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Kinds of Authenticity

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Abstract

The concept of authenticity plays an important role in how people reason about objects, other people, and themselves. However, despite a great deal of academic interest in this concept, to date, the precise meaning of the term, authenticity, has remained somewhat elusive. This paper reviews the various definitions of authenticity that have been proposed in the literature and identifies areas of convergence. We then outline a novel framework that organizes the existing definitions of authenticity along two key dimensions: (i) describing the type of entity that is evaluated and (ii) describing the source of information that is consulted. We argue that this convergence across a number of papers, and more importantly, across a number of domains, reflects significant progress in articulating the meaning(s) of authenticity. We conclude by suggesting new avenues for research in this area, with particular attention toward psychological process.

1. *Introduction*

Authenticity is a concept that impacts nearly all aspects of daily life – from consumer products to tourism, to art appreciation, to interpersonal interactions. The literature on authenticity, however, has struggled to reach a consensus about what exactly is meant by this elusive term. This lack of definitional clarity is primarily due to the diversity of contexts in which authenticity judgments arise. Consider items such as an *authentic* Picasso painting, *authentic* Mexican food, an *authentic* diamond, or an *authentic* Rolex. Authenticity is clearly relevant for all of these entities, and yet, in each case, the meaning of the term seems to be somewhat different. In the case of food, relevant considerations might draw upon specific cultural knowledge, while in the case of diamonds, observers may be most concerned with causal process (i.e., Is the diamond naturally occurring or manmade?). To complicate things further, different meanings of authenticity may be used when discussing the very same entity. To take an example from the arts, one can use *authenticity* not only to refer to the provenance of an artwork (e.g., Was the painting created by Pablo Picasso or by someone else?) but also to refer to an artist's motives (e.g., Was the artist genuinely motivated or did they create the work merely to appease collectors?).

These varied uses of the term authenticity have sparked interest across a wide-array of academic disciplines including aesthetics, philosophy, marketing, tourism, sociology, and psychology. And, within each discipline, researchers have sought to construct typologies that best describe the particular phenomenon of interest. This has led to a rather fragmented conceptual landscape and a growing list of 'kinds of authenticity' that are not frequently discussed in relation to one another. In this paper, we review each of these previous approaches. More importantly, however, we outline areas of convergence across these typologies and propose a novel framework that organizes authenticity judgments along two core dimensions: the type of entity that is evaluated and the source of information that is consulted. Additionally, we suggest that the broader approach of classifying types of authenticity has largely ignored a different set of considerations – specifically, the psychological processes underlying these judgments. Therefore, we conclude by discussing relevant psychological research and provide one example of how a

specific kind of authenticity judgment may be associated with a unique psychological mechanism and motivational antecedent.

2. *Kinds of Authenticities*

At the broadest level, authenticity is a concept aimed at capturing dimensions of truth or verification. For example, Trilling (1972) discusses authenticity as a process of testing whether '[objects] are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them' (p. 92). Similarly, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) write, 'despite the multiplicity of terms and interpretations applied to authenticity, ultimately what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true' (p. 839). In other words, within the existing literature, there seems to be the general consensus that authenticity refers to a process of verifying whether (or the extent to which) entities are what they are purported to be.

And yet, reflecting on the many ways in which people use the term authenticity reveals the limitations of this very broad definition. For example, even when evaluating the same entity, people may use very different criteria to evaluate authenticity; a diner from Iowa may define 'authentic Mexican food' very differently than a diner from Texas. Dutton (2003) highlights the complexities of this issue when he refers to authenticity as a 'dimension word' – a word whose specific meaning is uncertain until one knows which dimension of authenticity is being discussed.

Moreover, even when individuals have similar beliefs about what dimensions are relevant for authenticity, they may still judge authenticity quite differently. For example, in some cases, authenticity may be seen as more of a binary judgment, while in other cases, authenticity may be evaluated on a continuum. Further, some observers may see gradations of authenticity in stimuli that others perceive as unilaterally fake, such as wrestling or reality television (Rose and Wood 2005).

Thus, while there is the general sense that authenticity pertains to assessments of truth, this observation seems insufficient to capture the complex and varied ways in which the concept is often put to work. In some instances, this disconnect has led researchers to suggest that within the academic literature, the term authenticity should be abandoned in favor of more specialized terms (Reisinger and Steiner 2006). More commonly, however, this tension has pushed researchers to identify different kinds of authenticity that categorize these judgments in terms of their higher-level thematic or structural similarities. For example, someone might consider authenticity judgments about several different entities (e.g., artworks, historical artifacts, and sentimental possessions) and ask whether these judgments reflect a more general principle that is common to all of them. Through this process, the literature has generated a number of different typologies, which we review in detail below.

2.1. INDEXICAL AND ICONIC AUTHENTICITY

Grayson and Martinec (2004) outline two fundamentally different kinds of authenticity judgments. Specifically, they differentiate between *indexical* versus *iconic* authenticity. Drawing from the work of Peirce (1974), indexical authenticity is concerned with distinguishing 'the real thing' or 'original' from imitations and copies. People evaluate an entity as *indexically* authentic through spatiotemporal cues that verify that an entity is indeed the particular thing in question. For example, a chair pulled from the Titanic would be considered indexically authentic if a person could verify that it was actually aboard the Titanic (a spatiotemporal fact). Similarly, an authentic Picasso painting would be considered indexically authentic if it could be physically traced back to the individual Pablo Picasso.

Iconic authenticity, by contrast, refers to whether or not an item fits with an observer's expectations about how the item should *appear,* and is often used synonymously with the term verisimilitude (Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Kozinets et al., 2002). For example, a historical reenactment of Civil War battle may be perceived as authentic if the uniforms and props match observers' expectations about how items from that time period should appear. Thus, iconic authenticity is not concerned with a specific spatiotemporal fact, but rather with the degree to which the item satisfies one's prior expectations about how something ought to be, which can be reflected in terms such as 'authentic reproduction' (Bruner 1994; Crang 1996; Peterson 1997). This distinction also helps to explain perceptions of authenticity for entities that are not 'real', for instance, objects that belonged to fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes (Grayson and Martinec 2004).

2.2. NOMINAL AND EXPRESSIVE AUTHENTICITY

Dutton (2003) also distinguishes between two forms of authenticity. Similar to the concept of indexical authenticity, Dutton defines a construct of *nominal authenticity* as 'the correct identification of the origin, authorship or provenance of an object' (p. 259). For example, nominal authenticity distinguishes between a painting that was actually created by Picasso versus one that was not (Trilling 1972). The second form of authenticity that Dutton discusses is concerned with the manner in which something was created. He calls this *expressive authenticity* and defines it as the 'true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs' (p. 259). Dutton considers expressive authenticity far more ambiguous and 'contentious' than nominal authenticity, which is, at its root, 'a plain empirical discovery' (p. 267). Most notably, ascriptions of expressive authenticity depend on the observer's own perceptions and values. Therefore, Dutton suggests that there may be less consensus about expressive authenticity because such considerations are more subjective than the verification of particular historical facts.

2.3. TYPE AND MORAL AUTHENTICITY

Carroll (2015) also identifies two primary types of authenticity, which emerge from a qualitative analysis of restaurant reviews (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). The first is *type authenticity,* which involves an assessment of whether an entity is true to its associated type (or category, or genre) (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Food is particularly susceptible to questions of type authenticity (e.g., What is 'real' Mexican food?). The second is *moral authenticity*, defined as the attention to 'whether the decisions behind the enactment and operation of an entity reflect sincere choices (i.e., choices true to one's self) rather than socially scripted responses' (Carroll and Wheaton 2009, p. 255). When engaged in assessing this kind of authenticity, people are less likely to attend to the immediate properties of the food and are more likely to evaluate the processes, values, and goals of the producer.

2.4. OBJECTIVE, CONSTRUCTED, AND EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

Wang (1999) examines the concept of authenticity through the lens of tourism. On Wang's view, judgments about tourism objects (e.g., cultural artifacts and museum pieces) can involve two different forms of authenticity: one he refers to as *objective authenticity*, which involves verifying the 'authenticity of originals'. For example, judgments of whether or not a Native American headdress was indeed worn by a famous chief would be a question of objective authenticity. Wang also suggests that judgments about objects can involve a notion of *constructed authenticity*, wherein authenticity is 'projected onto toured objects by tourists or tourism

producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preference, beliefs, powers, etc.' (p. 351). This type assumes that reality is not fixed but is a social process in which questions like 'What is a *real* Native American?' are constantly revised and negotiated. Thus, a Native American headdress will be experienced as authentic in relation to whatever expectations a person has adopted or projected onto it.

In contrast to these first two types, Wang also identifies a third notion of authenticity, which he calls 'activity-related' or *existential authenticity*. Existential authenticity is concerned not with verifying attributes of objects but with achieving a certain personal and inter-subjective state of *being* (in Wang's case, through engagement in tourist experiences). For instance, people seeking existential authenticity may be attuned to the way in which a Native American dance makes *them* feel connected to the self and others. Wang points to the work of existentialist philosophers (e.g., Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) and political theorists (e.g., Montesquieu and Rousseau), as critical to the theoretical development of this type of authenticity. Often, the desired state of being is to be 'true to oneself' and free of the stultifying influences of modernity and societal pressure (Wang 1999, p. 358). This 'ideal of authenticity' is often associated with feelings, spontaneity, and individuality over rationality, reason, and conformity. Thus, perceptions of existential authenticity are often experienced as highly personal and varied, making it a fundamentally different model of verification than object-based authenticity. In related research, Arnould and Price (2000) focus on a similar notion of authenticity, which they refer to as *self-authentication*.

2.5. PURE AUTHENTICITY, APPROXIMATE AUTHENTICITY, AND MORAL AUTHENTICITY

Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink's (2008) qualitative analysis of the consumer responses to Trappist and Abbey beer advertisements results in a similar typology. They first identify *pure authenticity*, in which consumers look for evidence that the product has 'unbroken commitments to tradition and place of origin' (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008, p .7). Consumers experience the product as authentic if it is thought to be 'completely unchanged from the original' (p. 7). The authors also identify *approximate authenticity*, wherein consumers are less concerned with actual historical connections and respond more to whether a product produces a 'feeling' of tradition via the degree to which the product aligns with the consumer's prior mental representations. Finally, Beverland et al. (2008) identify *moral authenticity*, wherein consumers attend to the intentions of the producers. Specifically, consumers look for cues that suggest that the producers of the beer both value the traditional craft process and are 'motivated by love of the task, rather than the possibility of financial reward' (p. 12). Seekers of moral authenticity are most concerned with whether products are made by 'passionate creative people' who are 'genuine in their intent' (p. 12).

3. Convergence Across Typologies

Although the existing literature has identified many different kinds of authenticity (we count at least 12 in total), when examined as a whole, there actually appears to be a striking degree of convergence across them. Specifically, *indexical* (Grayson and Martinec 2004), *nominal* (Dutton 2003), *objective* (Wang 1999), and *pure authenticity* (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008) all seem to be describing roughly the same type of judgment. Here, we refer to this as Historical Authenticity. In short, this type of authenticity seems to pertain to objects (particularly one-of-a-kind items, such as artworks or historical artifacts) and involves the evaluation of an object's unique spatiotemporal history. Importantly, such judgments tend to be binary in nature (Is it *the thing* or not?) and seem to assume that authenticity is something that can be verified via an objective, external source (e.g., notes of provenance and expert evaluation)

A second area of apparent convergence includes *iconic* (Grayson and Martinec 2004), *type* (Carroll 2015), *constructed* (Wang 1999), and *approximate authenticity* (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008). This form of authenticity, which we refer to as Categorical Authenticity, also seems to pertain mostly to objects or physical entities such as food. Importantly, however, the relevant judgments seem to relate to categories of objects (e.g., Victorian furniture, Mexican food, and Native American artifacts), rather than unique one-of-a-kind items. In our assessment, a key feature of Categorical Authenticity is that judgments may be more graded and, critically, do not require an external source of validation. In fact, this type of authenticity seems importantly related to the notion that authenticity judgments are dictated by observers' own expectations and, therefore, may be much more subjective in nature.

A third area of convergence seems to involve the constructs of *expressive* (Dutton 2003) and *moral authenticity* (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008; Carroll 2015). We refer to this as Value Authenticity. Unlike the former two types, this notion of authenticity seems to pertain to agents and in particular, moral agents. This notion of authenticity invokes normative considerations, e.g., the extent to which someone is intrinsically motivated and eschews greed, or the extent to which someone's behavior embodies the values of a particular culture. In our view, Value Authenticity appears only to weakly apply to objects, and, when it does, it is only via their relation to an agent (e.g., the person or company who produced them). While there is, of course, subjectivity to such judgments, we suggest that observers may view the judgment itself as relatively objective. That is, observers may place varying degrees of importance on the extent to which one ought to conform to norms or moral rules, but those standards are often believed to arise outside of the self (e.g., in society, law, and religion) (Nichols 2002).

Remaining is the notion of *existential authenticity* (Wang 1999) or *self-authentication* (Arnould and Price 2000). We refer to this as Self Authenticity. This, in our view, is perhaps the most difficult concept to concretely articulate. However, when contrasted with the other types outlined above, it seems possible to at least get some grasp of its boundaries. Given that the judgment refers to the self, it seems reasonable to conclude that it pertains an agent (rather than objects). Objects may play a key role in informing judgments of self-authenticity, but ultimately, the critical factor seems to be how those objects impact the authenticity of the self. Moreover, in terms of the criteria used to determine Self Authenticity, they are probably best categorized as internal (rather than external), since they pertain to highly personal, subjective judgments.

4. Two Dimensions of Authenticity Judgments

From this analysis, there emerge four broad kinds of authenticity judgments, which can be organized along two relevant dimensions: the type of entity that is evaluated (object vs. agent) and the source of information that is consulted (external vs. internal). This latter dimension broadly captures the difference between criteria that are believed to be objective and external to the self (e.g., spatiotemporal history and social norms) versus those that are personal and generated by the observers themselves (e.g., expectations about categories, types of cuisines, and one's own identity).

This framework is depicted in Table 1. Each of these different kinds of authenticity specifies a unique dimension along which authenticity may be evaluated: history, category membership, normative values, and self-identity. This convergence across a number of papers, and more importantly, across a number of domains reflects (in our view) significant progress in connecting the very broad idea of authenticity as a process of verification to the many specific instances in which the concept is used.

That said, there are still complexities that are not fully addressed by this framework. The first involves the target of authenticity judgments, i.e., distinguishing the different *columns* in Table 1. Often, it may be difficult to determine whether an observer is actually evaluating the authenticity

Table 1. Two dimensions of authenticity judgments.

		Target	
		Object	**Agent**
Information Source	External Reference	**Historical Authenticity** *Assessment of spatiotemporal history* cf: Indexical, Nominal, Objective, Pure Authenticity	**Value Authenticity** *Assessment of values* cf: Expressive, Moral Authenticity
	Internal Reference	**Categorical Authenticity** Assessment of category membership cf: Iconic, Type, Constructed, Approximate Authenticity	**Self Authenticity** Assessment with respect to the self cf: Existential Authenticity, Self-Authentication

of the object itself or the values that the object may reflect and, in some cases, the former may inform the latter. For example, owning a counterfeit product might make oneself feel inauthentic (Gino, Kouchaki, and Galinsky 2015). Dutton (2003) also highlights this issue when he suggests that the attention to spatiotemporal history (i.e., nominal authenticity) is ultimately in service of understanding and maintaining a collective set of values (expressive authenticity). He writes:

> Establishing nominal authenticity serves purposes more important than maintaining the market value of an art object: it enables us to understand the practice and history of art as an intelligible history of the expression of values, beliefs, and ideas, both for artists and their audiences — and herein lies its link to expressive authenticity (p. 270).

A second issue involves the role of an individual's prior beliefs. Specifically, it may often be difficult to disentangle whether the criteria used to assess authenticity originate from within or outside of the self – one can think of this as blurring of the rows in Table 1. For example, Wang (1999) discusses how beliefs about 'what is real' are the product of shifting societal forces and individually constructed knowledge schemas. Relatedly, Grayson and Martinec (2004) write:

> Despite our belief that we perceive iconic or indexical signs "out there" in the "real world," our perception of these signs are highly influenced by our personal predilections and perceptual imperfections. Thus, there are no purely objective criteria for deciding whether a market offering is indexically or iconically authentic (p. 299).

Thus, one can identify some key distinctions between kinds of authenticity judgments – specifically, (a) that authenticity judgments about objects seem to be importantly different from judgments about agents and (b) that in some cases, people are more likely to believe that the criteria for authenticity are found in the external world, while in other cases, they will tend to rely on their own beliefs and opinions. However, when examined at the micro-level, one can also see that there are many instances that blur the lines between these distinctions. In other words, we readily acknowledge the limitations of this framework in specifying all of the potential gradations that may exist between these different kinds of authenticity. This, however, would

appear to be a feature of nearly any system of categorization – whether it is the classification of species or colors of paint – and is probably not a reason to abandon this approach altogether.

Where we do see a limitation in this approach is that by focusing on categorizing different types of authenticity judgments, the existing literature has tended to ignore questions about psychological process. In the following section, we focus on one particular kind of authenticity and discuss recent empirical studies that have examined the psychological mechanisms underlying those judgments.

5. Psychological Process Approach

Consider again authenticity judgments regarding objects such as a Picasso painting or Shakespeare's desk that are valued for their unique spatiotemporal connections to famous individuals. We have labeled this Historical Authenticity (cf., *indexical, nominal, objective, pure authenticity*). But why does it matter whether a painting was actually created by Picasso or not? While considerations of scarcity and market value clearly play an important role, they do not (in our view) fully explain why people may value such items (Newman and Bloom 2012, 2014; Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011). Indeed, one can readily think of many 'one-of-a-kind' objects that have little value (e.g., the author's left sock).

A recent series of papers have found that the valuation of this type of authenticity seems to be largely driven by beliefs in *contagion*. Contagion is commonly thought of as a form of magical thinking in which people believe that a person's immaterial qualities or essence can be transferred to an object through physical contact (Belk 1988; Bloom 2004, 2011; Frazer 1890; Nemeroff and Rozin 1994; Rozin et al. 1989; Tylor 1871). Therefore, people may value an original artwork or a celebrity's possession, because they believe that those objects contain some physical remnant of the person (e.g., the celebrity and artist), whereas a duplicate object does not.

There are now a number of empirical studies supporting the link between contagion and the valuation of these types of authentic goods. For example, Newman and Bloom (2012) asked participants assess paintings that were labeled 'originals', or identical paintings that were 'authorized reproductions'. In some cases, the duplicate painting was created by the original artist, while in other cases, the duplicate was created by the artist's assistant. Participants rated the duplicate painting as significantly less valuable when it was created by the artist's assistant than when it was made by the original artist, suggesting that contact with the particular individual plays an important role in judgments of value. Interestingly, this pattern seems unique to art – whether the duplicate was made by the original creator or an assistant did not impact the value of one-of-a-kind artifacts. Relatedly, holding constant the total amount of effort required to make an artwork, participants judge an artwork that had a great deal of physical contact with the artist to be more valuable than an identical artwork that had less physical contact – a relationship that also does not extend to nonartistic artifacts of comparable value.

Similar patterns have been observed for objects that have come into contact with celebrities, loved ones, and important historical figures. For example, qualitative research has found that visitors to a Shakespeare museum point to the belief that the items had direct physical contact with Shakespeare as a primary motive for their interest (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and members of a Barry Manilow Fan Club noted that the most valuable items in their collections were 'things that actually touched Barry' (O'Guinn 1991). In experimental research, Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom (2011) asked participants to value pieces of celebrity memorabilia after imagining that these objects had undergone various transformations. The results indicated that for well-liked celebrities, sterilizing the object reduced value significantly more than market-related transformations, such as preventing resale of the item. Moreover, subsequent studies found that directly enhancing

sensitivity to contagion increased the value assigned to celebrity memorabilia (Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011).

This research provides insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying the valuation of authentic goods such as artwork and celebrity memorabilia (or what we have referred to as Historical Authenticity). In particular, these items seem to be valued because they contain the *essence* of someone who is well regarded. However, what motivates people to want to acquire these objects in the first place – in other words, why would someone want to own a famous person's *essence*?

In a recent series of studies, Newman and Smith (2016) tested whether this phenomenon is further related to a more fundamental need to form and maintain social attachments with others – the so-called 'need to belong' (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The basic hypothesis is that certain authentic objects may help fulfill this need because they are believed to contain the essence of a valued person (via contagion). In turn, beliefs in contagion create a sense of connection with an esteemed individual, such that having contact with an authentic object may serve as a psychological substitute for having contact with the person. For example, a collector may ultimately value George Clooney's sweater because she believes that by having contact with the sweater, she is in some way forming a social connection with the actor.

In support of this explanation, Newman and Smith (2016) found that individual differences in the need to belong are uniquely correlated with the valuation of celebrity memorabilia and original artwork. Moreover, manipulating the need to belong via social exclusion leads individuals to pay more for authentic celebrity memorabilia. For example, in one experiment, participants came into the lab and played a game in which they were socially-included or socially-excluded. Following, participants were asked to report their willingness to pay for various items that belonged to their favorite celebrities. The results indicated that individuals who were excluded (vs. included) were willing to pay significantly more for items that had come into contact with individuals who they revered. Collectively, these studies lend insight into the underlying motives behind authentic consumption and provide process evidence that links motivation (belongingness) to mechanism (contagion beliefs) to behavior (the valuation of Historical Authenticity).

We think this approach can be applied to understanding the consumption of other subtypes of authenticity as well. For example, one could imagine distinct motivations and processes driving the assessment of Categorical Authenticity, Value Authenticity, and Self Authenticity. Over time, understanding authenticity through its associated psychological mechanisms may provide greater clarity about the boundaries between different kinds of authenticity and how they are related to one another.

6. Conclusion

Here, we reviewed the various kinds of authenticity that have been proposed in the literature and outlined areas of convergence across these typologies. We then proposed a framework that organizes authenticity judgments in terms of the type of entity that is evaluated and the source of information that is consulted. We also noted that the psychological processes underlying the different types of authenticity have been relatively understudied, and we provided one example of how a specific kind of authenticity judgment may be associated with a unique psychological mechanism and motivational antecedent. Thus, we suggest that the study of authenticity should not be limited to categorizing different kinds of authenticity but can be empirically tested as a psychological process with unique predictors and consequences.

Short Biographies

George Newman's research is at the intersection of psychology, cognitive science, and consumer behavior. His research investigates the concept of authenticity, as well as related topics involving consumer valuation, identity, and the self. Currently, he is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the Yale School of Management. He also holds joint appointments in the Department of Psychology and the Department of Cognitive Science.

Rosanna Smith is a PhD candidate at the Yale School of Management. She is interested in how people's intuitive beliefs about the creative process influence the appreciation of art, music, and films.

Note

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