Engineered Essence and Authenticity

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We propose a multi-process model of branded product authenticity. Branded products can gain authenticity from both contagious essence transfer and engineering of essence through instructed transformations. These processes are independent, function through distinct psychological mechanisms, and have consequences for product valuation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In a world where it is increasingly easy to deceive and be deceived, authenticity is becoming more important. Defined by Newman and Dhar (2014) as a judgment of “truth with respect to some valued property or dimension,” authenticity is an attribute that can strongly inform consumption decisions. For example, consumers can signal their own authentic selves by consuming products that are authentic to a shared underlying value (e.g. Kirmani 2009; Malär et al. 2011), and value cultural experiences on the basis of their authenticity (e.g. Chhabra 2005). Likewise, consumers are willing to pay more for authentic goods, and demonstrate increased brand loyalty toward firms behaving authentically (e.g. Newman and Dhar 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella 2013). Because of this, the ability to portray an authentic brand image and offer authentic products are sources of value to firms.

However, little is known about how consumers make authenticity inferences for every-day goods. Recent research by Newman and Dhar (2014) sheds light on this process by arguing that the authenticity of mass-produced goods is largely influenced by their ability to come into physical contact with a valued source of brand essence. The researchers argue that physical contact with an original factory location creates a contagious transfer of essence and makes the product more authentically representative of the brand. This finding led the authors to make the claim that authenticity itself is contagious. However, much of the qualitative research on authenticity demonstrates product authenticity in the absence of contagion. For example, in the wine and beer industries, authenticity is centrally linked to “traditional production methods” (Beverland 2005; 2006). In their research on craft souvenirs, Littrell, Anderson and Brown (1993) identify “artisans’ production techniques” as a key contributor to tourist perceptions of authenticity. Likewise, in their research on the authenticity of restaurant food, Cohen and Avieli (2004) discuss the importance of consumer understandings about the “process of preparation” as an influence on perceptions of authenticity. This suggests that method of production - beyond location of production - is central to authenticity judgment. Likewise, there are feasibility concerns with the notion that contagious contact with an original manufacturing location is essential for product authenticity; it implies that a firm without access to an original manufacturing location is by its very nature less authentic than its counterpart with that access.

To address these practical concerns and integrate qualitative research on authenticity, we present a multi-process model wherein mass-produced branded products and services can gain authenticity from beliefs about a contagious transfer of essence through physical contact with a valued location, and from beliefs about essence engineering following instructions from a valued founder. Across three studies, we demonstrate that these processes are independent, function through distinct psychological mechanisms, and have downstream consequences on consumer choice and product valuation.

In study one, we independently manipulate both contagious essence via original manufacturing location and engineered essence via manufacturing process for Levi’s jeans in a 2 (Location: New vs. Original) by 2 (Process: Original vs. New) design. We then measure beliefs about essence, authenticity, and product valuation. Replicating Newman and Dhar (2014), results revealed a marginally significant main effect of location on judgments of authenticity (p = .10). Relevant to our hypothesis, the main effect of process and the process x location interaction were significant. Planned contrasts revealed that jeans made at a new factory location were significantly more authentic when they were made via an original process. In fact, they were equally as authentic as jeans made in the original factory location, providing preliminary evidence that an original process is sufficient to guarantee a level of authenticity equivalent to that of original location.

In study two, we conceptually replicate the results of study one in a context where we can completely manipulate contagion opportunity. All participants read about a brand new restaurant being opened in New York City. We manipulate contagion by altering whether an executive chef will be present or absent at the new restaurant, and manipulate process through whether that restaurant will operate using the chef’s process or a process designed by the owning firm. We find a main effect of contagion, such that the chef’s presence meaningfully contributes to authenticity. More importantly, we find a significant main effect of process and a process x location interaction such that using the executive chef’s process lead to a more authentic experience than using the firm’s process overall, but this effect was even greater when the chef himself could not be present.

In study three, we examine an individual difference that moderates the engineered essence through process path but not the transferred essence through contagion path. In particular, if process is guaranteeing that a product’s essence is formed in the way a founder intended it to be formed, then people believing the world is fixed ought to see the influence of production process as more persistent. We demonstrate that people with such fixedness beliefs are most sensitive to information about production process and that this belief moderates the relationship between information about process and engineered essence, leading to judgments about authenticity. However, fixedness did not moderate the relationship between contagious location and authenticity, consistent with distinction between the two psychological mechanisms.

In conclusion, we present evidence for a multi-process model of authenticity via both the transfer of essence through physical contact and the engineering of essence through process. This model sheds light on the psychological process through which consumers make judgments about authenticity and has actionable consequences for marketing practitioners. Indeed, we demonstrate two psychologically distinct routes to authenticity judgments and show that products need not have to come into physical contact with a valued point of origin to become authentic in the minds of consumers.

REFERENCES


