereignty Inflation” (Holt 2002: 87) when the consumer barely has the time to make consumption choices. If “consumer resistance” is staged within the market, this will have profound consequences for what forms the trust relationships between brands and consumers can take.

Of course, even if the consumers do not escape the market, the struggle that “consumer resistance” puts up can pose a threat to individual brands, although it is not a threat to the market. However, there is a risk that brand managers see consumers’ demand for trustworthiness as just another fad, and treat it as such. It is easily done; especially when even consumer researchers do not clearly maintain their standpoint on what brand authenticity means.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that because of the emphasis on the link between trust and authenticity in Holt (2002), it is surprising that Holt (2003) chooses to leave trust out of the discussion of authenticity in the later article mentioning trustworthiness merely as something which icon brands can draw from at times when they need to change their brand strategy. As Holt (2002) points out it is for the “future” branding paradigm to adjust brands to become “Citizen-Artists” that see to consumers’ demands that authenticity should be about trust, and a convergence between brand values and corporate practices. The contradiction of the “Brand Veneer” (i.e. the brand covers up for corporate practices which are not aligned with brand values) is there for everyone to see in consumer culture, but the shift in branding paradigm takes its time. However, aligning brand values with corporate values, making corporate actions transparent, and communicating that the brand is a good citizen, are necessary steps towards becoming trustworthy and towards engaging in trust relationships with consumers; it is the way towards authenticity. I have argued that this needs to be done through strategic work engaging not only marketing managers, but instead carried out in all parts of the organization behind the brand.

Further, I have argued that Holt (2002) does not really problematize the trust relationship between consumers and brands. How can consumers be sure that what they put their trust in is not a new kind of “brand veneer” that only aims at showing a trustworthy brand image outward? “Trust” and “transparency” may not be more than the new buzz-words that corporations use to create an “image” of trustworthiness which appeals to the consumer, and other stakeholders, of today’s consumer culture. This paper suggests that these questions are highly relevant because of the power asymmetry between consumers and the market of brands which would be a consequence of “consumer resistance” being staged on
the marketplace, as Holt suggests (2002: 89). The individual consumer does not have much power in the market place. Thus, in future research it would be of interest to explore further what forms of trust are possible between consumers and corporations/brands.

In case consumers are trapped without escape on the market, consumers would need to rely on brands to a larger extent than if they had been able to choose not to take part in the market. However, it is increasingly difficult for the individual company to go against large changes in consumer culture, as exemplified by the current demands from consumers that authenticity in the brand means transparent and ethical corporate practices that are in line with the brand values. I have argued that this assumption underlying the argument in Holt (2002) needs to be clearly pointed out. Further, as shown in the example in Holt (2002) of Nike’s slow reaction to consumers’ insistence that authenticity requires openness and does not entail production in sweatshops, changing the authenticity of the brand to become a concept that is intimately linked with trust is not straightforward. Nevertheless, changing to become more transparent is key for brands in order to acknowledge the change in what authenticity means to consumers, and to show consumers that they are trustworthy.

REFERENCES
Baier, Annette (1986), ”Trust and Antitrust,” Ethics, 96 (January), 231-260.