Fabricating “Green” Meaning: an Empirical Examination of the Role of Indexical and Iconic Cues to Authenticity

Douglas Ewing, University of Cincinnati, USA
Chris Allen, University of Cincinnati, USA
Randall Ewing, Ohio Northern University, USA

This research brings authenticity into the laboratory to assess it in a manner different from most extant approaches. Results suggest that effects of indexical and iconic indicators of authenticity can be induced in a controlled manner with a product meaning derived varying on the basis of particular cues.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Extant consumer concerning authenticity has imbued the literature with numerous definitions and conceptualizations of authenticity but little in the way of theory about its antecedent/consequent processes (cf. Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006). The present research attempts to bring authenticity into the lab and pursue the phenomenon in a unique way. We draw on research in semiotics (e.g. Grayson and Martinec 2004; Hoshino 1987; Mick 1986, 1998) and test explicit hypotheses about how indexical and iconic cues influence judgments about brands in a context of “green” consumption.

Indexical cues are attributes of an object that provide a spatio-temporal and/or verifiable link to a reference point (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Their presence provides overarching validation that a consumption object has the appropriate characteristics and abilities to bear a “green” meaning. Assuming that individuals recognize the connection suggested by a “green” indexical cue, they will be more likely to judge an object as having an authentic “green” meaning leading to increased beliefs that it is “green,” thus yielding more favorable attitudes (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Lutz 1977).

Iconic cues are qualities that suggest “schematic fit” with expectations for an authentic object but lack an externally-verifiable reference point or “correspondence of fact” (Mick 1986). These cues emphasize general congruence with a consumer’s idiosyncratic, internal frame of reference (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh et al. 2006). Provided an individual has some expectations, he/she should judge an object as more authentic to the extent that there is matching between expected and observed iconic cues. As with indexical cues, this should have positive effects on both “green” beliefs and brand attitudes. However, given the straightforward meaning validation provided by a singular indexical cue, it seems plausible that these stronger cues will have a greater effect on beliefs and attitudes.

The efficacy of both indexical and iconic cues is likely to vary according to relevant characteristics of their associated product. One very basic product quality is whether it is an infrequently purchased durable or a more frequently purchased non-durable. Durable goods tend to have more features and larger purchases in terms of cost, both of which may incline consumers to desire more information and engage in a more extended search (e.g. Brucks 1985). Thus, it is conceivable the information provided indexical and iconic cues will be less effective for a durable versus a non-durable.

Beyond predicted effects of indexical and iconic cues and a differential effect between durable and non-durable goods, a general assertion of this conceptualization is that semiotic cues enable a consumer to validate a “green” product meaning. This “green” meaning should lead to specific beliefs about a product as well as more positive attitudes. Hence, the effect of the indexical and iconic cues on brand attitude likely operates through brand beliefs (Ajzen 2008).

These general predictions were tested in a 2 (Indexical Cue: Green/Non-Green) x 2 (Iconic Cue: Green/Non-Green) x 2 (Product Type: Consumable/Durable) within-subjects design (n=140). Participants evaluated 8 durable or non-durable brands based on visuals and text information embodying indexical and iconic cues. The indexical cue manipulation took the form of recognizable labels or co-brands intended to verify the target quality of “green.” The iconic cue manipulation comprised elementary information about such features as product composition or usable life to signal the target quality of “green.” The product type manipulation took the form of consumables versus durables. Each participant evaluated 4 consumable brands (2 laundry detergents and 2 batteries) and 4 durable brands (2 desktop computers and 2 car tires).

Participants reported their brand attitudes and beliefs via a 7-point semantic differential scale. Attitude items were favorable/unfavorable, pleasant/unpleasant, and good/bad. The belief items of primary interest were green/not green, thrifty/wasteful, and natural/artificial. Additional items belief items were collected to make memory-based comparison more difficult. The dependent variables retained for subsequent analyses were attitude and green-belief for each brand represented by a mean-centered sum of respective items. The data were analyzed with linear mixed models using maximum likelihood estimation to account for potential non-independence across ratings.

Results indicate that indexical cues and iconic cues had significant effects on green beliefs. Participants had more favorable green beliefs and attitudes when indexical and iconic cues signaled a “green” quality. Indexical cues were stronger than iconic cues in affecting green beliefs but not brand attitude. In addition to the cue types alone, results suggested that changes in green beliefs and attitudes towards durables were less sensitive to indexical cues and iconic cues than were consumables. A mediation analysis indicated that green beliefs fully mediated the effect of indexical cues and partially mediated the effect of iconic cues on brand attitude.

Overall, indexical cues had a more robust effect on green beliefs and attitudes and that these effects of both cue types are stronger upon consumables versus durables. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these semiotic cues varies according to a basic durable/non-durable distinction among products and green beliefs fully or partially mediate the effects of indexical and iconic cues manipulations on brand attitudes. Hence, it can be said that indexical cues and to a lesser extent iconic cues activate spontaneous inferences that manifest as new beliefs and corresponding brand attitudes. In addition, the pattern of results generally in line with predictions provides evidence that iconic versus indexical cues can be systematically manipulated to affect authenticity judgments. Taken together, the results provide evidence supporting a meaning validation process as the basis of authenticity judgments.

This research conceptualizes authenticity judgments in familiar terms for consumer researchers; that is, as a process involving spontaneous inferences about specific brand beliefs that then effect brand attitudes. Viewed this way, it is possible to bring authenticity phenomena into the laboratory and construct a nomological network to guide theory building. This research represents a first step on that path. Supplementing extant, interpretive research on authenticity with disciplined theory building represents a meaningful opportunity to inform the debate in a substantive domain where there is broad researcher and practitioner interest.
REFERENCES


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