

Brand Authenticity: Scale Development and Validation

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Abstract

This paper presents initial findings from the study that aims to develop, refine, and validate the brand authenticity scale. The first stage of scale development involves conceptual elaboration on the construct and its dimensions. The concept brand authenticity is defined as consumer judgement about the extent to which a brand is considered to be authentic (or inauthentic). The conceptualised seven dimensions of brand authenticity are real vs. contrived, true self vs. overreacting, commercialisation, unique vs. mass product, history, community link, and empowerment. The second stage involves two studies: item generation, and content validity assessment. The initial findings from these studies are presented and discussed.

Keywords: authenticity, brand authenticity, scale development, scale validation

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Introduction

In consumer research, authenticity has been described as one of the fundamental concepts in modern marketing (Beverland, 2005; Brown, Sherry Jr., and Kozinets, 2003). Research shows that consumers attribute authenticity to marketed products and services, although such attribution can be largely contingent upon consumption context, consumer personality, and life goals (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009). Research shows that diverse products such as luxury products (Beverland, 2005), mundane objects and mass-products (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009), reality television (Rose and Wood, 2005), and tourist sites (Cohen, 1988; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; MacCannell, 1973) can be judged to be more or less authentic or inauthentic. One can certainly refer to a concept, brand authenticity, to represent the degree to which brands are perceived to portray authenticity. Extant research investigated authenticity attributes (Beverland, 2005), authenticity forms (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, 2008), the influence of personal goals on authenticating (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009), hyperauthenticity in television viewing (Rose and Wood, 2005), authenticity cues (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), authenticity negotiation and commoditisation (Cohen, 1988), and others. Most of these studies are qualitative in nature. What is missing is the quantification of the concept authenticity, in particular, brand authenticity. The quantification task would involve operationalising brand authenticity as a second order multidimensional construct. Prior research indicated that market offerings can have graded authenticity levels; in other words, products and services are perceived to have higher/lower degrees of authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Moreover, authenticity is not a single-dimensional concept; rather it is multidimensional and complex (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009; Cohen, 1988). Brumbaugh (1968) stated that “authenticity as a construct is, at very least, likely to be multidimensional” (p.2). Hence, we propose to conceptualise brand authenticity as a graded multidimensional construct. Developing a relevant and comprehensive measure of authenticity would open a new range of possibilities for authenticity research employing hypothetico-deductive methods.

The main objective of the study is to develop a comprehensive, formally validated quantitative measure of brand authenticity and explore its differential effect on marketing performance. To accomplish this, we first define brand authenticity and explore its main dimensions. Second, we develop and refine the scale. Then, we use standard scale validation procedures to investigate its properties. Finally, we examine the scale’s nomological validity through exploring the concept’s antecedents and consequences. This paper reports the initial results from the first stage and the following two steps of the second stage: item generation, and content validity assessment.

Stage1: Conceptualising Brand Authenticity

Conceptual definition

Some researchers argue that authenticity is not an attribute of an object; rather it represents an assessment made by a particular evaluator in a particular situation (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). However, a number of research literatures conceptualises authenticity as a characteristic inherent

in objects. For instance, it is argued that modern trends, especially, contemporary lifestyles, largely defined through consumption imperatives, are the anti-thesis of authenticity. Products and services offered for mass consumption are devoid of authenticity, therefore authenticity can be taken as a counterconcept to most features attributed to modernity (MacCannell, 1999). Holt (2002) shows that consumers reflexively and creatively resist the consumption code, commodified meanings, and narrow identities created by marketers. Especially, some marketers are perceived to be extremely assertive while their brands too commercial. Reflexivity leads consumers to develop personal strategies to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic brands. Through reflexive resistance, consumers become conscious of marketer manipulation (i.e. crack the marketer created code) and make judgments about the “true, genuine, real” functional utility of a brand offered by this particular marketer. In contrast, other researchers argued that authenticity is an experience: it is felt when consumers transcend their role and become active builders of their experiences (Olsen, 2002). Hence, the discussion indicates that the authenticity concept does indeed refer to a complex social phenomenon, therefore there can be multiple approaches and ways through which one could define authenticity (Beverland, 2005).

In this study, the working definition of brand authenticity is that the concept refers to consumer judgement about the extent to which a brand is considered to be authentic (or inauthentic). However, this doesn't say how one should understand the word “authentic”. In this investigation, we tackle this problem via describing different dimensions of authenticity. The dimensions we discuss are: real vs. contrived, true self vs. overreacting, commercialisation, unique vs. mass product, history, community link, and empowerment.

Dimensions

Real vs. contrived. This dimension consists in consumer perceptions of a brand being real versus contrived (phony). The words used to describe this characteristic in the literature are *genuine, the real thing, “ought to be”, sincere, true* (Beverland, 2005, Grayson and Martinec, 2004). The consumer perceives the brand not to be an imitation or a copy of another brand (alternatively, he/she feels that it is an imitation). The emphasis here is on the difference of the real thing to its copies or imitations. Such a judgment can be made on the basis of cues (attributes) that have a genuine spatio-temporal link to perceived social facts. Such cues are called to be indexical cues. The indexical link can be physical (e.g. Harley-Davidson's distinctive motorcycle sound) or psychic (e.g. a guide and his behaviour) (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Another aspect of genuineness is that observed expressions (communications) of the brand reflect what this brand really is (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In other words, whether what is said about the brand truly represents (or does not represent) the brand's real features.

True self vs. overreacting. Assuming that most companies are more or less involved in authenticating their brands, we assume a situation where consumers might form judgments of the authenticity of authenticating action. A company might promote a contrived self image with regards to being authentic while it really is not. The consumer can detect such falsities in authenticity claims and action. In this case, company strategies will be perceived as irrelevant and consumers will form judgments of a company's overreaction. The scale items must portray brands either being true to themselves or overdoing marketing. In other words, the brand is perceived to promote true self-image or considerably misguided self-image.

Commercialization. The consumer may perceive a brand being too commercialised or less commercialised (Holt, 2002). Consumers form perceptions of whether the brand places commercial considerations above anything else or whether it is distant from commercial motives. The consumer would typically perceive that the more commercialised the brand, the less authentic it is.

Unique vs. mass product. The brand can be perceived to be very unique (only one of its kind) versus a standard product. It may be perceived to be unique because of unmatched consistent style, state-of-art production process, superior materials, or genuine representation of its country of origin. It may be perceived to be standard mass-produced product if either its design is unstable, or produced through mass technology, or inferior materials have been used to make it.

Rich vs. no history. This dimension consists in perceptions of the brand's genuine links to the long-term history of craftsmanship (Beverland, 2005). Real links to history, pedigree of quality craftsmanship would make the brand more valuable in the eyes of consumers. Moreover, the older versions of the brand will still be valuable because of such links and consistency in quality. Sometimes, the value of authentic brand increases rather decreases with time.

Community link. The consumers form perceptions of the brand being (not being) the real member of local and user communities (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009). The perception is that the more authentic brand supports local communities and also supports real people who are the members of user communities. The authentic brand connects the consumer with identical consumers.

Empowerment. The brand is perceived along the continuum of empowering/not empowering the consumer. Especially, judgment is made in terms of whether a brand allows a consumer to attain his/her life goals (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009). Empowerment perceptions are reinforced when brand is not seen as treating consumers as passive agents. The authentic brand does not dictate culture; rather it involves consumers as equal partners in the design and development of the product. It extends an invitation to participate in value creation; it is not too overpowering.

Stage 2: Scale Development

Item Development

We generate an initial pool of 93 items that reflect the discussed seven dimensions of the construct. These items are generated through reviewing existing literature, and also conducting an exploratory study and analysing its results. This exploratory study involved a short survey from a small sample of respondents (N=25) who were staff and senior-level students of a tertiary education institution. The objective was to understand how these individuals define authentic and inauthentic brands. In the survey, we asked the participants to list a single brand that in their opinion is the most or strongly authentic. Next, we asked them to describe in an open ended way the chosen brand and provide reasons why they think that the brand is authentic. Moreover, we asked them to describe the "sensations, feelings, thoughts, and behaviours" they might engage while purchasing and using the brand. Additionally, we asked the participants to list another brand in the same category that in their opinion is the least or weakly authentic. Similarly, we asked them to describe in an open ended way the brand and provide reasons why they think that the brand is inauthentic. The sample of answers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Etic Descriptions of Brand In(authenticity)

	Brands	(In)Authenticity defined: etic descriptions
Strongly authentic	Toyota, The All Blacks, Pak'nSave, Virgin, BP, Vogels, Adidas, Weet-Bix, Positively Wellington, Cadbury, Paul Reed Smith Guitars, Coca-cola, Lions Foundation, IBM, Google, Whittakers, Meadow Fresh, R.M. Williams, Sony	the consistency the product/service delivers; "it does what it says on the tin"; it has a sense of real people living responsible lives; people behind the brand are willing to be "visible" and responsible; well established recognized brand; others are aware you paid a lot for it; strong association with lifestyle and health; you can relate to it with your own experience; has been around forever; it has a history relates to cultural identity; it has significant influence on my life; handmade; sources highest quality materials;
Weakly authentic	Dodgy loan-instant finance companies advertised on TV, GE money, Ribena, British sports shoes, Vit-a-bits, Wine Country Hawke's Bay, Nestle, IPL cricket, Gibson guitars, private labels, Church Road winery, Hells pizza, Motorola, Cadbury, Supre, Samsung	Lack of consistency in communication; concealed costs usually in small print; false claims; lead by big business profit interests; others aware you bought them so cheap; copy cat versions; not family orientated; the money offered to players has taken away some of the more traditional aspects of the sport; lower quality materials, defects; a "fly by night" brand

Content Validity Assessment

This stage will involve three different studies. In the first study, five judges are recruited and trained. They are given the definition of the dimension, related explanation, and a sample item. They are asked to allocate the items to one of the proposed dimensions or the "not applicable" category. In the second study, five other judges are asked to evaluate the degree to which the items represent the proposed dimension. In the third study, a sample of respondents (N=40) is asked to describe the extent to which the items represent their authenticity perceptions for the brands given in the survey. Currently we have completed the first study. The sample of two items for each dimension and relevant judge evaluations are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Brand Authenticity Dimensions and Sample Items

		J1	J2	J3	J4	J5
A Real vs Contrived						
1	I sense real (genuine) people who have strong sense of accountability behind this brand.	F	B	A	A	A
2	I trust this brand to be the original (real) thing.	A	A	A	A	A
B Overreaction						
3	By emphasising its historical pedigree, this brand considerably misconceptualises value the customers want from this brand (r).	B	B	B	B	B
4	This brand's authenticity is simply a facade or false front (r).	A	B	B	B	B
C Commercialization						
5	Acquiring commercial gains at any costs (to consumers and	C	C	C	C	C

	public at large) is the sole priority for this brand (r).					
6	It is too obvious that this brand wants to mask its profit-driven commercial nature (r).	C	C	C	C	C
D Unique						
7	This brand has got its own unique style that is easily recognizable.	D	D	D	D	D
8	This brand is industrially produced in large quantities for mass audience (r).	D	D	D	D	NA
E Long History						
9	A classic (aged) version of the brand is as valuable as the modern one.	E	E	E	B	E
10	This brand draws its consistency in quality from its outstanding historical heritage.	E	E	E	E	E
F Community						
11	The consumption of this brand makes me part of community of genuine people.	F	F	F	F	F
12	This brand connects me to a broader community of brand users.	F	F	F	F	F
G Empowerment						
13	This brand is authentic because it allows me to regain control over my life and consumption experiences.	G	G	G	G	F
14	This brand is genuine because it empowers me to perform tasks that otherwise I would not be able to manage.	G	G	G	G	G

J = "judge"; A...G = "dimension codes"

Further Item Reduction

Further studies will involve two major surveys. The first survey will involve students evaluating a reduced authenticity scale in the context of purposefully selected brands via the Likert scale. The second survey will involve out-of-the-campus respondents (in the real-life situation) to answer the same questions. Next, discriminant validity assessment will explore the extent to which the brand authenticity scale is different to other available scales in marketing. Possible constructs for comparison are brand personality, brand experience, and brand attachment.

Conclusion

The initial findings show that the brand authenticity is a multidimensional construct. The exploratory study shows that consumer interpretations of brand authenticity are diverse. They more or less reflect the dimensions that have been proposed. The complexity of the construct is further corroborated by the fact that inter-judge consensus on items is not perfect.

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