Exploring Dimensions of Brand Authenticity

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1011004/volumes/ap11/AP-10

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Exploring Dimensions of Brand Authenticity

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**ABSTRACT**
This research adapts the Authenticity Inventory from the psychology literature to develop a framework to measure brand authenticity. The results show brand authenticity as consisting of four distinct dimensions: Relationships (interactions with consumers), Negativity (acknowledging negative brand aspects), Accomplishment (achievement of goals) and Identity (understanding core brand characteristics).

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**
Brand authenticity raises modest discussion in the marketing literature, despite being coined one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing (Holt 1997; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001). Although consumer researchers frequently use the term, only few define it and no generally acceptable definition is available. This lack of definition allows for the term authenticity to be used in different ways and with varying meanings (Grayson and Martinec 2004).

Within the marketing literature, Grayson and Martinec (2004) categorise authenticity as indexical or iconic authenticity. A brand has indexical authenticity if it is thought to be original, not a copy or an imitation (Bruner 1994, 400; Huntington 1988, 157). Alternatively, iconic authenticity refers to an object that is an “authentic reproduction” or an “authentic recreation” of the original (Bruner 1994, 399; Peterson 1997, 208). Authenticity research to date focuses on the indexical authenticity approach which emphasises a production perspective, assessing whether or not a product or brand’s origins are authentic and whether their origins are rooted in tradition and heritage (Beverland 2005; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008). Alternatively, Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003, 21) argue that authenticity is “composed of the brand elements that consumers perceive as unique”. In other words, authenticity is the brand’s essence, which is the heart of the brand’s identity (Aaker 1996; Beverland 2005; Kapferer 2001; Keller 1998).

Authenticity is argued to be an element of a brand’s identity or DNA. Authenticity comprises the unique characteristics of a brand’s values, people, product, services, and place that are shown through an organisation’s vision and actions (Morin 2010). Furthermore, Gilmore and Pine (2007) suggest authenticity communicates what a brand stands for through conveying its core value and tradition. This identity that is created and conveyed by brands is assessed by consumers who either validate or reject the communicated brand promises (Molleda 2009). In other words, brand authenticity is an assessment of a brand made by consumers based on their perceptions.

There is general agreement that authenticity is not an attribute inherent in an object. Rather authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation or an assessment made by an evaluator of the essence of what is observed (Beverland 2006; Beverland et al. 2008; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peterson 2005; Rose and Wood 2005; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Beverland et al. (2008) suggest that understanding authenticity from a strategic communication approach requires an assessment of the organisational crafting of authenticity claims and the consumers’ or publics’ perceptions of these claims. This perspective is closely tied to Gilmore and Pine’s (2007) conceptualisation of authenticity which is based on two principles: 1) Being true to your own self and 2) Being who you say you are to others. In other words, being authentic and conveying your authenticity comes about through marketing communications and interactions with the public. Research on celebrity authenticity also follows a similar perspective. Tolson (2001) attributes celebrity authenticity to “being yourself” in terms of creating an image of individuality uniqueness and differentiation. Fairchild (2004) argues that the creation of a persona and the consistency of this persona are what make a celebrity authentic. Although much of the research on brand authenticity focuses on the crafting of authenticity and understanding the attributes that make a brand authentic (Beverland 2005), our interest here is in examining whether or not consumers perceive a brand to be authentic, whether consumers perceive a brand to be true to itself.

It is in the philosophy and psychology literatures that discussions of authenticity are most extensive and where most perspectives on authenticity highlight the extent to which an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours reflect their true self. The philosophical interpretation argues that authenticity
is being true to the essence of the self (Van Leeuwen 2001). Remaining true to the presentation of self one claims (Goffman 1959) signifies being genuine, original, having a unique and distinctive style, and not being an imitation or copy (Van Leeuwen 2001). This conceptualisation is analogous with Grayson and Martinec’s (2004) indexical authenticity. Authenticity has been defined in the psychology literature as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true - or core-self in one’s daily enterprise” (Goldman and Kernis 2002; Kernis 2003; Kernis and Goldman 2004; Kernis and Goldman 2005, Kernis and Goldman 2006). According to Kernis and Goldman (2006), authenticity contains four separate, yet interrelated, components: awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour and relational orientation. Awareness refers to having knowledge of your motives, feelings and desires. This component of authenticity involves being motivated to learn about your strengths, weaknesses, goals and aspirations. Unbiased processing refers to objectively discerning both positive and negative self-aspects. This component involves not denying, distorting, or exaggerating self-relevant information. The behavioural component of authenticity entails behaving in accordance with one’s values, preferences, and needs and not acting in a false way to obtain rewards or evade punishment. Finally, relational orientation involves valuing and striving for openness, sincerity, and truthfulness in close relationships with others.

Despite growing interest on brand authenticity in marketing, no research to date has been conducted to develop a reliable and valid scale to measure brand authenticity. In fact, no general quantitative measure of brand authenticity has been developed, with research in the area mostly exploratory in its approach, focusing on what makes a specific brand or experience authentic to consumers (e.g. Beverland 2005; Chronis and Hampton 2008). The purpose of this research is to address the limitations within the current research on authenticity by drawing on and adapting Kernis and Goldman’s Authenticity Inventory (2004) from the psychology literature to determine whether its four dimensions can be used as a framework for brand authenticity.

A research company recruited respondents from regional areas within Australia to evaluate the authenticity of a corporate financial brand, the Greater Building Society. In total 343 respondents were approached and 147 provided complete and valid responses. From Goldman and Kernis’ (2004) 41 item Authenticity Inventory, 41 items were adapted to the brand context. Awareness consisted of 11 items, unbiased processing 9 items, behaviour 10 items and relational orientation had 11 items. Respondents were provided with statements about the brand (e.g. the Greater Building Society places a good deal of importance on customers understanding who they truly are) and asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree on a 5 point likert scale.

Initial Cronbach α reliability analyses show unacceptable results for three of the four authenticity dimensions: awareness $α=.514$, unbiased processing $α=.302$, behaviour $α=.530$. Cronbach α reliability for relational orientation shows acceptable results ($α=.853$). Once items are eliminated, internal consistency becomes acceptable (Nunnally 1978). Awareness consists of 9 items ($α=.789$), unbiased processing with 7 items ($α=.735$) and behavioral with 5 items ($α=.725$). Next, an exploratory factor analysis using principal components with varimax rotation reveals four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 accounting for 60.58 percent of the variance explained. Factor 1 explaining 37.5% of the variance consists of mainly five of the items that measure relational orientation, two behavioural items and one each of awareness and unbiased processing. This clearly is a relationship factor that identifies the interactions the brand has with its customers, its behaviour towards its customers and customers’ perceptions of them. Although three of the unbiased processing items load highly on Factor 2, all items on this factor relate to negative aspects of the brand such as their ability to “pretend” to be something they are not and ignore issues rather than work them out. This factor with 11.9% of the explained variance apparently is detecting negative brand aspects. Factors 3 and 4 explain much less adding 6% and 5% respectively and are less distinct. Factor 3 perhaps concerns the vision or goals the brand would like to achieve. Factor 4 seems to be an identity dimension relating to the brand understanding and prioritising its core identity features and customers’ ability to identify those features.

Although inconsistencies are found, adapting the Kernis and Goldman’s (2004) Authenticity Inventory from psychology to the marketing context does have potential. Results within the current study indicate that authenticity may have four dimensions. Key factors in consumer perceptions of brand authenticity include: 1) consumer-brand relationships, 2) negative brand aspects, 3) brand goal achievement
and 4) understanding brand identity. The significance of consumer-brand relationships is highly relevant given its recent interest in the marketing literature (Fournier 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). As this study is the first to examine the dimensionality of authenticity within a branding context, further research is needed to investigate the importance of each of the components in predicting consumer behaviour. Future research should explore the effect that perceptions of authenticity have on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Additional research also should be conducted using a number of different brands.

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