Advertising Authenticity: Resonating Replications of Real Life

Tandy D. Chalmers, University of Arizona, USA

This study explores how consumers perceive print advertisements designed to be authentic. Utilizing Stern’s (1994) conceptualization of authentic advertisements as creating an illusion of everyday life, I empirically show through a series of stimuli-based depth interviews that consumers rely upon perceptions of authenticity when evaluating advertisements. Specifically, they draw upon notions of indexical as well as iconic authenticity. These perceptions are filtered through a self-referent lens through which consumers relate the advertisement back to their own experiences, presenting a view of authenticity that is not objective but based on consumer production of a perceived authenticity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14030/eacr/vol8/E-08

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Advertising Authenticity: Resonating Replications of Real Life
Tandy D. Chalmers, University of Arizona, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Authenticity is important in several marketing domains including service delivery (Arnould and Price 1993), consumer rituals (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), consumer possessions (Grayson and Shulman 2000), advertising (Stern 1994), and servicescapes (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998). However, we still have little empirical support for its importance and only limited theoretical understanding of what is meant by authenticity and its relationship to consumer responses. The purpose of this research is to examine consumer perceptions of and reactions to authentic advertisements.

Understanding authenticity and its use in, and relation to, advertising and marketing rests upon understanding: (1) how authenticity is understood in general, (2) how marketing’s understanding of authenticity is situated within this larger authenticity discourse, (3) how authenticity is specifically manifested in relation to advertisements, and (4) how authenticity is assessed.

While a concise and broadly accepted definition of authenticity is not readily accessible, authenticity is conceptualized in fairly consistent ways: authenticity is usually based on being historically grounded and/or rooted in traditional modes of production (Beverland 2005; Peterson 2005), being separate from the commercial sphere (Fine 2004; Kozinets 2002), or being true to the self (Goffman 1959; Trilling 1972). Grayson and Martinez (2004) build upon this base of authenticity and conceptualize two types of authenticity: indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity refers to something that is believed to be the ‘the original’ or the ‘real thing.’ Iconic authenticity refers to something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic’ (Grayson and Martinez 2004, p. 298), thereby capturing the essence of something that is indexically authentic.

Consumer researchers have started to blur the boundaries between what is considered an authentic object or person and experiencing or consuming authenticity. Specifically, some consumer research shows that experiences of authenticity are co-created through the interaction of the authentic object and the person experiencing that object (Arnould and Price 1993; Rose and Wood 2005). Authenticity is also interestingly applied to advertising. 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” (p.388).

A final important issue relating to authenticity is how it is assessed. Much of the authenticity work in marketing and consumer research to date has focused on a production view of assessing authenticity: determining if the product or brand origins are authentic. Authenticity assessments for brands and advertising in particular tend to focus on the company that sponsored the advertisement (e.g. Kates 2004) or the spokesperson featured in the advertisement (e.g. Till and Shimp 1998). Consumer researchers have spent less time exploring advertisement authenticity from the perspective of the advertisement viewer. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine consumer perceptions of and reactions to authentic advertisements.

To understand perceptions of authentic advertisements, a series of stimuli-based depth interviews (Mick and Buhl 1992) were conducted with members of the distance running subculture. A subculture was chosen for this study because, for those involved in a subculture, the focal activity becomes an important part of their lifestyle, with commitment to the activity defined in terms of dominance over lifestyle (Donnelly 1981). I conducted interviews with 28 members of the distance running subculture during which I asked them to respond to 16 print advertisements representing a range of authenticities: common everyday experiences of running (similar to iconic authenticity), historical running images (indexical authenticity), and advertisements focusing on product attributes (not authentic). Important themes were uncovered using an iterative ‘back and forth’ reading process to uncover patterns both within and between informants.

Three primary themes emerged in this study. First, without any probing regarding authenticity, narratives surrounding the advertisements centered on discussions of authenticity. Specifically, informants frequently discussed their perceptions in terms of authenticity with comments relating to indexical authenticity, iconic authenticity, and a lack of authenticity. Second, self-referencing emerged repeatedly as an important factor in the evaluations of advertisements, serving as a link between assessing authenticity and liking the advertisement. Third, the importance of authentic advertisements being firmly rooted in everyday experience emerged as informants often differed in their authenticity perceptions of the same advertisement.

This study makes several important contributions to consumer research. First, it demonstrates the usefulness of the authentic advertisement concept in advertisement evaluations. Further, authenticity assessments seem to be primary filters for any brand or product information conveyed in the advertisement. That is, one might speculate that it is unlikely brand benefits would be evaluated if the advertisement did not first pass the authenticity test. Second, this study extends recent work on authenticity by showing that authenticity assessments, in the context of advertisements, are not objective judgments but are co-produced meanings: the combination of the advertisement’s content as well as the consumers’ experiences produces assessments of authenticity. Furthermore, it is the alignment of these two elements that impacts advertisement evaluation. Third, the importance of authenticity in advertisement assessments is demonstrated in the differences in authenticity perceptions, despite all informants sharing common experiences and lifestyles. These differences show authenticity assessments are strongly tied to the nuance of experience and provide support for the subjective view of authenticity: the construct of interest really becomes ‘perceived authenticity’ as objective views of what is or is not an authentic advertisement did not emerge in this study.

References


Muller, Joann (2002), “Jeep’s Identity Crisis: Can it Retain a Tough Image as it Expands to a Cushier Line?,” Business Week, August 12 (3795), 70.


Trilling, Lionel (1972), Sincerity and Authenticity, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
