"Keeping It Real": Marketing Implications of Brand Authenticity

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This paper demonstrates that authenticity is a malleable facet of the brand and provides evidence that consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s authenticity affect other brand-related cognitions such as quality perceptions and willingness to pay. This paper also shows the potentially ironic consequences of fostering authenticity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although there is evidence in the literature that being authentic provides benefits to the firm, most, if not all, of these conclusions have been drawn from depth interviews or other qualitative work. What is missing is experimental evidence that perceptions of brand or product authenticity provide other benefits to the firm. Using an experimental approach, this paper demonstrates that authenticity is a malleable facet of the brand, and provides evidence that consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s authenticity affect other brand-related cognitions such as quality perceptions and willingness to pay. This paper also shows the potentially ironic consequences of fostering authenticity.

Although many definitions of authenticity have been offered in the literature, this paper will focus on two main sources of authenticity: inherent qualities of the object and consumers' subjective judgments about the brand. In general, offerings that are natural, handmade, simple and/or based in fact are generally considered by consumers to be more authentic (Groves 2001; Boyle 2003; Munoz, Wood and Solomon 2006; Beverland 2005; Potter 2008). Consumers also make subjective judgments about the authenticity of a product using contextual information such as information about the brand’s image and its marketing. Summarized in Gilmore and Pine’s (2007) Polonius Test, brands are considered to be authentic if they are “true to self” and/or “are what they say they are”. Being “true to self” means that a brand is perceived as existing because of the passion of its founder—not simply for monetary gain. On the other hand, “being what you say you are” means that to be authentic, a company or offering must live up to its own promises—there must be truth in advertising.

While much attention has been given to the importance of authenticity to the consumer, limited attention has been paid to the benefit (or detriment) being authentic has for the firm. The extant literature provides some evidence that judgments of authenticity have the potential to have a direct and indirect impact on consumers’ search for information, consideration set formation and, ultimately, choice (Chalmers 2007; Groves 2001). While existing work suggests that consumers’ perceptions of authenticity may affect inferences consumers make about the brand, it does not address the types of inferences that consumers make. We hypothesize that consumers will infer that more authentic brands are also higher in quality, and that they will be willing to pay more for these products. Additionally, to the extent that consumers believe that authentic products are more “real” than inauthentic products, we hypothesize that consumers will be more confident in the inferences they make about authentic products than inauthentic products.

In studies 1a and 1b, authenticity was manipulated by informing participants that authentic and inauthentic brands were owned by large corporations. Revealing this information should cause consumers to doubt the authenticity of the authentic brands, because the discrepancy between the images and motives of the authentic brands and their parent corporations should bring into doubt whether the authentic brands truly are who they say are, a key component in perceptions of authenticity. Measures of authenticity perceptions, product quality, willingness to pay and attitude confidence were taken both before (Time 1) and after (Time 2) the corporate ownership information was revealed. Study 1a and 1b revealed that perceptions of authenticity do affect other brand-related cognitions. At Time 2, after reading of the authentic brands’ corporate parents, participants’ reported lower perceptions of authenticity of quality, decreased willingness to pay, and less confidence in their attitudes. The drops in quality perceptions, willingness to pay, and attitude confidence were fully mediated by participants’ lower perceptions of brand authenticity. However these results were unique to the authentic focal brands. The inauthentic brands actually benefited from their connection to a large parent corporation. At Time 2, perceptions of authenticity, product quality, and willingness to pay increased among the inauthentic brands.

While studies 1a and 1b, and previous work on brand authenticity, seem to suggest that increased authenticity is uniformly positive for the brand, might there be situations where a brand’s authenticity could be detrimental? In study 2, we are interested in determining how authentic brands weather brand transgressions, and if perceptions of the brand following the transgression are affected by the type of transgression committed. Although all transgressions should be detrimental to any brand, we hypothesize that some transgressions will be especially harmful for authentic brands. Specifically, we hypothesize that a transgression directly related to the basis of an authentic brand’s authenticity will be more damaging for the authentic brand than an equivalent transgression would be for another brand.

In study 2, participants were given information about an authentic or inauthentic brand and were then informed that this brand had committed one of three types of transgressions (moral, generic, or dangerous ingredient). While each transgression should be damaging to any brand, we hypothesize that the ingredient transgression will be especially damaging to the authentic brand (Burt’s Bees) because the transgression undermines its authenticity (all-natural ingredients). As hypothesized, following the moral and generic transgressions, both the authentic and inauthentic brands’ quality perceptions were damaged to a similar degree. However, following the ingredient transgression, the authentic brand’s quality perceptions were damaged significantly more than the inauthentic brand’s. This drop in quality perceptions was fully mediated by the decrease in participants’ perceptions of the authentic brand’s authenticity.

Drawing on the importance of “being what you say you are” in consumers’ judgments of brand authenticity, we presented three studies that demonstrate positives and negatives of brand authenticity. Our findings show that consumers perceive more authentic brands to be higher in quality and suggest that they may also be willing to pay more for them. Additionally, consumers’ confidence in their opinions about brands is directly tied to the extent to which they perceive those brands to be authentic. However, despite these advantages, we also demonstrated that authenticity can harm the brand if the brand commits a transgression that undermines its authenticity. Additionally, these studies demonstrate ways in which consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s authenticity can be manipulated.

REFERENCES


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