Artisan Cheese: Pursuing Authentic Consumables in a Mass-Production World

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Writers have recently focused on consumers seeking authenticity in their choices. Specific to the consumables area, some have studied tea (Gould 1998) and high-end wine (Beverland 2006). To better understand the complex concept of authenticity, we surveyed knowledgeable consumers about the characteristics of artisan cheese using Beverland’s authenticity attributes as a framework. Statistical analysis of our highly involved consumers’ responses revealed two overarching dimensions: seeking an authentic product (e.g., inputs are hormone and cruelty free) and preferring an authentic production process (e.g., made by hand, with passion and expertise).

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scale and were not significantly different across all three conditions. Additionally, respondents did not question the typicality of the advertised digital camera. Overall, preliminary findings indicate that respondents perceived stimuli as intended, were familiar with digital cameras and exhibited higher than average level of involvement during evaluation process.

Major Findings

Results of a one-way ANOVA showed significant differences among groups in terms of retailer credibility (F=4.14, p=0.019), brand attitude (F=4.70, p=0.012), product quality (F=5.6, p=0.005) and deal evaluations (F=4.55, p=0.013). At the same time respondents’ purchase intentions were not different across the three conditions (p=0.301).

Our results provide additional support to findings by Urbany et al. (1988). When exposed to exaggerated reference price respondents did not believe that the amount of advertised price reduction was a truthful claim. However, their deal evaluations were significantly higher than those in a typical “$150/30%” price promotion condition.

In line with our hypotheses respondents’ quality perceptions in a “$150/80%” condition were significantly lower than those in two other conditions. However, neutral assessment of product quality in a “$600/80%” condition did not improve respondents’ perceptions of retailer credibility. Retailer credibility in this condition was not significantly different from that in a “$150/80%” condition and both were significantly lower than retailer credibility in a typical price promotion condition ($150/30%).

Additionally, brand evaluations in both atypical price promotion conditions were significantly lower than those in a typical price promotion condition.

Overall, our results support our suggestion that consumers will generate different attributions during price promotions offering excessive value. The type of attributions depends on a reference price level. Price promotions with plausible reference prices will be attributed to inferior product quality, while price promotions with implausibly high reference prices will be attributed to the desire of a retailer to enhance perceived value of the deal. Despite respondents’ high evaluations of the monetary value of a deal in atypical price promotion conditions, consumers’ attributions about retailer’s motives adversely affected consumers’ brand perceptions in both atypical price promotion conditions. Absence of significant differences in purchase intentions may be explained by the fact that almost 97% of respondents already owned digital cameras and were not going to purchase it in the next six months.

References


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Writers have recently focused on consumers seeking authenticity in their choices. Specific to the consumables area, some have studied tea (Gould 1998) and high-end wine (Beverland 2006). To better understand the complex concept of authenticity, we surveyed knowledgeable consumers about the characteristics of artisan cheese using Beverland’s authenticity attributes as a framework. Statistical analysis of our highly involved consumers’ responses revealed two overarching dimensions: seeking an authentic product (e.g., inputs are hormone and cruelty free) and preferring an authentic production process (e.g., made by hand, with passion and expertise).

**Conceptualization**

Recently, many writers (c.f., Chalmers and Price 2009) have focused on consumers seeking authenticity in their choices. Researchers have examined authenticity in a diversity of areas, such as promotion and branding (Gustafsson 2006; Kozinets, et al. 2008), tourism and
place consumption (Costa and Bamossey 2001), music (Arthur 2006; Peterson 2005), antiques (Ger and Csaba 2000; Parsons 2008), and the performing arts (Derbaix and Decrop 2007). Specific to the consumables area, some have studied tea (Gould 1998), beer (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008), and high-end wine (Beverland 2006).

Beverland proposed six dimensions of authenticity related to wines: heritage and pedigree; stylistic consistency; quality commitment; relationship to place; method of production; and, downplaying commercial motives. While his work is qualitative, its promise encouraged us to develop quantitative measures along similar dimensions. This type of exercise is potentially fraught with imprecision and the possibility of only further muddying an already opaque concept (Grayson 2002) particularly as our reading suggests that authenticity is negotiated between audience and creator (c.f., Peterson 1997). Furthermore, Leigh, et al. (2006), address the challenge even more strongly by noting, “few consumer researchers have explicitly defined authenticity” (p. 482).

Both wine and beer have been studied; yet, to our knowledge, the authenticity of artisan cheese has not been addressed. Accordingly, we first read widely and deeply about artisan cheese, understanding what others have said about its defining characteristics. We also interviewed cheese experts, cheese makers, cheese retailers and cheese consumers. We subsequently designed a survey, informed by Beverland’s authenticity attributes, for attendees at the Second Annual California’s Artisan Cheese Festival. This venue was selected because it provided entree to consumers interested in artisan cheese.

**Method**

Developing the survey instrument was challenging. Beverland’s conceptual work has established guidelines for thinking about the attributes of authenticity. Additionally, while there is some agreement among researchers about what comprises authenticity, no specific measures have been developed. As Chronis and Hampton (2006) explain, “Academic work … remains vague both in terms of its definition and in its marketing relevance” (p. 367). We therefore considered the characteristics of artisan cheese derived from our readings and our informants in comparison with Beverland’s six attributes. We then created statements about cheese to reflect each attribute. The initial effort resulted in 49 items. For the final survey, we reduced the list to twenty, each with a rating scale. Some items directly asked about characteristics of cheese and its making that would reflect the Beverland authenticity attributes. Others focused on the respondents’ relationships to food, experiences, and a self-evaluation on their level of expertise with cheese.

**Findings**

The findings from this study contribute to our understanding of authenticity by considering the consumer’s perspective. Data were initially analyzed by factor analysis, to determine if the responses could be explained by the six underlying authenticity attributes. After applying both orthogonal and oblique rotations, the result was that four factors best describe the data. Items from several of the six Beverland authenticity attributes loaded (at more than .3) on each factor. Nevertheless, the factor structure was quite interpretable. Responses seem to focus in two areas: seeking an authentic product (what it is made of, with milk from what animals, how the milk is or is not processed, how the animals are treated, who makes the cheese, and where) and seeking an authentic process (made with passion and skill, by hand, by a cheesemaker who raises his/her own animals).

Interestingly, attributes (from Beverland) of stylistic consistency, heritage and pedigree, and downplaying of commercialization were not important elements of the factor structure (low factor loadings). All three are explained to some extent by recognizing that artisan cheese is a relatively new development in the United States. The stylistic consistency results are reinforced by knowing that artisan cheese inherently varies from season to season and from animal to animal—an attribute more recognized by cheese experts than cheese novices in this study. There is no long history of craft cheese production nor established brand appellation (DOC or AOC designation) to provide heritage and pedigree. And while our participants may not like industrialization, the artisan cheese market is currently highly individualized and has yet to confront consolidation or cooption by conglomerates.

We also analyzed the data with multidimensional scaling (Prefscal) to develop a perceptual map of the authenticity attributes. These results yielded a plot with two dimensions that can be interpreted as “Authentic Product”—“Authentic Process” and as “Maker”—“Cheese.” Two clusters, suggested by the factor analysis comprised the Product?Process dimension, again indicating that our respondents focused on the product and process as carriers of authenticity. The contribution of the multidimensional scaling is the attribute clustering in the second dimension (which combines product and process attributes together). This dimension appears to discriminate between the maker–combining “product” attributes of who and where with “process” attributes of skill and passion, of dedication, and of using one’s own animals—and the cheese–combining “product” attributes of type of animal and milk, type of milk processing, with “process” attributes of production by hand. External factors, such as awards, pairing with other artisan products (such as bread), purchases at farmer’s markets, and the evaluation of the marketing, were of less importance.

**Conclusion**

As noted in the introduction, authenticity is a complex and problematic concept. The referenced articles base their conclusions primarily on qualitative, ethnographic, historical, and observational analyses. This study broached a more quantitative examination of authenticity from the consumer perspective. Artisan cheese is an especially complex good because the origins of its raw materials (type of milk, season of milking, local of livestock), production (inherited recipe, adapted recipe, new recipe), and regulation (food product safety, processing, labeling) all affect its final form. Our consumers’ responses are similarly complex. The responses to the self-evaluation questions show consumers are in some ways self-reflective, in that being able to discern authentic products accrues to their own status as authentic. Examining this confounding may be the key to a clearer definition of authenticity.