

QUESTING FOR BRAND AUTHENTICITY OF LUXURY PRODUCTS: CONSUMERS' GOAL-CONTINGENT PROCESS AS SELF-IMAGE CONFORMATION ONLINE

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the question of brand authenticity of luxury products when consumers shopping online. Illustrations from most of the luxury brands show that marketers control the ways and timing of the marketing information dissemination process. Attributes of a luxury product, for example, material, craftsmanship, innovation, and design, are experienced by consumers under the strict control of marketers through the offline sales and marketing channels (Uche Okonkwo, 2007). However consumers are questing for authentic product through the use of Internet and mobile technology nowadays. The self authentication process which is a goal-contingent process is important to marketers to understand the consumers' questing behavior, but how the goals are generated is still unknown to us despite a lot of social-research are carried out. This paper presents an exploratory study, on a pilot case study basis, from psychological perspective, the role and function of the self-image conformation concept of consumers in their questing process of the authenticity of luxury brands that with the goals and associate benefit pursuance in their mind.

Keywords: self-authentication, self-image, luxury product, goal-contingent.

JEL Code: D24

INTRODUCTION

Consumers purchase luxury products for reasons. However luxury products are not necessities to our daily living. The reasons of the spending are always myth to marketers. Marketers try to offer good quality products with real life story and brand history to their target customers in order to claim a legitimate status in the mind of customers and claim a premium price. The offering from brands constructs the basic ‘authentic’ qualities of a luxury brand, i.e. uniqueness, true, real and rare to their customers. Marketers, thereafter, manage these qualities by controlling the supply of them carefully to their market. This practice is well adopted mostly under an offline environment. As practitioners can control the brick-and-mortar store in terms of displays of goods, and service provision from sales associates. Best practice can be codified. Sales peoples can be trained accordingly in order to offering the desired kind of experience to consumers that is in line with the brand’s authenticity. As marketers know their customers in their stores personally, adjustment on the tailoring of product and service is possible through the dynamic of face-to-face interaction, for example, events and activities, the control strategy is always effective in implementation.

However, the adjustments mentioned are lacking support in terms of the justification of it in the online shopping environment. Consumers can only sense the ‘authenticity’ with their eyes through the images on the web-pages with no physical contact either to the sales peoples or the products. These results some negative impacts to the brand’s image as the virtue as a goal that the morality brings to the satisfaction of consumers in the process of buying is not as strong as the level of the offline environment and, as its digital presence, the consumers feel difficult to differentiate among brands presenting online. Positive impact is found from the enhanced degree of participation due to the openness nature of Internet that empowering the consumers on the practicality of controlling their time and energy on web-surfing under their free will.

We observed that the brand authenticity is agreed by the marketers and consumers over the Internet in the entire purchase process, i.e. pre-purchase, during the purchase, and post purchase. Thus, brand authenticity is a core part of a brand’s identity (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2001; Keller, 1993), it is actually fairer to perceive as the process of the offering and questing process of the marketers and consumers that aims to satisfy the target customers with the basic attributes of the luxury products the brand having.

In view of these premises, this article is presenting the nature of authenticity and the concept of it as a process, from a multi-component psychological perspective. The relationship of

the conformation of the self-image of a human being in the authenticity process that having goals and associate benefit in mind is presented conceptually under the context of online luxury purchase environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity is a core component of successful brands because it forms part of a unique brand identity (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2001; Keller, 1993). Also, Consumers are seeking out authentic brands and experience constantly (Fine, 2003; Holt, 1997; Penaloa, 2006; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). We can recall our memory as metaphor from William Shakespeare's Hamlet, that Polonius counsels his son Laertes: *this above all, - to thine own self be true; and it must follow, as the night and day, thou canst not then be false to any man.*" It is Shakespeare's genius that although Polonius comes off as spouting workout platitudes, his advice nonetheless proves to be profound.

In epistemology stance what is true and false, to any man, is an ethical issue. From Kant's Principles on human dignity and consistency to Sarte's concept on authenticity functioning; I might termed the former from Kant as 'Public Ethic' and the later from Sarte as 'Personal Ethic', i.e. hedonic base. Saliently, this is a very rough divide needed a lot of polishing.

Actually, the word 'Authenticity' reaches the limit of language. As per the assistant professor of marketing Renee Richard's, of MIT's Sloan School of Management: "Authenticity is not necessarily a property of the product itself, but rather a property of the consumers' connection to the product". Authenticity is not just a logo. Researchers explain it as staged and original (MacCannell, 1973), iconic indexical, and hypothetical (Grayson and Martinez, 2004), fabricated (Belk and Costa, 1998), self-referential and hyper-authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005), existential (Wang, 1999), symbolic (Guller, 1981), legitimate (Kate, 2004), literal or objective (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, 2008), sincere (Beverland, 2006), emergent (Cohen, 1988), and approximate and moral (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton, 2006).

Differences also emerge as to the nature of the objects or cues that convey authenticity. For example, authenticity has been identified in the patently fake (Brown, 2001), obvious reproductions (Bruner, 1994), and mundane mass-market objects (Miller, 2008), while others consider such examples the very antithesis of authenticity (Eco, 1986).

We can found that from the 'Personal Ethic' perspective, which is a hypothesis, the nature and it associated context with the language used carries a great variety of perspective. That is these diversity and its relationship cause actions. By understanding the diversity and its structure, by empirical research, could provide a better contribution to the world of knowledge and appreciation of the value of this knowledge no matter what it indicates.

On the ontology basis, the constructive view on Authenticity studied by Cohen stated that authenticity is a quality perceived by individual that emerges from their own personal experience (Cohen, 1988). Bruner also said that this view adopts a social constructionist perspective in that no single version of history is pinpointed as the true origin, making it a socially negotiable concept that is relative, contextually determined and ideologically driven. It can be the projection of one's dreams, fantasies, stereotypes, and expectations onto an object or experience (Bruner, 1994)

The viewpoints with this ontological ground firm the existence and functioning of consumers' psychological process. Which is a very crucial thinking to further the exploration of the components of authenticity; namely: true, real, rare and original that depicted by those brands' professional marketers. Culler's view stated what consumer desire is symbolic authenticity as an outgrowth of perception (Culler, 1981). Thus constructive authenticity allows for different interpretations of reality, on the basis of consumers' projection onto objects and is essential symbolic.

Preliminary, from the above, the mobility of internet connection, with empowering tools for consumers' participation, mirrors the both the buying and selling sides in the virtual world. The constructivists' perspective highlighted the possible involvement of the deconstruction concept and post-modernity. As the decentralization structure of TCP/IP communication amplifying the development of the mobile commerce nowadays. The world being mirrored in a more comprehensive manner or even more than we can found in the existence of the physical world. We are carrying activities offline and online all the ways. A kind of activity-based existential authenticity (Wang, 1999) is becoming more influential than ever before.

Existential authenticity is grounded in postmodernism focusing on deconstruction (Urry, 1990). Post modern consumers actively seek the staged experience as an outgrowth of the value they place on eclecticism and aesthetic enjoyment (Urry, 1990). And, no admitted original to serve as an index, postmodernists are not concerned with authenticity as it relates to an origin (Urry, 1990).

A MULTI-COMPONENT CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY FUNCTIONING

Regarding Aaker's view on componential, Michael H Kernis and Brian M. Goldman further on that and proved that authenticity is a multi-component conceptualization latent variable (Authenticity Inventory, 2006) as follow:

Table 1: Authenticity Inventory (A1-3) version 3 - Goldman and Kernis, 2006

- Awareness: Awareness of, and trust in, one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions. Conceptually, this includes awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, figure-ground personality aspects, emotions, and their roles in behavior.
- Unbiased processing: not denying, distorting, exaggerating, nor ignoring private knowledge, internal experiences, and externally based self-evaluative information. Conceptually then, this includes objectivity and acceptance of one's positive and negative aspects.
- Behavior: acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs. Conceptually, this contrasts acting merely to please others, or to attain rewards, or avoid punishments even if it means acting 'falsely'.
- Related orientation: valuing and achieving openness and truthfulness in one's close relationships. Conceptually, the relational component presumes it is important for close others to see the real you, good and bad. Moreover, relational authenticity means being genuine and not "fake" in one's relationships with others.

Further, Grayson and Martinec indicated that the sell side offering of authenticity would have two types, i.e. indexical and iconic.

For the physical attributes, indexical offering means that when an object has a factual spatiotemporal connection to history, i.e. a context in which people and object interact with each another. For brand essence, I.e. when an object is an accurate reproduction of the original, so it resembles the original's physicality is the iconic type of authenticity offering (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). They also stated that neither the two are mutually exclusive nor are they inherent in an object.

From the consumers' side, the questing, as I depicted in the Introduction, has also have crucial literature. Regarding personal experience as the theme of questing, authenticity is a consumer perception that occurs through a filter of one's personal experience (Brown et al, 2003). He carried out a case study on Volkswagen Beetle on this founding. According to MacCannell, authenticity was based on an object's or experience's degree of originality. Judging objects or experiences according to their extent of genuineness assumes that there is an absolute, objective criterion, I.e. an intangible origin, against which to gauge it (MacCannell, 1973).

The above founding is all on physical context, but form the very basic foundation of the nature and functioning of the Authenticity concept. As the paradox of Technology

empowering peoples, which can be felt by us from the degree of controlling, connecting and even to the virtue communicating among all participating, along with the nature of technology which can also make the inauthentic look and feel authentic (Fjellman, 1992). Reality to postmodern consumers depends on their perceptions of this staged authenticity. In postmodern times the more "authentic" a representation, the more it is "real".

Grayson and Shulman's perspective on indexicality, sharply contrasts modern views of hyper-reality in which simulation is substituted for genuine experience and perhaps even preferred (Baudrillard, 1983). Arnould and Price denoted the central role of authenticity seeking in everyday consumer practice as a response to the fragmentation and alienation elicited by post-modern cultural forces (Arnould and Price, 2000).

Consumers feel they are in touch, both with a "real" world and with their "real" selves. They are also not as concerned with object-driven indexical or iconic authenticity but are in search of their authentic selves. In other words, if individuals cannot realize their authentic selves in everyday life, they turn to adventures for those personal trials that facilitate self-creation and realization (Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

I can found that the literature develops the concept in a direction that is, preliminary, match with the context of my study that it is a matter of psychological functioning and coming from the recognition matter that whether both sides of the transaction can be met. Existential authenticity is activity driven and coincides with postmodern consumerism questing for pleasure and fun. This form of authenticity involves personal or subjective feelings activated by the liminal process of activities.

According to Wang, these experiences represent an idealized way of life and become romanticized as they contrast against the reason and rationality of modernity. In such experiences consumers feel more able to express and be true to themselves than in everyday life. Even fantasy is relevant to existential authenticity because it provides a subjective feeling that is real to the individual (Wang, 1999). Wang pointed out two types of existential authenticity, first is the intra-personal one, that is the personal level one which is both physical and psychological; and the second is the interpersonal one which is mainly related to collective sense of self.

Consumer experience as the subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm, including the communication encounter, the service encounter and the consumption encounter (Fred Lemke, Moira Clark, and Hugh Wilson, 2011), thus, the virtual platform covers all these encounters. The research of consumers questing of authenticity is, therefore, more on contextual focus.

The Internet as a virtual platform, with high mobile accessibility, impacts the e-Commerce world larger than ever. Literature review focus on the authenticity nature of such

accessibility is preliminary done. Scholars, particularly, pointed out that the question of artificiality should be addressed for e-Services. As activity based existential authenticity, over internet, is largely related to the service encounters mentioned above. Thus, the basic question over this e-Service is their artificiality. So understanding consumer perceptions of risk in e-Service encounters, differentiate authentic and artificial from risk perceptiveness which is diverted from trust perceptiveness (Mauricio S. Featherman, Joseph S. Valacich, John D. Wells, 2006) is core to understand the technological acceptance that forms the basic context of the consumers' psychology.

METHOD

Pilot case study is done by interviewing 22 people (13 males and 9 females, 27 to 39 years old (see table 2)) working in the financial sector in Shanghai. Their ages, sex, gender, and professional background are laid out in the table 2. Every informant is being interviewed by the interviewer for about 120 minutes. Before the interview started, interviewer is giving them 15 minutes to surf over any official webs of the luxury brands. Each interview is being audio recorded. The scripts of the records are produced by hiring professional translators to do it and check it. Overall 44 hours of audio recording stored in u-drives and 644 pages of scripts are kept in record. Content analysis is done. Words used by the interviewees are highlighted, counted and categorized. The number of words categorized, according to the multi-component conceptualization of authenticity model, was classified according to the Authenticity Inventory (A1-3) version 3 - Goldman and Kernis, 2004 as shown in the table 1. Follow that, a survey is done by setting a questionnaire according to the AUT3 (Goldman and Kernis, 2004) to measure the informants' perception about themselves, there are not right or wrong responses, either a high and positive self-image or not. The survey is also served as a triangulation of the result of the content analysis.

Table 2: A description of the interviewees

<u>Informant</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Family</u>		<u>Profession</u>	<u>Educational background</u>
			<u>Status</u>	<u>Profession</u>		
1. Samuel Lor	Male	31	married	credit officer	credit officer	postgraduate
2. Min Song	Female	33	married	loan manager	loan manager	high school
3. Lebing Xu	Male	32	single	financial analyst	financial analyst	postgraduate
4. Jason xi	Male	29	single	financial analyst	financial analyst	graduate
5. Weizhong Yang	Male	27	single	product manager	product manager	graduate
6. Bing Lv	Female	36	married	settlement officer	settlement officer	high school
7. Cici Cao	Female	27	single	product manager	product manager	graduate
8. Feng Dong	Male	36	single	branch manager	branch manager	postgraduate
9. Ju Ge Wu	Female	29	married	sales associate	sales associate	graduate
10. Jeyu Mu	Female	33	single	trust compliance officer	trust compliance officer	graduate
11. Jinhuang Hua	Male	28	married	internal audit manager	internal audit manager	postgraduate
12. Sui wei Gong	Male	35	married	risk compliance officer	risk compliance officer	graduate
13. Lisheng Du	Male	28	single	product manager	product manager	graduate
14. Edmund Chen	Male	39	married	senior branch manager	senior branch manager	graduate
15. Lusum Li	Male	34	single	industry analyst	industry analyst	postgraduate
16. Xiaotin Wang	Male	32	single	senior auditor	senior auditor	graduate
17. Yizheng Wang	Female	31	single	audit manager	audit manager	postgraduate
18. Mandy Ho	Female	36	married	corporate risk advisor	corporate risk advisor	postgraduate
19. Chun Chen	Male	34	married	marketing manager	marketing manager	graduate
20. Maurice Tun	Male	37	married	training manager	training manager	graduate
21. Vivian Song	Female	29	single	product sales	product sales	high school
22. Yue Wang	Female	30	single	internal auditor	internal auditor	graduate

THE GOAL-CONTINGENT PROCESS OF SELF-IMAGE CONFORMATION

The contextual focus of consumers purchasing process that is a goal seeking process and from which the authenticity is defined should related to the self-image of the consumer.

Our interviews of the 22 informants, selected under convenience sampling method, working in the financial sector in Shanghai revealed that consumers buying luxury product for some goals and benefits. If these goals and benefits achieved and realized, then the informants will agreed with the existence of the authenticity of the brands to a high degree.

We can conclude from the result of the interviews that, according to the Authenticating objects, brands, and experiences (OBE) framework (hereafter 'OBE framework') of Beverland and Francis J. Farrelly, 2009, interviewees are all gone through the authenticity functioning process of Michael H Kernis and Brian M. Goldman specified. That means the subject matters of self-imaging as a psychological phenomenon is realized as the OBE framework. The degrees of defensiveness and mindfulness of the informants are the manifestation of the self-image of oneself at the end.

For example:

Jason is young and educated from Singapore is having a more open minded character that his defensiveness on digital information of brands are more lessen so as his mindfulness. As his overseas education background provides a stronger belief to him that he can differentiate the real and fake image once he saw it. So we found he has more comfortable to the web information and he agreed the practicality, participating and virtue he has in the purchasing process.

Another informant, Bing Lv, demonstrated her strong degree of defensiveness and mindfulness of the digital image and information from the luxury brands. She doubted the realness of information she saw. As she heard a lot from her friends and family that the fake products looks like real at all and we cannot rely on our eyes when making the purchasing decision. Higher price quoted does not automatically prove that the product is real on the Internet. So she concluded that her feeling of control, connect and particularly virtue is weak in her online purchasing experiences.

Among the 22 samples, 13 of them show weak in all the three goals in the self-authentication

context of the authenticity functioning process. Correlations between total authenticity and self-concept variables (Goldman, 2004) is as follows:

- Self-concept clarity 0.68
- Identity integration 0.57
- Identity style diffusion -0.51
- Self-concept differentiation -0.32
- Entity -0.24
- Contingent self-esteem -0.58
- Self-esteem level 0.60

($p < 0.01$)

DICUSSION

According to the results of the AUT3–survey, the categorization of the answers of the 45 questions and the respective alphas from the 22 informants under the multi-component conceptualization of authenticity model is as follows:

Subscales (Composite Scale Alpha: 0.90)	Alpha
Awareness: 1R, 3, 4, 6, 9, 14R, 20, 21, 29, 34R, 36R, 38	0.72
Unbiased Processing: 7R, 13R, 16R, 19R, 30R, 35R, 37R, 39R, 41R, 42R	0.61
Behavioral: 2, 8R, 10R, 11R, 25, 27R, 28, 31, 32, 33R, 45	0.87
Relational Orientation: 5, 12, 15, 17R, 18, 22R, 23, 24, 26R, 40, 43, 44	0.94

[Note: R = Reverse Scored Item]

We found the high positive correlation existed between the self-image internally to the informants and their authentication obtained from their experiences on luxury brands' representation over the Internet. Those with better mindfulness and openness (i.e. 9 informants from the 22) have more ease to themselves and felt more comfortable with his/her own identity and they reacted more positively to the offering from the brands.

Of course, this is pilot case study that aimed to discover the possible relationship between the authenticity functioning and the psychological process of self-image in the context of the social experiencing on recognition of the luxury products online. The above results preliminary indicate the existence of the relationship of them. Further to this exploratory study, a more formal and detail research should be conducted with larger sample that coping cultural difference into the research method.

Besides, the cost of self-authentication process of an individual should also be considered, so as to facilitate our evaluation and explanation of the research result. A more detailed subscale is aimed to be developed for the ultimate testing of the relationship and psychological process so as to produce a grid for market practitioners as tool on identifying the reasons of consumers' goals formed on running their self-authentication process.

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