

# AUTHENTICITY

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**The concept of authenticity informs a number of central topics in management studies. On the surface, it might seem that a consensus exists about its meaning; there is indeed widespread agreement that authenticity refers to that which is “real” or “genuine” or “true.” Below the surface, however, there is much less agreement; scholars use the same lexical term but often approach the concept from different perspectives and apply different meanings. This review outlines three fundamental but distinct perspectives found in the literature: authenticity as (1) *consistency* between an entity’s internal values and its external expressions, (2) *conformity* of an entity to the norms of its social category, and (3) *connection* between an entity and a person, place, or time as claimed. The aim of this review was to critically appraise the various research themes within each perspective, highlighting similarities, differences, and relationships between them. In doing so, this review represents an initial step toward an integrated framework of authenticity, which provides new insights into our understanding of the existing literature and a useful guide for future research.**

## INTRODUCTION

Authenticity is in high demand. Trilling’s (1972) seemingly prophetic treatise on the topic nearly a half century ago anticipated the rise of authenticity in response to modernization. Indeed, one does not have to look far today to find self-help books focused on the “true self,” organizations touting themselves as “authentic,” and ongoing debates about who and what should be called “real” versus “fake.” As but one indication of the extent to which authenticity has entered into our public discourse, a recent Google search for “authentic” produced more than half a billion hits; according to Google Books, the number of books published on the topic has nearly doubled

since Trilling’s seminal work. Several scholars (e.g., Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland, 2009; Fine, 2004; Grazian, 2003; Taylor, 1991) and social critics (e.g., Guignon, 2004; Lindholm, 2008; Potter, 2010) alike have joined Trilling in conjecturing about what has given rise to the appeal of authenticity in contemporary society, with many suggesting that we most often seek authenticity because it is the very thing that seems to be lacking in our lives and in the world around us. Whatever the reason, the concept of authenticity carries great appeal indeed. As Potter (2010: i) proclaimed, “the demand for authenticity. . . is one of the most powerful movements in contemporary life.”

It is thus no surprise that management scholars have become equally enamored by the topic in recent years. Over the past decade, the number of articles on authenticity in management journals has more than doubled. These studies together show that the search for authenticity has significant implications for employees (e.g., Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Hewlin, Dumas, & Burnett, 2017; Molinsky, 2013), managers (e.g., Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012), social relationships in the workplace (e.g., Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012; Hennig-Thurau, Thorston, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013),

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consumers (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton 2006; Rose & Wood, 2005), organizations (e.g., Frake, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013; Verhaal, Khessina, & Dobrev, 2015), and social movements (e.g., Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Negro, Hannan, & Rao, 2011; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008). Of course, this work is also informed by related research in marketing, psychology, and sociology, among others. In short, the importance of authenticity seems to transcend a host of academic domains and research paradigms. Given its ubiquity in popular culture and academic research, an understanding of the meaning of the concept is of critical importance.

On the surface, there might seem to be widespread agreement about the meaning of authenticity. Most scholars agree that it refers to that which is “real” or “genuine” or “true” (Dutton, 2003: 258). In this sense, authenticity refers to some sort of verification process in that it “describes the evaluation of some truth or fact” (Newman, 2016: 296) even if “it is ultimately not about the facts per se but rather about interpretations regarding those facts” (Kovács, Carroll, & Lehman, 2014: 460). As such, authenticity is not a property of entities but, instead, “a claim that is made by or for [them] . . . and either accepted or rejected by relevant others” (Peterson, 2005: 1086). In short, there indeed exists a general consensus among scholars in the social and behavioral sciences that authentic entities—whether they are individuals, collectives, or objects—“are what they appear to be or are claimed to be” (Trilling, 1972: 92).

Despite this apparent consensus, however, there is much less agreement below the surface. Indeed, various scholars use the same term “authenticity” but in different ways. Consider the following questions: Are you your “true self” at work? (Guerrier & Adib, 2003). Is your favorite pair of Levi’s jeans genuine or fake? (Newman & Dhar, 2014). Was last night’s symphonic performance of *L’Enfance du Christ* true to the genre of classical music? (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005). Is your boss an authentic leader? (Sparrowe, 2005). Was the wine served at last night’s dinner party real Barolo? (Negro et al., 2011). Is Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre really located at its original site? (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Does your favorite Thai restaurant actually serve traditional Thai cuisine? (Kovács et al., 2014). Is Waylon Jennings an authentic musician and, if so, is it because of his unique style of music, his cowboy hat, or perhaps even his “hillbilly roots”? (Peterson, 1997). Do you even know who you really are at the end of the day? (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). In each of

these cases, the label of “authenticity” or some synonymous term is invoked and the attribution entails a verification process of whether or not someone or something is “real” or “genuine” or “true.” Yet, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that each case involves the application of a different meaning of the concept.

Of course, this notion that authenticity can take on different meanings is not entirely new. As Dutton (2003: 258) noted, authenticity is a “‘dimension word’ . . . a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about.” In other words, an entity is authentic because it is a “real” *what?* Or a “genuine” *what?* Or “true” to *what?* The referent at the root of an authenticity attribution—the *to what?*—is thus of paramount importance. Yet, various streams of research have emerged out of disparate theoretical foundations, each with its own emphasis on different referents and each carrying different underlying assumptions about the nature of the concept and how attributions about it are made or not. Consequently, as others have noted, “authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept” (Trilling, 1972: 94) because the facts involved can point in different directions and lead to different conclusions.

Still lacking, however, is a systematic and comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding these different possible meanings of authenticity. Our review of the literature reveals that many scholars either acknowledge the possibility of different meanings of authenticity but then proceed to settle on an interpretation that is overly general and frequently confounds the different meanings just acknowledged, or focus exclusively on one meaning at the total neglect of other possibilities. This all-too-common application of multiple or different meanings of authenticity is problematic for at least two related reasons. First, it leaves scholars unable to communicate meaningfully with one another, which creates further conceptual confusion and streams of related work that proceed in isolation from one another. Second, it carries the risk of missing the big picture. We suggest that, when viewed together, the full body of research offers new insights into the nature of authenticity and points to promising new lines of inquiry about it, neither of which is readily apparent when just one meaning of authenticity is considered in isolation. A conceptual framework that clarifies the different possible meanings of authenticity—as well as key similarities, differences, and relationships—thus stands to advance our understanding of this important concept. Accordingly, we conducted a review of the extant literature with two specific objectives in mind.

The first objective is to provide some much-needed construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010). We do so by outlining the three different meanings of authenticity that emerged from our review of the literature. The first meaning is rooted in foundational philosophical works ranging from the Ancient Greeks (Aristotle, Socrates) to the Existentialists (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1943), as well as classic mid-century scholarship on impression management (Goffman, 1959). It interprets *authenticity as consistency* between an entity's internal values and its external expressions; research themes within this perspective include work on the self-concept (Cable et al., 2013; Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), self-presentation (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), and, more recently, organizational and brand identity (Baron, 2004; Beverland, 2005; Holt, 2002). The second meaning is rooted in early work in the cognitive sciences on categorization and schemas (Murphy & Smith, 1982; Rosch, 1973) and in foundational work in sociology on institutional categories (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and genres (DiMaggio, 1987). It interprets *authenticity as conformity* of an entity to the norms of its social category; research themes within this perspective have examined the consequences of category membership (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Lu & Fine, 1995) and the process of changes to categorical boundaries (Negro et al., 2011; Weber et al., 2008). The third meaning is rooted in work on psychological essentialism (Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989) and semiotics (Baudrillard, 1983; Mick, 1986; Peirce, 1940). It interprets *authenticity as connection* between an entity and a person, place, or time as claimed; research themes within this perspective have conceptualized authenticity as a matter of connection via provenance (Dutton, 2003; Newman & Dhar, 2014), transference (Frazier, Gelman, Wilson, & Hood, 2009; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), or symbolism (Hahl, 2016; Leigh et al., 2006; Maccannell, 1973). In sum, three different meanings of authenticity emerged from our review: consistency, conformity, and connection.

The second objective of this review is to offer an initial step toward an integrated framework of authenticity. Based on our review, we suggest that the three different meanings of authenticity share key similarities; however, they are indeed conceptually and practically distinct. On the one hand, authenticity according to each of the perspectives references that which is intangible, involves a threshold in making the attribution, and is generally regarded as a positive attribution worth pursuing. On the other hand, each perspective makes different underlying

assumptions about whether an authenticity attribution implies uniqueness or sameness, whether authenticity is interpreted in subjective or objective terms, and whether the authentication process unfolds from lay judgments or expert knowledge. We discuss each of these similarities and differences in detail along with patterns that emerged from our review of the literature regarding how the three meanings are related to one another.

Taken together, we hope to provide a lens for better understanding existing research on authenticity and, at the same time, offer a useful guide for future inquiry on the topic. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss the methodology used to conduct our review of the literature. Then, we outline the three meanings of authenticity that emerged from the review. Next, we discuss similarities and differences across these perspectives as well as patterns in the literature regarding interrelationships. Finally, we offer an agenda for future research by discussing a range of theoretical and methodological implications as well as opportunities for new lines of inquiry.

## REVIEW METHOD

Research on the topic of authenticity spans a wide range of disciplines. To reasonably bound our review, we focused on articles appearing in outlets most central to management scholars. However, in an effort to highlight the breadth of the concept, we also discuss some of the rich theoretical foundations that have informed existing research in this area. To compile a set of articles for the review, we employed a multistep approach.

First, we conducted a broad search of the existing literature. Specifically, we searched Web of Science for articles containing "authentic\*" as a keyword or in the title; the search was conducted in September 2017. A journal was included in the search if it fits either of the following criteria: (1) it was listed in the *Financial Times* Top 50 list in management or marketing, and is targeted primarily at an academic audience; or (2) it was listed in the U.K. Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide as a 4 or 4\* (i.e., the top two tiers) outlet in the management, marketing, psychology, or sociology categories. Table 1 provides a complete list of journal titles. In total, this search yielded 452 articles.

Second, we narrowed the set to the most relevant articles to be included in the review. We first removed book reviews (16 articles), retractions (six articles), and corrections or addendums (two articles);

**TABLE 1**  
**Recent Trends in Authenticity Research**

Decade	Total	Management	Marketing	Psychology	Sociology
1990–1999	19	5	2	7	5
2000–2009	100	51	13	22	14
2010–2017	208	110	22	50	26
Total	327	166	37	79	45
Number Empirical	241	91	34	77	39
Percent Empirical (%)	74	55	92	97	87

*Notes:* The counts in this table reflect the articles included in the final database. Journal titles are listed below by discipline. Those marked with an asterisk (\*) were included in the initial search but did not yield any relevant results. Those marked with a dagger (†) were not included in the search but represent a relevant article(s) added to the database; see the text for full details. Note that three articles included in the first row above were actually published before that time period; however, those articles are included in the first row because of the low frequency of articles on the topic in earlier years. The counts of empirical articles include quantitative and qualitative studies but not conceptual pieces, reviews, and meta-analyses; chapters, books, and edited volumes are not reflected here.

*Management:* *Academy of Management Annals, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, British Journal of Management, Business Ethics Quarterly, Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice\**, *Human Performance\**, *Human Relations, Human Resource Management, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Organizational Behavior, The Leadership Quarterly, Management Science, Organization Science, Organization Studies, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Research Policy, Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal\**, *Strategic Management Journal, Strategy Science*†.

*Marketing:* *Annals of Tourism Research*†, *International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Advertising*†, *Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Marketing Science*.

*Psychology:* *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*†, *Annual Review of Psychology, Cognitive Science*†, *Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Cognition and Culture*†, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*†, *Journal of Experimental Psychology (Applied)\*, Journal of Experimental Psychology (General), Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, Journal of Personality, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin, Personnel Psychology, Psychological Bulletin\**, *Psychological Review\**, *Psychological Science*.

*Sociology:* *American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, Annual Review of Sociology\**, *Journal of Consumer Culture, Social Forces, Sociological Quarterly, Sociological Review, Sociological Science*†, *Sociology*.

these were “paired” with the original articles so as to be included but not double counted). We then reviewed and parsed the list to identify those articles for which authenticity was a/the core construct in the article. Among those identified as not relevant, members of the author team revisited each omitted article to ensure that it was not erroneously removed from the set. In the end, 124 articles were removed for lack of relevance.

Third, we added to the set a few relevant articles that did not result from the search. In several cases, articles were added because they were forthcoming at the time of the search and have since appeared in print (eight articles). In other cases, articles were added because they were published in outlets typically considered less relevant for management scholars and thereby not included in the search, but which were frequently cited by articles that did appear in it (eight articles). In the remaining cases, articles were added because they were part of a larger program of research focused on authenticity, but the authors of those articles did not include “authenticity” in the title or keywords for whatever reason

(e.g., articles early in a line of work, as one example; seven articles). In total, 23 articles were added to the set.

The final set for the review thus included a total of 327 articles. Table 1 provides a breakdown of articles by discipline and decade. In addition, we referenced throughout the review process relevant books, chapters, and edited volumes as appropriate, as well as work in related research areas. Many of these sources are cited throughout the review but are not included in the counts of articles outlined above.

After compiling this set of articles, the author team met regularly to discuss patterns and emergent themes across an initial subset of the articles. To compile this subset, each member of the author team read all of the articles in one of the four disciplines noted earlier and selected those that were particularly impactful on the field (i.e., highly cited), current (i.e., recently published), and/or offered unique perspectives on the topic. In the end, 96 articles (29 percent of the full set) were included in this subset. All four members of the author team then read all of these articles in their entirety in an effort to identify broad patterns and themes.

We reviewed this subset of articles with three guiding questions in mind: (1) Who or what is the *referent* at the root of the authenticity judgment? We initially approached the literature with two preliminary referents in mind: internal versus external to the entity at hand. In other words, the referent—the *to what?*—appeared to be the entity itself in some cases (i.e., whether the entity is true to itself), whereas, in other cases, it appeared to be distinct from or outside of the entity that was the target of the authenticity judgment (i.e., whether the entity is true to some other criterion). However, on further reading and discussion, it became clear that the latter could fruitfully be divided further. Specifically, some studies conceived of the referent in terms of a social category (e.g., a genre), whereas others conceived of it in terms of a particular person, place, or time (e.g., an origin). (2) Who or what is the *entity* that is the target of the authenticity judgment? Some studies focused on the authenticity of individuals, others on organizations or brands, and others on objects or performances. (3) Who is the *audience* that is making the authenticity judgment? In some cases, the audience and the entity were one and the same (e.g., the self); in other cases, the two were distinct (e.g., consumers and products). As we reviewed this initial subset of articles, all authors took extensive notes and considered how each of these three guiding questions might best organize the body of literature. In conversation with one another, we agreed that the first question—who or what is the referent?—effectively organized the literature into thematic categories or perspectives that parsimoniously captured the different meanings of authenticity. Importantly, it became apparent that each of these perspectives was rooted in distinct theoretical foundations. In addition, the second and third questions provided a useful way to organize distinct research themes within each of the three perspectives. Table 2 provides a summary of these three perspectives along with the respective theoretical foundations and current research themes.

We then categorized all of the articles in the full set according to these three perspectives and respective themes. The first two members of the author team completed this process. To ensure consistency when categorizing the articles, both authors independently reviewed a random sample of 25 articles, discussing and resolving any inconsistencies. Each then reviewed separately the remaining articles, frequently conferring with one another along the way. Some articles fell into a single perspective and theme, whereas others fell into two or more; patterns

regarding the latter are discussed in a later section of this review. Throughout this process and at the end, the author team discussed and refined our collective understanding of the literature. In doing so, we remained open to additional perspectives and themes represented in the literature but concluded that the full range of articles included in the review was accurately characterized by the initial framework.

In sum, three different perspectives of authenticity emerged from the review: (1) *authenticity as consistency* between an entity's external expressions and its internal values and beliefs; (2) *authenticity as conformity* to the social category to which an entity has been assigned or that it has claimed for itself; and (3) *authenticity as connection* to a person, place, or time as claimed. In the sections that follow, we discuss each of these perspectives in detail along with the respective theoretical foundations and current research themes.

## AUTHENTICITY AS CONSISTENCY

### Meaning of Authenticity

According to this first meaning of authenticity, an entity is authentic to the extent that it is *consistent* in terms of its external expressions on the one hand, and its internal values and beliefs on the other hand. Returning to the questions posed earlier, considerations of your “true self” at work (Guerrier & Adib, 2003) and whether or not you do—or even can—know who you really are (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011; Schlegel et al., 2009) would both be invoking this meaning of authenticity. If your evaluation of Waylon Jennings rests on the fact that he chose to write and perform music that reflected his personal values and beliefs, defying along the way the conventions of the Nashville music establishment (Peterson, 1997), then it, too, would be invoking this interpretation of the concept. In short, the referent at the root of an authenticity attribution according to this meaning is the entity itself: Is it true to itself?

### Theoretical Foundations

This first meaning has the oldest theoretical foundations, rooted in classical philosophical works by the Ancient Greeks (e.g., Socrates, Aristotle) and later work by thinkers from the Enlightenment (e.g., Rousseau) and Existentialist movements (e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Kierkegaard, 1983 [1849]; Sartre, 1943). Classic mid-century scholarship on impression

**TABLE 2**  
**Perspectives in Authenticity Research**

Authenticity as. . .	Consistency	Conformity	Connection
Meaning of authenticity	<i>An entity is authentic to the extent that it is consistent in terms of its external expressions and its internal values and beliefs.</i>	<i>An entity is authentic to the extent that it conforms to the social category to which it has been assigned or that it has claimed for itself.</i>	<i>An entity is authentic to the extent that it is connected to a particular person, place, or time as claimed.</i>
Theoretical foundations	Classical philosophy Ancient Greeks Rousseau Kierkegaard (1983) Heidegger (1962) Sartre (1943) Impression management Goffman (1959) Festinger (1957) Snyder (1974)	Cognitive schemas Murphy and Smith (1982) Posner and Keele (1967) Rosch (1973, 1975) Wittgenstein (1953) Institutional categories and genres Becker (1982) DiMaggio (1987) Hannan and Freeman (1977) Meyer and Rowan (1977)	Psychological essentialism Flavell et al. (1983) Gelman (2003) Medin and Ortony (1989) Rozin and Nemeroff (1990) Semiotics Baudrillard (1983) Mick (1986) Peirce (1940)
Current research themes	Self-concept Cable et al. (2013) Kernis and Goldman (2006) Harter (2002) Schlegel et al. (2011) Sheldon et al. (1997) Self-presentation Grandey (2000) Hewlin (2003) Hochschild (1983) Leroy et al. (2012) Walumbwa et al. (2008) Organizational and brand identity Beverland (2005) Hatch and Schultz (2017) Holt (2002) Morhart et al. (2015)	Category membership Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) Fine (2004) Glynn and Lounsbury (2005) Kovács et al. (2014) McKendrick and Hannan (2014) Peterson (1997) Category reinterpretation Harrison and Corley (2011) Negro et al. (2011) Rao et al. (2005) Weber et al. (2008)	Provenance Dutton (2003) Frazier et al. (2009) Newman and Dhar (2014) Smith et al. (2016) Valsesia et al. (2016) Transference Grayson and Martinec (2004) Grayson and Shulman (2000) Wang (1999) Symbolism Davies (2001) Hahl (2016) Leigh et al. (2006) Maccannell (1973)
Underlying assumption	Uniqueness	Sameness	Varies
Interpretive nature	Subjective	Combination	Objective
Authentication process	Reliance on lay judgments	Democratic and negotiated	Reliance on expert knowledge

*Note:* References provided here are intended to be illustrative not exhaustive.

management has also been highly influential (e.g., Goffman, 1959). We offer a brief overview of each.

**Classical philosophy.** The earliest references to authenticity date back to the Ancient Greeks (for an historical overview, see Kernis & Goldman, 2006). For example, Socrates emphasized the importance of self-understanding and reflection: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Aristotle, on the other hand, focused on the importance of action but, even here, the emphasis was on living in accordance with one’s *daimon* or “true self” (*Nicomachean Ethics*; see Waterman, 1990). Indeed, achieving consistency between one’s actions and true self was critical for achieving *eudaimonia* or “happiness” and a virtuous life. Such ideas created ripples

throughout history in later philosophical works. During the Enlightenment, for example, Rousseau emphasized the importance of “exploring and revealing one’s essential nature. . . as an absolute good” (Lindholm, 2008: 8). During the Existentialist movement, Kierkegaard (1983 [1849]: 130) called for one to “become what one is.” Heidegger (1962) and Sartre (1943) echoed this emphasis on individual agency and the importance of exercising the authority to choose to be one’s own in a society filled with seemingly infinite alternatives.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary

<sup>2</sup> Note that “authenticity” and “authority” share the same etymological roots; as such, the former has been taken by some to mean “acting on one’s own authority.”

scholars have speculated that the importance of one's true self emerged from life in this existential vacuum (Arnould & Price, 2000; Holt, 2002). Whereas past societies lived according to a set of shared values, such as religions or other traditions that guided individuals toward appropriate action and a meaningful life, individuals in modern societies with fewer commonly shared values have turned inward toward themselves in search of meaning. Of course, it is worthwhile to note that the broad impact of these classical philosophers has extended throughout history to literary traditions as well; as Polonius instructed Laertes in *Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene iii): "This above all: to thine own self be true."

**Impression management.** As the Enlightenment and Existentialist thinkers recognized and emphasized, the self does not exist in isolation but, instead, in a social context. Here again, literary traditions capture and echo the philosophical foundations of authenticity, as Jaques pronounces in *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene iii): "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. . .and so he plays his part." Goffman (1959) famously invoked this metaphor of the theater to highlight the distinction between the inner or private (i.e., "backstage") and outer or public (i.e., "front stage") spheres of our lives. Like actors in a play, the individual in social life "plays a part. . .offers his performance and puts on his show 'for the benefit of other people'" (p. 17). On the one hand, "sincere" individuals believe that their own words and actions are in line with their true self, "convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality" (p. 10).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, "cynical" individuals feel obliged to play a part for the benefit of customers, clients, patients, or the like. For Goffman (citing Sartre), such roles are wholly ceremonial: "The public demands of them that they realize it as ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, a tailor, an auctioneer. . ." (p. 76) even if "the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (p. 113). This notion of impression management—that is, the *expressions* of the performer intended to manage the *impressions* formed by audiences—as a form of misalignment between the front and

backstages of life fascinated Goffman's contemporaries as well. Classical work on related topics such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) equally imply a true self operating the backstage, which may produce inconsistencies between it and the front stage presented to others. Together, these theoretical foundations reveal longstanding traditions that explore self-understanding and awareness, and in turn, how individuals express in both word and deed their true selves to others.

### Current Research Themes

Our review revealed three general research themes that have adopted the perspective of authenticity as consistency. In line with the theoretical foundations out of which these themes have arisen, the primary focus has been on individuals even though other entities have also been considered. The common thread across each of the three themes discussed below is a concern with consistency between the "front" and "back" stages (Goffman, 1959). Each assumes that the backstage represents the "true self," whereas the front stage may or may not be an accurate portrayal of it. However, each emphasizes the front versus backstages in distinct ways.

**Self-concept.** Research within this first theme focuses primarily on the backstage. This work builds largely on the theoretical foundations in classical philosophy outlined above that have considered how to conceptualize the self. Common definitions generally reflect this focus on how one views oneself. For example, authenticity has been defined as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006: 293), "behavior that is phenomenally experienced as being authored by the self" (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), alignment of "our internal experiences with our external expressions" (Cable et al., 2013: 6), "act[ing] in accordance with one's own sense of self, emotions, and values" (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015: 984), and, more simply, "that sense of 'who we really are'" (Costas & Fleming, 2009: 356). Other specific definitions abound, but all are similarly focused on the backstage and treat the true self as moral (Christy, Seto, Schlegel, Vess, & Hicks, 2016; Newman, de Freitas, & Knobe, 2015), fundamentally good (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014), and the ideal version of one's self (Strohming, Knobe, & Newman, 2017) which one ought to pursue

<sup>3</sup>Note that the title and text of Trilling's (1972) influential book shares this same label: *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

(Svejenova, 2005; Vieira, Pappamikail, & Resende, 2013).

A number of different factors have been shown to give rise to the feeling that one is acting in accordance with her true self. Most commonly, scholars have considered how different psychological states prompt such feelings; for example, high levels of nostalgia (Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2015), power (Chen, Langner, & Mendoza-Denton, 2009; Joshi & Fast, 2013; Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013; Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011), positive mood (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013; the suppression of negative moods has the opposite effect: Le & Impett, 2016), autonomy (Heppner, Kernis, Nezlek, Foster, Lakey, & Goldman, 2008), and attachment security (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010), among others, all enhance feelings of authenticity. Alternatively, some behaviors such as making personal sacrifices (Kogan, Impett, Oveis, Hui, Gordon, & Keltner, 2010), doing meaningful work (Endrissat, Islam, & Noppeney, 2015), and participating in particular consumption experiences (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Hahl, Zuckerman, & Kim 2017; Leigh et al., 2006; Rose & Wood, 2005; van der Laan & Velthuis, 2016) have also been shown to increase authenticity. Finally, some organizational practices, such as newcomer socialization (Cable et al., 2013), have been shown to elicit employees' true selves; others, such as high-commitment management practices, have been shown to suppress them (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Taken together, various individual states, behaviors, and contextual factors all tend to elicit the true self.

In turn, the feeling that one is acting in accordance with her true self has been shown to predict a range of positive outcomes for the individual and others. In general, it tends to produce positive psychological benefits such as increased well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Kifer et al., 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Suh, 2002), higher self-esteem (Heppner et al., 2008), shame-free guilt (Vess, Schlegel, Hicks, & Arndt, 2014), and a greater sense of meaning (Schlegel et al., 2009, 2011). Feelings of authentic (vs. hubristic) pride have been shown to have similar positive effects (Ashton-James & Tracy, 2012; Huang, Dong, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; McFerran, Aquino, & Tracy, 2014; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Weidman, Tracy, & Elliot, 2016). In addition, feelings of authenticity can also lead to social benefits such as a greater sense of belonging (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). The converse of these findings also seems to be true: feelings

of inauthenticity can produce negative outcomes such as feelings of immorality and impurity (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). Beyond the self, various positive outcomes associated with authenticity have significant implications within organizations related to hiring decisions, work engagement, employee satisfaction, and employee turnover (Cable et al., 2013; Moore, Lee, Kim, & Cable, 2017).

In sum, studies within this body of research have focused on the backstage and assume that it represents the true self. However, one notable point of unsettled debate is the nature of the true self over time: Is it constant or evolving? As reflected by the measurement scales of authenticity most commonly used within this theme, several scholars suggest that the true self is constant, akin to a personality trait (i.e., Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008), whereas others would suggest that it is a state that is prone to develop or change over time (e.g., Harter, 2002). The evidence is not entirely clear on the issue (Chen, English, & Peng, 2006; English & Chen, 2007, 2011; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Showers, Ditzfeld, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015) but does suggest that the notions of trait and state authenticity are at least distinct from one another (Lenton et al., 2013). Perhaps most interesting is that lay theories on the matter seem to vary (Johnson & Boyd, 1995; Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012). The dominant view, at least in Western cultures, is that the true self is essentialized (Schlegel et al., 2009) and, as such, to be “‘discovered’ rather than created through an effort of will” (Johnson, Robinson, & Mitchell, 2004: 627). However, others point to the importance of “self-referential behaviors that reveal or produce the true self” (Arnould & Price, 2000: 8). Such distinctions raise interesting questions about whether authenticity is more about being “true to self” versus “remaining true to the authentic self one has created” (Peterson, 2005: 1089). Despite the more recent arrival of these topics into studies of workplace behavior, such questions are, of course, by no means new; debates on the matter date back decades (Sartre, 1943) if not centuries (e.g., Aristotle). Such fundamental questions will undoubtedly persist for years to come and offer exciting new directions for management scholars.

**Self-presentation.** Research within this second theme focuses primarily on the front stage of the self. It, too, draws on the theoretical foundations in classical philosophy outlined above; however, it also builds largely on the foundations in impression management that have considered how individuals present themselves to external audiences in social



settings. Scholars within this theme acknowledge the many apparent advantages of consistency between the front and backstages of the self; at the same time, however, they also emphasize that social and organizational pressures often compel individuals to present themselves in ways that are misaligned with their true selves. Scholars have studied the presentation of the self in a range of social relationships, including casual and intimate partnerships (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001; Lemay & Clark, 2008a, 2008b; Lemay & Dudley, 2011; Swann, de LaRonde, & Hixon, 1994). However, the vast majority of research included in the review and within this theme falls within one of two rather well-defined research streams: emotional labor and authentic leadership.<sup>4</sup> With few exceptions (e.g., Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009; Humphrey, 2012), these two streams have developed in isolation of one another despite the shared theoretical foundations and focus. Accordingly, we discuss each in turn.

The first stream is emotional labor, which is “the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for organizational goals” (Grandey, 2000: 97; see also Gross, 1998). This general definition of the public expression of personal emotions draws on Hochschild’s (1983) seminal work that coined the term and focused on employees’ customer service encounters, as well as later work that focused on other workplace relationships (e.g., Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996). The language frequently used to discuss emotional labor is evocative of Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of the theater: “acting.” Surface acting refers to the regulation of observable expressions and is considered “fake,” whereas deep acting refers to the regulation of feelings such that expressed emotions are “truly felt inside” (Cote, Hideg, & van Kleef, 2013: 453); in other words, the former is considered inauthentic and the latter authentic. Others have invoked different but related language. For example, “facades of conformity” refer to “false representations [of the self] created by employees to appear as if they embrace organizational values” (Hewlin, 2003: 633). The dominant emphasis across each of these studies is on the front stage

and the primary interest is in understanding the causes and outcomes of *inauthenticity*.

A number of different factors have been shown to give rise to the inauthentic expressions of one’s true emotions. Following Hochschild’s (1983) initial emphasis on the impact of role demands in the workplace environment, much subsequent work has also focused on organizational settings where customers expect “service with a smile” (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005) such as retail (e.g., Pounders, Babin, & Close, 2015), tourism (e.g., Guerrier & Adib, 2003), and health care (e.g., Grandey et al., 2012; Hayward & Tuckey, 2011). The general consensus across these studies and others is that workplace roles that demand affective displays are more likely to elicit surface acting. In addition, individual factors have also been shown to predict inauthentic expressions, including collectivism (Hewlin, 2009), male gender (Averill, 1999), and specific leadership types (Griffith, Connelly, Thiel, & Johnson, 2015). Contextual factors have also been examined, such as job insecurity (Hewlin, Kim, & Song, 2016) and sleep deprivation (Barnes, Guarana, Nauman, & Kong, 2016). Across the various studies, the common theme is that individuals frequently feel compelled to display emotions that are not aligned with their true feelings.

These false presentations of one’s self have generally been shown to produce negative outcomes. Again, following Hochschild’s (1983) initial emphasis, many studies have shown that surface acting by employees has a negative impact on customers’ satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2005), loyalty (Wang, Singh, Li, Mishra, Ambrose, & Biernat, 2017), and even emotional states (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Other studies have demonstrated negative effects on employees themselves in the form of reduced well-being and job satisfaction (Martinez, Sawyer, Thoroughgood, Ruggs, & Smith, 2017; Pugh, Groth, & Hennig-Thurau, 2011), stress (Bono & Vey, 2007), and turnover (Hewlin, 2009; Hewlin et al., 2016). These negative outcomes, however, can be buffered by stronger relationships (Wang & Groth, 2014) and organizational cultures that embrace authentic self-expression (Grandey et al., 2012). Recent studies have even demonstrated some of the “bright sides” of emotional labor (Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015). At a basic level, surface acting can sometimes enable one to carry out tasks the employee finds important albeit emotionally exhausting (Hayward & Tuckey, 2011). In addition, even faked positive emotions can help to form favorable first impressions (Trichas & Schyns, 2012) and elicit positive affect

<sup>4</sup> It is worthwhile to note that extensive reviews exist for both of these streams. Among others, for emotional labor, Grandey (2000); for authentic leadership, Avolio and Gardner (2005). Of course, our aim here is not to conduct yet another review of these literatures *per se* but, rather, to review them through the lens of authenticity and to situate them within a broader conceptual framework of the construct.

from others via emotional contagion (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Taken together, most studies in this first stream point to the negative outcomes of false presentations of the self, even as some positive outcomes of individual and organizational importance have also been noted.

The second research stream is authentic leadership. Although it has been defined in various subtly different ways, those who developed the most commonly used measure (i.e., Authentic Leadership Questionnaire) define it as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008: 94). These four dimensions are aligned with and borrow heavily from the conceptualization of authenticity proposed by Kernis and Goldman (2006; for similar conceptualizations and measures of authentic leadership, Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). Yet, even though scholars frequently refer to such research that focuses on the backstage or “true self” (e.g., Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), the dominant emphasis is on the front stage or the presentation of the self from the viewpoint of others, namely, followers.

Although some studies have examined various antecedents of authentic leadership (e.g., leader enactment: Weischer, Weibler, & Peterson, 2013; gender: Eagly, 2005; Monzani, Bark, van Dick, & Maria Peiro, 2015; various individual differences: Peus et al., 2012), the vast majority has sought to demonstrate the range of positive outcomes of it. Early studies focused on individual-level benefits for followers, including both psychological outcomes such as well-being (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015), psychological capital (Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014), trust in (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010) and satisfaction with the leader (Peus et al., 2012), and even authentic followership (Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015), and behavioral outcomes such as increased job performance (Leroy et al., 2012), helping and other extra-role behaviors (Hirst, Walumbwa, Aryee, Butarbutar, & Chen, 2016; Hsiung, 2012; Liu, Liao, & Wei, 2015; Mehmood, Hamstra, Nawab, & Vriend, 2016), and ethical decision-making (Cianci, Hannah, Roberts, & Tsakumis, 2014). Responding to calls for multilevel

research (e.g., Yammarino, Dionne, Shelley, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008), more recent studies have demonstrated team-level benefits such as productivity (Hannah, Walumbwa, & Fry, 2011; Lyubovnikova, Legood, Turner, & Mamakouka, 2017) and performance (Rego, Reis Junior, & Pina e Cunha, 2015), commitment (Rego, Vitoria, Magalhaes, Ribeiro, & Pina e Cunha, 2013), ethical climate (Zhu, Avolio, Riggio, & Sosik, 2011), and workplace inclusion (Boekhorst, 2015). In short, leaders perceived as authentic appear to engender a host of positive outcomes for individuals and teams.

Although authentic leadership has enjoyed a great deal of positive attention among leadership scholars over the past decade, it has also faced two specific critiques. First, the conceptual and empirical distinctions between it and other forms of positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005), such as transformational (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Price, 2003), ethical (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Toor & Ofori, 2009), responsible (Pless & Maak, 2011), and servant leadership (Sun, 2013), among others (e.g., Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015; Whittington, Pitts, Kageler, & Goodwin, 2005), have been less than clear. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis concluded that “the relationship between authentic and transformational leadership is large in magnitude, suggesting construct redundancy” (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016: 634). Others have suggested that these overlapping theories merely capture affective responses such that followers are simply “more dedicated to leaders they ‘like’” (Hannah, Sumanth, Lester, & Cavarretta, 2014: 608). Roughly half of the authentic leadership articles included in this review were non-empirical and many focused on this issue of conceptual distinction. Perhaps for this reason, some scholars have recently begun to examine some of the dimensions of the construct in isolation (e.g., Vogelgesang, Leroy, & Avolio, 2013). Second, the inherent ethical component of the construct has raised concerns by some scholars. Although some would argue that this ethical component is part of “the point” in studying positive organizational behavior (Luthans & Avolio, 2009), others would argue that “authenticity is not intrinsically ethical” (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 118) and that the two have been confounded (Mumford & Fried, 2014; see also Liu, Cutcher, & Grant, 2017). We echo both of these critiques and, at the same time, acknowledge the important role of authenticity in the domain of leadership.

In sum, both streams of research—emotional labor and authentic leadership—view authenticity as consistency between one's front and backstages, and both have generally emphasized the front stage. Moreover, both assume—and sometimes even show—that others (e.g., customers, coworkers, and followers) can detect authenticity based on a view of the front stage alone. At the same time, the two streams also differ in at least one important way. As noted in our discussion of the self-concept theme, here, too, the temporal nature of the true self is not entirely clear. Nearly all of the studies in the emotional labor stream would suggest that authenticity changes over time depending on the context. As noted by Guerrier and Adib (2003: 1399) in their study of tour representatives, individuals often “actively seek spaces. . . that they see as reflecting their authentic selves.” Alternatively, most studies in the authentic leadership stream would suggest that authenticity is inherently stable, which is reflected in the conceptualization and measurement of the construct (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Of course, a few offer a divergent view, suggesting that authentic leadership “is emergent from [a] narrative process” (Sparrowe, 2005: 419) and even go so far as to claim that “inauthenticity is inevitable” at times (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 118), but these seem to represent a minority perspective. Taken together, the two streams highlight once again the tension between the constant versus evolving nature of the true self, here, as it relates to one's presentation of the self.

**Organizational and brand identity.** Research within this third theme has generally been an extension of the second (i.e., self-presentation) and, to a lesser extent, the first (i.e., self-concept), to entities other than individuals, namely, organizations and their brands. Scholars within this theme frequently draw on the theoretical foundations in both classical philosophy and impression management as well as the work in the first two themes outlined above. Here, research does not fall quite as cleanly into distinct streams; however, in general, studies focus on either the identity of an organization or of a brand. Accordingly, we discuss each in turn.

First, some research has focused on the authenticity of organizations. In defining organizational authenticity, scholars tend to draw explicit links to the theoretical foundations in classical philosophy as well as work from psychology within the self-concept theme. For example, Carroll and Wheaton (2009: 261; “moral authenticity”) suggest that “. . . by analogy, an organization would be authentic to the extent that it embodies the chosen values of its

founders, owners or members. . .” The emphasis in such definitions is on organizational values (i.e., the backstage; see also Baron, 2004), but, at the same time, most empirical studies tend to focus on audience perceptions of organizational action (i.e., the front stage). Audiences have been shown to make authenticity attributions on the basis of observed production processes (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings, 2013; Weber et al., 2008), product names (Verhaal et al., 2015), advertising campaigns (Moeran, 2005), ownership structure (Frake, 2017; Kovács et al., 2014), the extent to which it is “local” (Cutcher, 2014), and even CEO portraits (Guthey & Jackson, 2005). Such attributions of authenticity tend to translate into audience appeal for the organization and its products and services. In addition, audiences have been shown to evaluate the authenticity of an organization on the specific basis of its corporate social responsibility programs (Beckman, Colwell, & Cunningham, 2009; Cuypers, Koh, & Wang, 2016; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Skilton & Purdy, 2017) and the manner in which such programs are publicized or not (Carlos & Lewis, 2017). Although most research has focused on audience perceptions of the front stage, some have considered how organizational members collectively understand and even construct the backstage (e.g., Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Cording, Harrison, Hoskisson, & Jonsen, 2014; Liedtka, 2008), often via an agentic use of its own history (Hatch & Schultz, 2017); such considerations have also extended beyond the boundaries of the organization to communities and other collective identities (Blaikie, 2001; Etzioni, 1996; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). In sum, this collection of research may seem disparate at first blush, but the common thread is an interest in organizational authenticity, conceived as the consistency between the organization's values and its actions.

Second, other research has focused on the authenticity of brands. Here, too, scholars tend to emphasize the backstage in conceptual definitions of authenticity but focus on the front stage in empirical examinations of it. As Holt (2002: 83) put it: “To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.” Drawing on this early work, others have similarly emphasized notions of “faithfulness” and “truth” (Morhart, Malar, Guevremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015: 203), “consistency” (Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012: 969), “sincerity” (Beverland, 2005: 1008), and “trust” (Fueller,

Schroll & von Hippel, 2013). Several studies have shown how audiences, and consumers in particular, make authenticity attributions on the basis of emotional branding tactics (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006) such as storytelling (Beverland, 2005; Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). Others have shown the impact of such factors as craft production methods (Beverland, 2005) and the perception of value alignment between the brand and its employees (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013) or consumers (Kates, 2004). Brand authenticity tends to engender such positive responses as brand identification and attachment (Baker, Rapp, Meyer, & Mullins, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015), product adoption (Fueller et al., 2013), and sales (Beverland, 2005). In sum, research on brand authenticity is a bit more coherent than that on organizational authenticity in that the former has primarily come from a smaller circle of scholars; however, the two are generally conceptualized in similar ways.

Taken together, research within this theme conceptualizes authenticity as consistency but extends this conceptualization to entities other than individuals, namely, organizations and their brands. Both of the bodies of research highlighted here point to related tensions raised by the first two themes. On the one hand, most scholars would acknowledge that organizational and brand identities change over time. On the other hand, findings suggest that audiences demand that organizations and their brands be consistent not only in terms of their values and actions but also over time. Such expectations pose challenges for organizations operating in dynamic environments (Holt, 2002). Consequently, images of authenticity are often “partly true and partly rhetorical” as managers attempt to maintain an authentic identity over time (Beverland, 2005: 1008). Compounding the challenge is that touting one’s own authenticity can backfire, making one come off as anything but authentic (Kovács, Carroll, & Lehman, 2017). This tension between the constant versus evolving nature of authenticity is thus highlighted once again when one considers organizations and brands.

### Summary

Authenticity has been conceptualized here as *consistency* between an entity’s external expressions on the one hand, and its internal values and beliefs on the other hand. Some scholars have emphasized the latter, whereas others have emphasized the former; in addition, a growing number of scholars have applied this conceptualization to organizational and

brand identities. Regardless of the emphasis or entity of interest, the referent in any case is the entity itself: Is it true to itself? As such, this meaning of authenticity continues to reverberate from its roots in individual self-understanding. When considering other entities, then, it is intriguing that scholars and audiences alike seem to personify organizations and even brands as if they were individuals with a “true self” at their core. Organizations are referred to as “moral” (Frake, 2017) and “sincere” (Cuypers et al., 2016) to the extent that they “walk the talk and live up to their claims” (Skilton & Purdy, 2017: 104; see also Cording et al., 2014; Dhanani & Connolly, 2015). Brands are similarly accorded a “personality” (Thompson et al., 2006: 50) that might be considered “sincere” or even “rugged” (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016: 58) and are evaluated on the basis of whether or not they will “betray” the consumer (Morhart et al., 2015: 213). Yet, even if any of these entities indeed express their true selves, the temporal nature of such identities remains unclear as discussed in each of the themes above. Moreover, access to the “backstage” is challenging at best, even for one’s own self or organization. As Freeman and Auster (2011: 19) note: “‘Know thyself’ is easy to say and hard to accomplish.” Of course, scholars working within the self-presentation theme assume that the front stage is the only glimpse one has into another’s backstage; however, even within the self-concept theme, scholars have shown that individuals vary in the extent to which they believe they can access their true self (e.g., Schlegel et al., 2011). Within the organizational and brand identity theme, identities are frequently perceived differently by various stakeholders, whether they be internal (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) or external (e.g., Baker et al., 2014; Kates, 2004) to the organization. Taken together, we suggest that the conceptualization of authenticity as consistency across these three themes could be strengthened through a richer consideration of the temporal nature of such identities.

## AUTHENTICITY AS CONFORMITY

### Meaning of Authenticity

According to this second meaning, an entity is authentic to the extent that it *conforms* to the social category to which it has been assigned or that it has claimed for itself. Returning again to the questions posed earlier, deliberations about whether or not last night’s symphonic orchestra was true to the genre of classical music (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), if the

hosts of your most recent dinner party poured real Barolo wine (Negro et al., 2011)<sup>5</sup>, or if your favorite eatery down the street really serves traditional Thai cuisine (Kovács et al., 2014) would all be invoking this meaning of authenticity. In addition, if your evaluation of Waylon Jennings rests not on his expression of a unique personality but, instead, on whether or not he conforms to the category of country music—perhaps because he appears to fit the part in his cowboy boots and hat (Peterson, 1997)—then it, too, would be invoking this interpretation. In short, the referent at the root of an authenticity attribution according to this meaning can be found outside of the entity: Is it acting in accordance with the norms and expectations of its social category?

### Theoretical Foundations

This second meaning has more contemporary foundations, rooted in work in cognitive psychology on schemas (Medin & Smith, 1984; Rosch, 1973) and in work in sociology on institutional categories (e.g., Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and genres (e.g., Becker, 1982; DiMaggio, 1987). We offer a brief overview of each.

**Cognitive categories and schemas.** Cognitive psychologists have long emphasized the role that concepts and categories play in structuring human cognition. Dating to early cognitive linguistic work on concepts by Wittgenstein (1953), the main thrust of the argument is that categories are cognitive devices that individuals use to organize, recall, and communicate information (for an excellent overview, Murphy 2002; see also Goldstone, Kersten, & Carvalho, 2003; Medin & Smith, 1984). For example, individuals do not need to remember that a given object is red, weighs eight ounces, and is edible; instead, they simply remember that it is an apple. Deviating from the prevailing view of category membership based on Aristotelian logic at the time, Rosch (1973, 1975) noted that not all members of a given category are the same. Instead, the human mind organizes concepts according to the internal structure of typical category members or even a summary representation of a category as a whole, such as the extent to which entities share common features (Rosch & Mervis, 1975) or aims (Barsalou, 1985); for example, most individuals might claim that an apple is a more typical fruit than an avocado.

Cognitive categories and schemas thus provide a more coherent understanding of entities (Markman, 1999; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977) and aid in identifying new members (Murphy & Brownwell, 1985), learning new categories (Horton & Markman, 1980; Murphy & Smith, 1982), and remembering (Posner & Keele, 1967) and communicating abstract information (Murphy & Medin, 1985), all of which are foundational to authenticity as conformity.

**Institutional categories and genres.** The study of categories from institutional and ecological approaches in sociology and organization theory takes a more macro view, focusing on the norms and processes that shape categories (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The main argument here is that the ways in which categories emerge and evolve are shaped by societal level processes. Consistent with the idea of cognitive schemas above, “organizations that display a common pattern are treated as belonging to a form” (Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2007: 30). This is important insofar as it helps to make sense of and group similarities among a range of entities. When there is enough agreement about a set of entities that share commonalities, categories emerge and are labeled accordingly. Such categories are similar to the classification systems used by sociologists (e.g., genres) and defined as the different “kind” or “type” of entities (e.g., artists) that share similar form or content, social relations, or are otherwise “classified together on the basis of perceived similarities” (DiMaggio, 1987: 441; see also Becker, 1982; Lena & Peterson, 2008). This process of category emergence and evolution is important because the identity of an entity consists of “social codes, or sets of rules, specifying the features that an organization is expected to possess” (Hsu & Hannan, 2005: 475). Conformity to these codes or categories is generally rewarded and deviations penalized (Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2011; Zuckerman, 1999, 2000). What these theoretical foundations share, whether discussing forms, categories, or genres, is a focus on the classification of entities by external audiences engaging in a perceptual organizing and sensemaking process; such processes are central to understanding authenticity as conformity.

### Current Research Themes

Our review revealed two research themes that have adopted the perspective of authenticity as conformity. In line with the theoretical foundations out of which these themes have arisen, the primary focus of study has been on organizations—or, more

<sup>5</sup> This particular example points to possible relationships between the meanings of authenticity, which are discussed further in a later section of this review.

generally, producers—even though other entities have been considered. The common thread across both is whether or not an entity conforms to its social category. Given that this interpretation of authenticity is rooted in more contemporary theoretical foundations, it is not surprising that the two research themes that emerged here are more closely aligned with one another compared with the themes outlined in the previous section. Indeed, scholars within both themes define authenticity in similar ways. Davies (2001: 203) offers, perhaps, the most straightforward definition of authenticity as conformity: “Authenticity reflects a concern with correct classification” and, as such, an entity “is an authentic X if it is an instance or member of the class of Xs.” Others have offered similar definitions, suggesting that authenticity refers to whether or not an entity conforms to “an idealized representation of reality” (Grazian, 2003: 10), “the conventions of a category or genre” (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2005: 969), “the criteria for group membership” (Jimenez, 2008: 1530), or, simply put, “is true to its associated type or category or genre” (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009: 257; “type authenticity”). At the same time, however, some scholars have emphasized the perceptions of external audiences, whereas others have focused more on an entity’s active and agentic engagement with the category, often in attempts to reshape the boundaries of it (for discussions of this distinction beyond the scope of authenticity, Hannan et al., 2007; Hsu, Hannan, & Kocak, 2009); we discuss each in turn.

**Category membership.** Research within this theme emphasizes the role of audiences in defining the boundaries of social categories and determining membership within them. Scholars here operate according to “the classical sociological notion that social identity is granted by external agents” and that “audience members grant a producer’s membership in a category” (Hsu et al., 2009: 152). As such, it is audiences who determine whether or not an entity is authentic (McKendrick & Hannan, 2014). Empirical studies generally focus on the range of rewards conferred on entities that audiences deem authentic. Various types of audience members play a role in defining categories and determining membership within them (Pontikes, 2012).

Audience members such as consumers use categories as a way to locate and evaluate authenticity. One way they do so is through public discourse; for example, several sets of studies have used text analysis to show that consumers rely on authenticity-laden language on online review websites to evaluate the authenticity of producer organizations and communicate this information to others (Frake, 2017; Kovács et al., 2014; Verhaal et al., 2015). Enthusiasts

tend to play a particularly powerful role in determining the extent to which producers conform to a given category as well as the appeal of the category itself (McKendrick & Hannan, 2014). Consumers also tend to make assessments about conformity to categories on the basis of visible features that are closely associated with category membership, such as particular production methods (Beverland, 2009; Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Hirsch & Tene, 2013). Finally, membership in multiple categories generally reduces perceptions of authenticity (Kovács et al., 2014; see also studies on the topic of stereotypes, e.g., Yogeewaran & Dasgupta, 2010). Indeed, it is clear that consumers play a central role in determining whether or not entities are authentic by assessing their fit within existing and generally accepted social categories and, in doing so, shaping the evolution of those categories over time.

Audience members such as critics, regulators, and even professional associations tend to take a more active role by using categories to control the criteria for authenticity attributions. For example, Glynn and Lounsbury (2005: 1031) provide evidence from reviews of symphonic orchestra performances of how critics serve as “gatekeepers for the authenticity of cultural genres” by patrolling the boundaries that define the category. As one would expect, the power of critics in policing authenticity is especially high in cultural fields where critics are able to define the identity of producers, such as labeling some as “self-taught” (Fine, 2004) or even others along racial lines (Anthony, 2012; Grazian, 2003); critics have also been shown to play a similar role in related domains such as dining (Rao et al., 2005) and wine (Beverland, 2005; Voronov et al., 2013), among others. Similarly, regulators sometimes play an active role in determining whether or not an entity is an authentic member of particular categories by establishing such rules as those concerning the production of foie gras (DeSoucey, 2010) or the origins of ingredients for champagne (Guy, 2003). Professional associations frequently take on comparable roles (Frake, 2017; Verhaal, Hoskins, & Lundmark, 2017). In short, “there is a cycle of authentication involving everyone active in the field” (Peterson, 2005: 1091) as a range of audience members play a role not only in determining whether an entity is authentic but also in defining the criteria used to make such judgments.

Both types of audiences tend to reward entities that are deemed authentic because of category membership. Of course, sociologists have long studied audience reactions to organizational membership in single and multiple categories (e.g., Hsu, 2006). To the extent that such assessments of membership are associated with authenticity, consumers

tend to reward entities with higher ratings (Frake, 2017; Kovács et al., 2014; Lehman, Kovács, & Carroll, 2014; Verhaal et al., 2015), greater willingness to pay (O'Connor, Carroll, & Kovács, 2017), increased sales (Beverland, 2005; McKendrick & Hannan, 2014), and the like. Consistent with these findings, critics, regulators, and professional associations bestow on authentic entities greater legitimacy among other rewards (Anthony, 2012; DeSoucey, 2010; Frake, 2017; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Guy, 2003; Verhaal et al., 2017). Some research points to the idea that such rewards may depend on *which* category is in question. Several studies on cultural consumption suggest that audiences may be especially inclined to reward authentic entities if the category in question is exotic (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Zukin, Lindeman, & Hurson, 2017) or even “lowbrow” (Fine, 2004; Hahl et al., 2017). In addition, some audience members may be more (or less) inclined than others to reward category membership (Goldberg, Hannan, & Kovács, 2016). In general, however, audiences tend to reward entities deemed authentic because of category membership.

In sum, research within this theme has emphasized the role of audiences in defining the boundaries of social categories and determining membership within them. In doing so, it has tended to focus on the roles of consumers on the one hand and critics, regulators, and professional associations on the other hand. In addition, it has emphasized the various rewards that an entity stands to gain from authenticity. In general, the criteria for category membership is assumed to remain relatively stable over time and the role of audiences is to determine whether or not entities fit within the boundaries of existing categories. Even though scholars have examined how debates about category membership are resolved and which logics apply in making authenticity attributions (e.g., Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), the dominant focus is on whether and how organizations conform to existing categories from the viewpoint of audiences.

**Category reinterpretation.** Research within this theme emphasizes the entity’s active and agentic engagement with a category and its boundaries. In other words, scholars within this theme assume that entities must devote a finite set of resources to “learning about the preferences of the audience for each category, tailoring the offering to those tastes, and developing authenticity” (Hsu et al., 2009: 155). These scholars tend to assume that social categories and the categories that define them are in “continual flux” (Lu & Fine, 1995: 538); accordingly, entities engage in “authenticity work” to situate themselves within those categories and, importantly, to redefine the boundaries of them to make authenticity claims. As

such, many of these scholars suggest that authenticity can ironically be “manufactured” (Jones, Anand, & Alvarez, 2005) or even “fabricated” (Peterson, 1997).

Entities actively engage with a category and its boundaries in pursuit of authenticity in various ways. For example, Rao et al. (2005: 972) showed how French chefs borrowed from opposing categories of classical and nouvelle cuisine to effectively redraw the boundaries of the culinary categories; importantly, they found that “high-status actors...can innovate through cross-category borrowing and still be protected against accusations that they are not authentic.” Weber et al. (2008) showed how small-scale farmers and other producers engaged directly with audiences to form a grassroots movement, creating a new category for grass-fed meat and dairy products. Harrison and Corley (2011) offer a unique perspective on category reinterpretation; that is, a producer might “cultivate” the broader culture by exporting cultural materials in an attempt to align the category with itself. In each case, “producers are not subservient to critics but, instead, redefine boundaries for the critics to recognize” (Rao et al., 2005: 989). In other words, the producer engages with the category and various audiences in deliberate ways so as to achieve or even create authenticity.

Entities are especially inclined to engage in category reinterpretation under particular conditions. In their study of Italian winemakers, Negro et al. (2011: 1460) suggest that entities tend to actively engage in efforts to reinterpret category boundaries when there exists “competing views of authenticity based on differing interpretations of categorical schemas.” Similarly, Grazian’s (2003) ethnography of Chicago blues clubs showed how existing members of a category seek to (re)define its boundaries at the exclusion of new entrants to it. Others suggest that entities tend to engage in category reinterpretation as a way to manage the tensions created by membership within multiple categories at the same time (e.g., Archer, 2012; Jimenez, 2008). Taken together, entities appear to pursue authenticity via category reinterpretation when the category or their position within it is threatened or otherwise at risk.

In sum, research within this theme has emphasized the role of entities in reinterpreting the boundaries of social categories in pursuit of authenticity. Studies within this theme generally agree that entities stand to benefit from being deemed authentic. However, the emphasis here is primarily on the agentic pursuit and claims of authenticity; the rewards of authenticity are generally regarded as a taken-for-granted assumption. Somewhat contrary to the studies in the previous theme, categories are treated here more as evolving over time. When

tensions arise, producers exert their own influence to create and shape boundary definitions. The result, then, is that authenticity is not only a question of whether or not an entity belongs to an existing category or which logic is employed but also about understanding the evolution of categories themselves.

## Summary

Authenticity has been conceptualized here as *conformity* of an entity to the social category to which it has been assigned or that it has claimed for itself. Some scholars have emphasized the role of external audiences, whereas others have emphasized the role of entities themselves. Of course, the two themes are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, several studies suggest that both audiences and entities play an active—and often joint—role in determining who is authentic and who is not (e.g., Beverland, 2005; Peterson, 2005). However, we contend that the distinction is conceptually useful here, given its application to other work on institutional categories beyond the scope of authenticity (e.g., Hannan et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2009). Regardless of the emphasis or entity of interest, the referent in any case is the social category. That is, does the entity adhere to the norms and expectations of its category? Scholars who have adopted this meaning of authenticity have tended to remain close to its theoretical foundations, studying organizations or other producers; and, when studying other entities, they tend to do so through an organizational lens. Particularly interesting is the tension about the temporal nature of authenticity that is highlighted once again by the two research themes discussed above. Entities operate within the context of existing categories and audiences make authenticity attributions on the basis of conformity to norms and expectations inherent in those categories. At the same time, the boundaries of those categories change over time and entities may play an active role in the process. Once again, extant research points to interesting questions about the temporal nature of authenticity but is unable as of yet to offer many solid answers. We suggest that the conceptualization of authenticity as conformity could thus also be strengthened through a richer consideration of how categories emerge and evolve over time.

## AUTHENTICITY AS CONNECTION

### Meaning of Authenticity

According to this third meaning, an entity is authentic to the extent that it is *connected* to a person,

place, or time as claimed. Returning one more time to the questions posed earlier, concerns about the authenticity of your favorite pair of Levi's jeans (Newman & Dhar, 2014) or of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) would both be invoking this interpretation of authenticity. If your evaluation of Waylon Jennings is based on whether or not his live performances were accurate portrayals of his original recordings (Peterson, 1997), then it, too, would be invoking this meaning, as would a debate about whether or not he indeed played a particular guitar in question or about whether or not he was born on a small farm in rural Texas as claimed. In short, the referent at the root of an authenticity attribution according to this meaning can also be found outside of the entity but, here, is a specific person, place, or time: Is the entity connected to it as claimed?

### Theoretical Foundations

This third meaning is rooted in work on both psychological essentialism (e.g., Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989) and semiotics (e.g., Baudrillard, 1983; Mick, 1986; Peirce, 1940). Scholars have drawn on both of these foundations, often in tandem, to conceptualize authenticity as connection. We offer a brief overview of each.

**Psychological essentialism.** Accounts of psychological essentialism date back at least to Plato's allegory of the cave and later work by John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers on human understanding (Gelman, 2004; Medin & Ortony, 1989). The main argument is that certain entities contain an "essence" or a quality that audiences cannot directly observe (Gelman, 2003). Stemming from related research on concepts and categories outlined above, much of this work treats the notion of essentialism as part of a larger study of how the human mind organizes and makes sense of the world, often through the lens of linguistics and psychological development. Essentialist scholars make a notable distinction that the question of essence is not simply a metaphysical one (i.e., it is not "out there" somewhere in physical reality) but, rather, one of psychological representation (i.e., it is how individuals represent in their own minds the physical world around them), something that even young children can distinguish (Bloom, 2000; Flavell, Flavell, & Green, 1983). Importantly, not only is an entity's essence nonvisible, inherent, and difficult to remove but also it can be passed from one entity to another without diminishing it (Gelman, 2003). As such, individuals tend to psychologically represent nonvisible concepts through



the process of contagion. Consider, for example, a sweater worn by Hitler or a faux-pearl necklace once belonging to Jacqueline Onassis (Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). “One does not *become* Hitler by wearing his sweater; one does not *become* Jackie O. by wearing her pearls. Rather, you possess a bit of their being” (Gelman, 2003: 307; emphasis in original), perhaps like carrying strands of hair in a locket, or keeping fragments of saints’ bones. Such matters of essence and contagion are foundational for the notion of authenticity as connection.

**Semiotics.** In line with the work in psychology outlined above, work in philosophy on semiotics addresses how reality acquires meaning through symbols, such as words, signs, gestures, and the like (Baudrillard, 1983; Mick, 1986). For instance, semiotic analysis might ask how the faux pearls worn by Jacqueline Onassis produce meaning related to and representative of the First Lady. Following Hippocrates’ understanding of symptoms as signs or signals about unobservable physical and mental states, recent work has focused on the process of creating meaning through linking signs with concepts. One type of link is an “indexical” relationship in which an object has a physical spatiotemporal connection to something specific in the real world (Peirce, 1940). Similar to the notions of essence and contagion, indices might refer to Jackie O’s pearls, a coin minted during the French revolution, or a ticket stub from the Beatles’ first concert. A second type of link is that of an “iconic” relationship (Peirce, 1940); unlike a factual connection to a person, place, or time, an icon produces analogous experiences such that “the sensation we get from perceiving the sign is similar to the sensation we get when perceiving the object” (Grayson & Shulman, 2000: 18). Thus, an “iconic sign relates to its object insofar as it imitates or resembles the object” such as “an actor portraying Benjamin Franklin” (Mick, 1986: 199), modern reproductions of Jackie O’s pearls, a replica coin made to resemble one from the French revolution, or a reprint of one of the Beatles’ first concert tickets. Both types of linkages are also pertinent to understanding authenticity as connection.

### Current Research Themes

Our review revealed three general research themes that have adopted the perspective of authenticity as connection. In line with the theoretical foundations out of which these themes have emerged, the primary focus of study has been on the authenticity of objects even though other entities have also been

considered. The common thread is a concern with a connection to a person, place, or time as claimed. However, each of the three themes outlined below emphasizes different types of connections that might be associated with an attribution of authenticity.

**Provenance.** Research within this first theme emphasizes physical spatiotemporal connections to the source of an entity. Various scholars have assigned different labels and definitions for authenticity that reflect this focus. Perhaps the most commonly used label is that of “nominal authenticity” in the evaluation of artwork, which is defined as “the correct identification of the origin, authorship, or provenance of an object” (Dutton, 2003: 259). For example, nominal authenticity distinguishes a painting that was actually created by Picasso versus one that was not (see also Trilling, 1972). Similarly, the notion of “indexical authenticity” builds directly on Peirce’s (1940) foundational work and concerns indices or cues embedded within an entity that have “a factual and spatiotemporal link with something else” (Grayson & Martinec, 2004: 298), which, in many cases, is the author or source of the entity. The notion of “pure authenticity” (also referred to as “literal authenticity”) also points to the importance of indexical cues and is similarly concerned with “unbroken” links to a place of origin (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). In each of these cases, an authenticity attribution arises out of a perceived—and often objectively verifiable—spatiotemporal connection to the source of the entity. Studies generally show that such attributions result in higher valuations and appeal; however, this value might arise through different mechanisms.

One relatively straightforward mechanism through which a connection to the source of an entity generates value is that of perceived quality. That is, the origin of an object provides a signal about its quality or market value. For example, an authentic Picasso painting is valued more highly because it would be considered of higher quality and, therefore, worth more on the market than a forgery (Frazier et al., 2009). Of course, students of aesthetics raise interesting questions about how much of the painting had to be completed by the artist himself for it to be considered authentic (Baugh, 1988; Becker, 1982; Benjamin, 1968); nevertheless, a connection to the producer is generally associated with higher quality and, therefore, value. The same is true not only of one-of-a-kind objects such as artworks but also of consumer goods. For example, physical spatiotemporal links to production (Newman & Dhar, 2014) and geographic (van Ittersum & Wong, 2010; see also Bilkey & Nes, 1982)

sources of origin have been shown to produce higher perceptions of quality. Alternatively, counterfeits are typically viewed as being of inferior quality because they lack such connections (Qian, 2014; Qian, Gong, & Chen, 2015).

A second mechanism through which a connection to the source of an object might generate value is that of contagion. Studies on the contagion of authenticity draw on the foundations of psychological essentialism outlined above to show that objects perceived as authentic generate value not because they are of higher quality, *per se*, but, rather, because they contain the “essence” of their source (Newman, 2016). For example, the value of handmade objects comes from the fact that such objects contain “love” (Fuchs, Schreier, & Stijn, 2015: 98), the “face” or personality of the craftsperson (Johnston & Baumann, 2007: 184), or some other form of essence from the producer (Carfagna, Dubois, & Fitzmaurice, 2014; West, 2010). Interestingly, the extent to which individuals believe an object contains the essence of its producer appears to vary depending on spatiotemporal proximity (Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011). As such, objects produced in an original factory (Newman & Dhar, 2014), those that are originals rather than perfect duplicates (Newman & Bloom, 2012), and those with lower serial numbers in limited edition sets (Smith, Newman, & Dhar, 2016) all tend to be considered more authentic because they are “closer to the creator” and, therefore, contain more of the essence of that creator. Taking this one step further, to the extent that the producer has creative control over the production process, objects are also perceived to contain more of the essence of the producer (Valesia, Nunes, & Ordanini, 2016).

In sum, research within this theme has shown that entities are considered authentic to the extent that a physical spatiotemporal connection can be drawn to their origins. Authenticity may be valued on the basis of perceived quality or the belief that the object contains the essence of its producer. Of course, both mechanisms might jointly occur, and the extent to which one operates over the other may vary across individuals (Fuchs et al., 2015; Newman & Dhar, 2014). Nevertheless, individuals across cultural contexts appear to consider objects more authentic to the extent that they can verify connections to their source (Frazier et al., 2009). Interestingly, this notion of contagion might help explain why some people believe they can achieve “authenticity by appreciation” (Hahl et al., 2017); if the essence of a producer is inherent in an object then, by extension, that essence might transfer to the owner of that object.

**Transference.** Research within this second theme focuses not on the source of an entity but, instead, on connections to other people, places, or times that might engender value. For example, the label of “objective authenticity” in the domain of tourism is used to describe whether or not an item in question has a particular, verifiable history (Wang, 1999). The notion of “indexical authenticity” would also apply here in cases where the point of connection is not the source of origin but a physical spatiotemporal link is still at the heart of the matter (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Most studies here, too, show that such attributions of authenticity result in higher valuations and appeal. However, the types of objects considered and the mechanism through which a value is generated are different.

Studies within this theme tend to focus not on artistic creations or one-of-a-kind objects but, instead, on everyday objects that have been “‘contaminated’ via physical contact” and are, therefore, “‘layered’ with distinctive meanings” (Grayson & Shulman, 2000: 17). As such, objects are authentic in that they provide “perceived evidence” (Grayson & Martinec, 2004: 302) that the person, place, or time to which an object is connected indeed exists. For example, an article of clothing worn by a celebrity might be valuable to her fans because the item provides evidence of a connection to that individual (Newman et al., 2011; see also O’Guinn, 1991). The celebrity did not produce the item but a physical spatiotemporal connection between it and the celebrity warrants an attribution of authenticity. Scholars have studied the authenticity of objects as significant as an individual’s birthplace (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) or family heirlooms (Frazier et al., 2009; Ture & Ger, 2016) and as seemingly insignificant as a ticket stub (Grayson & Shulman, 2000), among others.

In short, the findings from this set of studies suggest that any object, regardless of its origins, can be deemed authentic if it has a meaningful physical spatiotemporal connection with a person, place, or time of significance. The distinction between the previous theme and the current one is a subtle but important one. Although research within the former would suggest that an object “is” authentic by virtue of its origins, research here would suggest that an object can “become” authentic via a connection, even if the connection arises long after its creation. This distinction again points to interesting questions about the temporal nature of authenticity.

**Symbolism.** Research within this third theme is not concerned with physical spatiotemporal connections but is focused, instead, on how entities exhibit

symbolic connections that produce an attribution of authenticity. Nevertheless, the referent is still a particular person, place, or time of interest. Scholars have used a range of labels to capture similar interpretations of the construct. For example, the notion of “expressive authenticity” has been used to contrast nominal authenticity in the domain of art, and refers to whether “an object’s character [is] a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs” (Dutton, 2003: 259). Expressive authenticity distinguishes whether or not a contemporary artistic production instances its topic work or, similarly, whether a recording accurately represents the live performance it is made to simulate (Davies, 2001); in either case, the question of authenticity is a matter of capturing the symbolic aims of the original rather than of accurately determining the origins or authorship. Similarly, the notion of “iconic authenticity” builds directly on Peirce’s (1940) foundational work and has been used to contrast indexical authenticity; it refers to something that “resembles” the real thing (Grayson & Martinec, 2004: 298).<sup>6</sup> The label of “approximate authenticity” contrasts literal authenticity and refers to “stylized links” to a place or person of origin

<sup>6</sup> The notion of an iconic sign shares etymological roots with that of religious icons, which are objects that resemble a person of religious significance (in Greek, *eikon* refers to the “likeness” of a person); similarly, an iconic sign points to a specific person, place, or time of interest (Mick, 1986; Peirce, 1940). Iconic authenticity can be understood in similar terms. Consider, for example, *Salvator Mundi*, which was purportedly painted by Leonardo da Vinci circa 1500 and sold at auction for \$450 M in 2017. One might conclude that the painting is iconically authentic inasmuch as it is a credible depiction of the person of Jesus Christ. (By the same token, any one of the many later versions of the painting might be deemed authentic if it is a credible reproduction of da Vinci’s original.) At the same time, one might conclude that the painting is indexically authentic to the extent that its authorship can indeed be attributed to da Vinci, a point of considerable debate. Both are questions of authenticity as connection, but the former is a matter of symbolism, whereas the latter is a matter of provenance. In addition, the painting’s unique history could point to matters of transference; one might conclude that it is authentic on verification of its supposed previous ownership by King Louis XII of France. Of course, an iconic sign could also conform to a relevant social category; in the present example, one might also consider the painting to be authentic inasmuch as it conforms to the genre of Renaissance artwork. Yet again, the referent—the *to what?*—points to the meaning (here, connection vs. conformity). Relationships between the three meanings are discussed in the next section.

(Beverland et al., 2008: 8). Analogous to these notions of authenticity, the label of “authentic reproduction” has been used to refer to “credible” representations of original events or performances (Peterson, 1997: 208). In each of these cases, an entity is authentic to the extent that it reproduces a “symbolized and remembered” past (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013: 119). Research within this theme has typically focused on reproductions of objects or spaces, on the one hand, or performances or processes, on the other hand. We discuss each in turn.

First, several studies have focused on objects or spaces that are deemed authentic on the basis of a symbolic connection. For example, a restored vintage automobile might be deemed authentic if it possesses the vehicle’s original qualities, even if many of its parts are in fact new (Leigh et al., 2006).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, individuals use “contagious and imitative magic” to view replicas as authentic objects (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011: 278) or retro products as having an “aura” of authenticity (Hollenbeck, Peters, & Zinkhan, 2008: 344). Particularly interesting is that objects and physical sites can apparently be deemed authentic on the basis of symbolic connections even to fictional people (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) or places (Jones & Smith, 2005). Of course, attributions of authenticity tend to be enhanced to the extent that such symbolic connections—to fictional or nonfictional points of interest—are precise (Johnston & Baumann, 2007). In each of these examples, objects are accepted as “symbols of authenticity” (Hahl, 2016: 933) because they signal or point to an original, even if it is commonly known that the object at hand is indeed not the original.

Second, several studies have focused on performances or processes. Scholars interested in the authenticity of artistic performances, ranging from the musical (e.g., Davies, 2001) to the culinary arts (e.g., Fine, 1996), remind us that all performances, even those by the artist herself, are, in a sense, reproductions. However, they are authentic to the extent that they are “credible” or “believable”

<sup>7</sup> Such examples point to classic philosophical questions. For example, Plutarch famously perplexed his students with Theseus’s Paradox: If a ship is restored by replacing all of its parts, is it still the same ship? Thomas Hobbes and John Locke posed similar puzzles. Perhaps most germane to the discussion here is that the Ship of Theseus could be considered “indexically authentic” as an original piece but then “iconically authentic” as a restored or reproduced piece.

reproductions (Bruner, 1994; Peterson, 1997). Similarly, organizational processes that harken back to its own past are authentic for the same reasons (Beverland et al., 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Scholars interested in tourism would offer similar insights. Maccannell (1973) even invoked Goffman's (1959) metaphor of the theater to suggest that most tourist experiences involve "staged authenticity." In other words, "tourism addresses a tension between space and time as avenues for accessing the past" (Reynolds, 2016: 346). Nevertheless, even tourist sites (Wright, 2006) and events (Penaloza, 2000; Rahman & Lockwood, 2011) are frequently considered authentic by audiences to the extent that they are credible or believable reproductions of the past. Of course, some offer a more cynical view, noting that tourism "consumes and destroys the very object it searches for" (Howard, 2016: 368). Finally, it is worth noting that even discussions of ethnographic reports use a similar notion of authenticity in that such scholars are called to "emphasize being genuine to the field experience" (Goldenbiddle & Locke, 1993: 599; see also Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016).

In sum, research within this theme emphasizes symbolic connections that are associated with attributions of authenticity. Diverging from the work in the previous two themes, studies here suggest that physical spatiotemporal links are unnecessary for an entity to be deemed authentic. Instead, individuals "are motivated to focus on those particular cues in objects that for them convey authenticity" (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010: 838). These studies thus highlight the ways in which audience members draw symbolic connections in their own ways, thereby "coproducing" authenticity (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014; Rose & Wood, 2005).

## Summary

Authenticity has been conceptualized here as a *connection* between an entity and a person, place, or time as claimed. Scholars who have adopted this interpretation have emphasized different types of connections that might give rise to an authenticity attribution: provenance, transference, and symbolism. Most of this research has focused on the authenticity of objects, although some have considered historic sites and processes as well as people. Regardless of the emphasis or entity of interest, the referent in any case is the point of connection. Research across the three themes together points to an intriguing tension. On the one hand, authenticity as connection tends to be viewed as a matter of "fact" or

"evidence" (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). On the other hand, it is often, in reality, a matter of "stylized versions of real events" (Beverland, 2005: 1007). As such, the power of authenticity might be most impressive in its reach within this perspective. Although questions of provenance might be the most straightforward, questions of authenticity become more complex as the spatial or temporal distance between an entity and its origin grows. Objects that merely come into contact with a person, place, or time of interest may be enough to evoke attributions of authenticity. Even reproductions can prompt such assessments. This tension, then, between factual evidence and stylized versions of it grows stronger over time, pointing yet again to interesting questions about the temporal nature of the concept.

## TOWARD AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

In the previous sections, we discussed the three different meanings of authenticity that emerged from our review: (1) *authenticity as consistency* between an entity's external expressions and its internal values and beliefs; (2) *authenticity as conformity* to the social category to which an entity has been assigned or that it has claimed for itself; and (3) *authenticity as connection* to a particular person, place, or time as claimed. In doing so, we discussed how the theoretical foundations of each meaning have informed the various research themes within each perspective. Given that authenticity as consistency has the oldest theoretical foundations, it is no surprise that it is the predominant perspective within the literature; however, both of the other perspectives indeed represent large and growing bodies of research on the topic.

We discussed each of these three meanings separately for expositional ease; however, in reality, scholars frequently borrow from one or more as they seek to define authenticity. For example, some invoke multiple meanings in a single definition: "For our purposes, authenticity can be defined as a 'story that balances industrial. . .and rhetorical attributes to project sincerity through the avowal of commitments to traditions, . . .passion for craft and production excellence, and the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations'" (Beverland, 2005: 1005). In this example, one can see elements of authenticity as consistency (e.g., "sincerity" and "the public disavowal of. . .commercial motivations") and connection (e.g., "commitments to traditions"); interestingly, this study also refers to the

notion of authenticity as conformity among luxury winemakers who sought to “define the standard for the category” (p. 1025). Others opt for a more general approach: “Although scholars have defined different types of authenticity. . . I adopt the general meaning of the term, which describes whether an actor is considered genuine and acts in accordance with their true character” (Frake, 2017: 2). This example seems to be most aligned with authenticity as consistency; however, this study goes on to assess authenticity as a measure of category fit within craft beer brewing as defined by The Brewers Association. Others refrain from adopting a particular meaning of authenticity at all and, instead, rely on text analysis in an effort to “take consumers’ expressed attributions about authenticity at face value” (Kovács et al., 2014: 461). Yet, even here, the keywords used for the text analysis invoke elements of authenticity as consistency (e.g., “sincere”), conformity (e.g., “typical”), and connection (e.g., “historical”). Still others adopt multidimensional scales that invoke multiple meanings of the concept (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015). These examples, along with many others, highlight the complexity of the construct and, in many cases, the challenges posed by rich field contexts.

Although scholars frequently draw on and even confound the multiple meanings of authenticity, we contend that these meanings are indeed conceptually distinct and these distinctions are critical for understanding the complexity of the concept. Accordingly, we offer a discussion of key similarities and differences across the three meanings followed by a brief discussion of a few particular patterns regarding how the three meanings are interrelated.

### Similarities Across Meanings

We began by suggesting that there appears on the surface to be widespread agreement about the meaning of authenticity; it refers to that which is “real” or “genuine” or “true.” Indeed, all three interpretations would agree with such general labels. As such, it is worthwhile to highlight some of the key similarities across the three meanings.

**Authenticity references the intangible.** All questions of authenticity involve a verification process that asks whether an entity aligns with a specific referent, revealing whether a person is consistent with her true self, whether a producer conforms to its social category, or whether an object connects to a specific person, place, or time. When we consider these three perspectives, a pattern emerges: the referent—the *to what?*—is most often intangible even if authenticity attributions rely on tangible

cues. Indeed, questions of authenticity as consistency pertain to one’s true self, which has been interpreted primarily as something that is “invisible” (Strohming et al., 2017: 553), “private” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006: 302), “hidden” (Martinez et al., 2017: 216), “unobservable” (Humphrey et al., 2015: 751), “secret” (Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017: 2), and even “tucked away” (Roberts, 2005: 696). In short, the backstage is unseen by and inaccessible to audiences outside oneself; others must, therefore, rely on tangible cues from the front stage to make judgments about the intangible backstage (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, questions of authenticity as conformity depend on social codes and institutional logics, most of which “refer to higher order belief systems that shape cognition and action” (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005: 1032). A producer’s authenticity depends on whether it conforms to a social category yet those classification structures are themselves intangible, leaving audiences to rely on tangible representations that may signal individual components within those larger categories. Although producers might strategically display some of the features that are associated with a given category (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Carroll & Wheaton, 2009), ultimately, the category itself is inherently intangible (DiMaggio, 1987; Hollenbeck et al., 2008: 352). Last, questions of authenticity as connection refer to a particular person, place, or time, all of which are often intangible. Of course, some individuals have seen the moon from which a moon rock was taken (Frazier et al., 2009), witnessed Barry Manilow wearing his glove in concert (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), or enjoyed the original performance of a classical orchestra piece (Davies, 2001); however, most have not. Instead, the referent is most often intangible and individuals must rely on other tangible cues such as photographs or stories to verify authenticity claims. Even in those cases where the referent is tangible, its tangibility is limited in time and space. Importantly, that which accords value via authenticity as connection is also by definition intangible: an essence, or that “non-visible part, substance, or quality in each individual” (Gelman, 2003: 306). Such essences “are frequently discussed as unobservable conceptual placeholders” (Newman, 2016: 295) that “rather than observable properties, [are] the primary source of value” (p. 299). Because questions of authenticity across the three meanings reference that which is intangible, an intriguing tension arises: audiences often place tremendous value on authenticity while, at the same time, they often lack sufficient access to distinguish the sincere from phony, the authentic

from inauthentic, and the real from fake. Precisely what is intangible is what is needed to determine authenticity.

**Authenticity attributions involve a threshold.** A second similarity across the three meanings is that questions of authenticity involve both dichotomous and continuous judgments. Linguistically, scholars, and laypersons alike treat authenticity as a binary dimension: an entity is either authentic or it is not. This treatment is consistent across the three meanings: people are deemed as either “living as an authentic person” or a “fraud” (Martinez et al., 2017: 218), producers are either in a category or they are not (Frake, 2017), and objects are either “real” or “counterfeit” (Qian, 2014). Entities are rarely, if ever, expressed with any linguistic qualifier; scholars and laypersons alike generally do not refer to people as “kind of authentic,” producers as “sort of phony,” or objects as “somewhat counterfeit.” Yet individuals appear to be sensitive to gradations of authenticity even if attributions are not expressed with such language. Relative distinctions in authenticity are made between different leaders (Walumbwa et al., 2008) or brands (Morhart et al., 2015). Producers represent to greater or lesser degrees the category to which they belong (Kovács & Johnson, 2014). Objects are deemed more or less authentic to the extent that they are spatiotemporally proximal to their creator (Smith et al., 2016). It seems that authenticity is, therefore, “not an all or nothing distinction but a matter of degree” (Cooper et al., 2005: 490). Even though it is discussed in dichotomous terms, individuals appear to be sensitive to gradations, thereby responding to it in more continuous terms. Taken together, we suggest that authenticity attributions according to any of the three meanings involve a threshold. Individuals appear to act on authenticity as if it were continuous but talk about it as if it is dichotomous, reserving the label of “authentic” for instances when some threshold has been met.

**Authenticity is highly valued.** Across all three meanings, it is exceedingly clear that “authenticity is an overwhelmingly positive trait in our culture” (Johnston & Baumann, 2007: 179). Indeed, individuals tend to believe that there is a moral quality to being authentic (Grauel, 2016). Authenticity attributions tend to produce a range of positive outcomes, whether authenticity is conceptualized as consistency, conformity, or connection. Of course, the value that is derived from authenticity depends on the appeal of the referent at play. For example, leaders who are true to themselves tend to elicit

greater employee effort and promote organizational performance; however, these outcomes are contingent on the appeal of the leader’s values (Cha & Edmondson, 2006). Diners rate more highly those eateries that fit clearly within their cuisine category; however, these ratings are predicated on the appeal of the cuisine (Kovács et al., 2014). Individuals are willing to pay more for political posters with earlier serial numbers; however, these effects are moderated by the appeal of the politician (Smith et al., 2016). In short, the value generated by authenticity according to any of the three meanings depends on the extent to which the referent at play carries appeal. Yet, when it does, the power of authenticity might be so great that it can even compensate for an entity’s other shortcomings (e.g., Lehman et al., 2014). Of course, inauthenticity may counterintuitively lead to positive outcomes on occasion such as helping (Gino et al., 2015) or increases in sales of genuine products (Qian, 2014). Notwithstanding, the unequivocal conclusion across all three meanings is that authenticity is a good thing—so long as the referent carries appeal.

### Differences Across Meanings

As outlined above, the three meanings of authenticity share several key similarities. At the same time, a few notable differences point to the important conceptual distinctions underlying the three meanings.

**Authenticity implies uniqueness or sameness vis-à-vis others.** As discussed above, authenticity according to each of the perspectives references the intangible. Different across the three meanings, however, are underlying assumptions about what alignment with these intangible referents entails for entities vis-à-vis others. In some cases, an attribution of authenticity implies that the entity is different from others. In other cases, an attribution of authenticity implies that the entity is similar to others.

On the one hand, authenticity as consistency implies uniqueness. For individuals and organizations alike, authenticity involves the sincere expression of the backstage. An underlying assumption is that an individual’s “true self provides each person with a unique life philosophy” (Schlegel et al., 2009: 474); in other words, each person’s backstage is inherently distinctive (Cable et al., 2013). This same assumption applies to organizations and brands as they are personified and authenticity thus entails a “unique brand identity” (Beverland, 2005: 1003); indeed, the notions of uniqueness and authenticity are frequently used interchangeably (Cattani, Dunbar, &

Shapira, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; also see Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). Authenticity as consistency thus implies uniqueness in that there can only be one authentic X.

On the other hand, authenticity as conformity implies sameness. According to this perspective, authenticity demands that one “adheres to conventions associated with the genre” (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005: 1046). Authentic entities will thus display “features that are considered typical of [their] category” (Negro et al., 2011: 1449), thereby becoming “idealized representations” of it (Grazian, 2003: 10). As such, entities that are similar to others in the same category will be deemed authentic, whereas those that are dissimilar or even span multiple categories will be deemed inauthentic (Kovács et al., 2014). Authenticity as conformity thus implies sameness in that any entity can be an authentic X so long as “it is an instance or member of the class of Xs” (Davies, 2001: 203).

Authenticity as connection often implies a balance between uniqueness and sameness. Of course, many questions of provenance pertain to one-of-a-kind creations (e.g., Newman & Bloom, 2012) and many questions of transference to irreplaceable possessions (e.g., Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Newman et al., 2011); such questions imply uniqueness. Yet, many other questions of provenance pertain to mass-produced consumer goods (e.g., Newman & Dhar, 2014) and many other questions of transference pertain to objects that are one of many linked to the same person, place, or time (e.g., Ture & Ger, 2016; Wang, 1999). Similarly, questions of symbolism pertain to “authentic reproductions” (Peterson, 1997: 208) that merely “resemble” an original (Grayson & Martinec, 2004: 298). In such cases, authenticity as connection implies a balance in that an entity is authentic to the extent that it is the same as other entities that share a common point of origin or interest and, at the same time, a certain level of uniqueness in that these points of connection distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic.

In sum, research across the three meanings of authenticity points to different assumptions about how an authentic entity compares with others. Entities might be deemed authentic on the basis of being uniquely themselves, of sharing features common to other category members, or of balancing this tension. Of course, uniqueness and sameness are matters of degree. Nevertheless, this difference highlights that an entity’s authenticity hinges on which meaning is invoked and the underlying assumptions of uniqueness or sameness implied by it.

**Authenticity attributions are based on subjective or objective assessments.** As discussed above, authenticity attributions according to each of the perspectives involve a threshold. Different across the three meanings, however, are implicit assumptions about the interpretive nature of the concept. In some cases, whether an entity is authentic or not is a question to which a correct answer does not necessarily exist. In other cases, it is a question that can be answered based on factual evidence.

At one end of this spectrum, authenticity as consistency is conceptualized in subjective terms. Some scholars have even used the label of “subjective authenticity” (e.g., Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Kogan et al., 2010). Others describe authenticity as a “feeling” (e.g., Gan & Chen, 2017; Gino et al., 2015; Gino et al., 2010; Lenton et al., 2013; Schlegel et al., 2011), highlighting the “twin constructs of emotion and authenticity” (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013: 119; see also Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Of course, this subjective nature of the concept is consistent with the private nature of the backstage to which access is controlled and limited (Goffman, 1959). In short, authenticity as consistency is conceptualized in relatively subjective terms.

At the other end of this spectrum, authenticity as connection is conceptualized in more objective terms. As noted earlier, some scholars have used the label of “objective authenticity” (e.g., Wang, 1999) and others have used similar language about “knowable facts” (O’Connor et al., 2017: 2), treating authenticity as “a verifiable link between the product and past traditions” (Beverland et al., 2008: 8) or “an objectively measurable quality” (Morhart et al., 2015: 201). Similarly, the inauthenticity of counterfeits can often be detected on the basis of particular qualities that can be seen or experienced (Qian, 2014). Authenticity as connection is, therefore, conceptualized in relatively objective terms.

Finally, authenticity as conformity is conceptualized in the middle of the spectrum. What is deemed authentic by one might be perceived as fraudulent by another (Peterson, 1997). At the same time, a consensus about what is authentic or not often emerges in any given cultural context even though disagreements from one person to the next can and do exist (Kovács et al., 2014). Moreover, audiences often point to objective attributes as necessary but not sufficient criteria for inclusion in what might otherwise be a subjective category, such as geographic origins (DeSoucey, 2010; Guy, 2003) or production scale (Frake, 2017; Verhaal et al., 2017), among others. Audiences are consequently able to make

decisions about authenticity by looking to a few objective qualities (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Of course, even these objective cues often shift over time, but they are objective nonetheless. Authenticity as conformity is thus conceptualized in both subjective and objective terms.

In sum, research across the three meanings of authenticity points to different assumptions about the interpretive nature of the concept. Of course, objectivity and subjectivity are also matters of degree. Nevertheless, an appreciation of these differences helps us to further understand the conceptual distinctions between the three meanings and also points to differences in the authentication process.

**Authentication relies on lay judgments or expert evaluations.** This third difference follows from the previous one; because authenticity carries different assumptions about subjectivity versus objectivity, the authentication process varies across each of the three meanings. In each case, authentication refers to a verification process and an authenticity attribution is typically valued as discussed earlier; however, who has the authority or standing to act as an arbiter of authenticity differs for each of the three meanings.

For authenticity as consistency, the authentication process relies more heavily on lay judgments. Authenticity is conceptualized in subjective terms and greater emphasis is placed on the role of emotions and feelings in making authenticity attributions. Moreover, only one person has access to each backstage (Goffman, 1959)—the actress herself—and even that access may be limited at best (Schlegel et al., 2011). Other individuals must rely on cues from the front stage to make assessments about whether or not a person is authentic. However, no observer is in a better position than others to make these judgments (with the possible exception of intimate partners; e.g., Swann et al., 1994). Such assumptions about the authentication process are evident even in the measures used to assess authenticity; each customer is equally able to make her own assessment of whether or not a service employee is sincerely offering “service with a smile” (Grandey et al., 2005); the same is true of followers and leaders (Walumbwa et al., 2008) as well as consumers and brands (Morhart et al., 2015). Because authenticity attributions rely more heavily on lay judgments, they often vary from observer to observer and over time.

For authenticity as connection, on the other hand, the authentication process relies more heavily on expert evaluations. Authenticity is conceptualized

in objective terms and greater emphasis is placed on the role of knowable facts. There even often exists a separate marketplace for the verifiability of those facts, such as art experts (Frazier et al., 2009), museum curators (Hollenbeck et al., 2008), and historians (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Reynolds, 2016). In other cases, groups of individuals opt to develop expertise for the sake of their own consumption: consider brand communities (Leigh et al., 2006) or even the academic peer review process (Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004). In short, authenticity attributions rely more heavily on the judgment of experts or those observers who have obtained the knowledge required to make the attribution. Here, authenticity attributions tend to change less over time; once an entity is deemed authentic, it most often remains authentic, at least among the same audience.

For authenticity as conformity, the authentication process is more democratic and negotiated in nature. Authenticity is conceptualized in both subjective and objective terms; category boundaries are subjective in nature but objective cues are frequently put in place as necessary, albeit insufficient, criteria for category membership. Disputes about authenticity arise when observers either disagree with respect to the classification criteria or its application; however, such disputes are usually resolved and diminish over time as audiences engage with one another. Yet it is important to note that these processes often involve multiple audience members, including consumers, both casual (Kovács et al., 2014) and serious (Frake, 2017; McKendrick, & Hannan, 2014; Verhaal et al., 2017), critics (Anthony & Joshi, 2017; Fine, 2004; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), and regulators (DeSoucey, 2010), not to mention producers themselves (Negro et al., 2011; Weber et al., 2008). Moreover, the influence of different audience members in the authentication process changes over time (Peterson, 2005). Authenticity attributions thus rely on a democratic and negotiated process and, as such, do sometimes change over time but often in an evolutionary fashion with fits and starts.

In sum, research across the different meanings of authenticity points to different authentication processes, each of which is related to the respective assumptions about subjectivity versus objectivity. Importantly, each of the meanings point to different audiences who have the authority or standing to act as an arbiter of authenticity. Taken together, these patterns point to important differences in how authenticity attributions come about, who is able to make them, and how they change over time.



## Relationships between Meanings

Taking these similarities and differences together, our review revealed a few particular patterns regarding how the three meanings are related to one another. We briefly discuss these relationships below and then turn to an agenda for future research directions.

First, authenticity as consistency is often conceptualized as oppositional to the notion of conformity. As noted earlier, authenticity as consistency emphasizes “being unique rather than ‘the same’” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011: 186). Indeed, an underlying assumption is that the backstage is inherently unique (Schlegel et al., 2009). To fit in, “people who alter or mute their unique values. . . create a sense of alienation from themselves” (Cable et al., 2013: 6). This oppositional nature of authenticity as consistency versus conformity is seen in studies of individuals who sometimes put on the “façade of conformity” (Hewlin, 2003; see also Kyratsis, Atun, Phillips, Tracey, & George, 2017; Molinsky, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013) or “attempt to fit in by conforming” (Gino et al., 2015: 986) as well as organizations that strive to balance the “tension between innovation and control” (Rao et al., 2005: 972; see also Delmestri, Montanari, & Usai, 2005; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Peterson, 1997). Of course, an entity might be authentic according to both perspectives of consistency and conformity; however, scholars frequently conceptualize the two as oppositional.

Second, authenticity as conformity is sometimes conceptualized as requiring the notion of connection. That is, the criteria for category membership relies at times on verifiable links to people, places, or periods. Even categorical labels frequently borrow from a particular place or group of people; consider, for example, ethnic cuisines (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Kovács et al., 2014) or genres associated with a national identity (e.g., Delmestri et al., 2005; Lena & Peterson, 2008). This relationship between authenticity as conformity and connection is most evident among studies that focus on producers in cultural domains. For example, to fit in a particular category of wine, a winery must use ingredients connected to a specific region (Guy, 2003; Negro et al., 2011); similarly, a brewery might be required to use processes linked to a specific group of people (Beverland et al., 2008), or a musician to demonstrate that they have “real hillbilly roots” (Peterson, 1997: 1095). Authenticity as conformity thus incorporates elements of connection in some cases.

Third, authenticity as connection may sometimes offer a “window” into authenticity as consistency. This seems to be particularly true for audiences

seeking to assess the authenticity of producers in cultural domains. As Dutton (2003: 270) puts it: “Establishing nominal authenticity serves purposes more important than maintaining the market value of an art object. It enables us to understand the . . . expression of values, beliefs, and ideas.” In other words, products and practices deemed authentic on the basis of a connection can sometimes serve as a window into the alignment of the producer’s front and backstages (e.g., Beverland et al., 2008; Cattani et al., 2017; Verhaal et al., 2017). Moreover, organizations can highlight evidence of authenticity as connection to offer to audiences a window into their backstage (e.g., Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Authenticity as connection is, therefore, sometimes able to provide a more objective window into the more subjective authenticity as consistency.

Finally, authenticity as consistency can be enhanced for individuals via the consumption of authenticity according to any of the three meanings. This particular relationship is especially apparent in studies focused on consumers. As noted by many scholars, consumers seek “authentic cultural resources” (Holt, 2002: 84) in an effort to “reveal or produce the true self” (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010: 838), and the frequent explanation is that “authenticity is sought because authenticity is lacking” (Hahl et al., 2017: 830). Individuals seek to enhance their own authenticity by consuming authenticity according to any of the three meanings, whether it be in the form of artwork from “lowbrow” artists who come off as authentic because they are above economic motivations (Hahl et al., 2017), eateries (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Lu & Fine, 1995) and musicians (Grazian, 2003) who conform to their genre, or vintage objects restored to original condition (Leigh et al., 2006). Moreover, this search for authenticity can be triggered by encounters with inauthenticity (Gino et al., 2010; Hahl, 2016). Individuals thus seek to enhance their own authenticity via the consumption of authenticity in the world around them.

Taken together, these similarities, differences, and relationships represent an initial step toward an integrated framework of authenticity. We hope that the present review provides a useful guide for doing so.

## AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### Theoretical Implications

A view of the full body of research on the topic of authenticity offers new insights into the nature of the

concept that are not readily apparent when any one of its meanings is viewed in isolation. We discuss here two fundamental implications that come out of the review that should shape future theoretical development.

**Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder.** Authenticity involves a verification process about whether or not an entity is real, genuine, or true. At the crux of this review, then, an authenticity attribution depends on the referent: Is it a real *what*? Or a genuine *what*? Or true to *what*? An entity might be deemed authentic because it is true to itself, a genuine representation of its social category, or possesses a real connection to a person, place, or time as claimed. Importantly, the different meanings of authenticity might point in different directions and lead to different conclusions. As such, an entity might simultaneously be deemed authentic by some observers and inauthentic by others. This might happen in one of two possible ways.

First, different observers might apply different meanings and therefore arrive at different conclusions. For example, Weber et al. (2008) observed that farmers engaged in social movements for grass-fed beef and dairy were “sincere, transparent, and connected to self” (p. 539) even as they operated outside of “a recognized, distinct, and valued category” (p. 547). Stated differently, one observer might conclude that these farmers were authentic from the perspective of consistency even as others might suggest that they were inauthentic from the perspective of conformity. Peterson (2005: 1095) reports that many country music legends lauded as authentic were actually “professionally trained performers who took on the guise of a hillbilly.” In other words, these musicians might be deemed authentic when viewed through the lens of conformity, even as they might alternatively be viewed as inauthentic for deceiving audiences about their true selves or lacking any connection to real hillbilly roots. Finally, Dutton (2003: 258) noted that “a Han van Meegeren forgery of a Vermeer is at one and the same time both a fake Vermeer and an authentic van Meegeren.” That is, the forged artwork does not have a physical spatio-temporal connection to Vermeer as claimed; however, even art historians agree that van Meegeren forgeries adhere to relevant criteria for the genre, not to mention that they are arguably symbolic representations of Vermeer’s original work. In short, whether or not an entity is authentic depends on *which meaning* is invoked by an observer.

Second, different observers might apply the same meaning but still come to different conclusions. For

example, studies of authentic leadership rely exclusively on follower perceptions of the leader; however, a follower might conclude that a particular leader is authentic even if the leader might feel like a fraud (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey, 2012). The leader and follower are both adopting the perspective of authenticity as consistency but are doing so from different vantage points and thus possibly drawing different conclusions. Critics and consumers might come to different conclusions about whether or not an artist conforms to its genre (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005); both are adopting the perspective of authenticity as conformity but might be applying different institutional logics to the category. An antique collector might regard a teapot as inauthentic on discovering that it is merely a replica, whereas a family member might consider it an authentic treasure because it is a family heirloom (Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Ture & Ger, 2016); both are adopting the perspective of authenticity as connection but drawing different conclusions because one is concerned with provenance and the other with transference. Whether or not an entity is authentic thus depends also on *whose perspective* is considered.

In sum, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder. Yet, this notion that an entity can simultaneously be considered authentic by some observers and inauthentic by others is only apparent when one considers the three different meanings of the concept together. This insight points to two important questions—a checklist of sorts—that scholars should ask themselves when developing further theory about authenticity. By doing so, scholars will be able to offer greater insights into the nature of authenticity and, perhaps, even inauthenticity.

*Which meaning is invoked?* As noted earlier, many studies are surprisingly unclear on this matter. Scholars frequently either invoke multiple meanings at once or a single meaning at the neglect of others. Such lack of clarity not only creates conceptual confusion and limits the ability to communicate among scholars (Suddaby, 2010) but also limits the ability to theorize with precision about relationships between authenticity and other constructs (Bacharach, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995). Of course, we acknowledge the need to strike a balance between precision and abstraction; a construct must be conceptualized narrowly enough so as to be useful for communicating and theorizing and, at the same time, broadly enough so as to allow for creativity and flexibility in the research process (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). Our assessment is that research on authenticity seems to veer toward both ends of this spectrum without benefiting from such

balance. Some scholars conceptualize it in such broad terms that it is unclear what is being studied, whereas others conceptualize it in such narrow terms that it precludes the discovery of possible insights related to the other meanings of authenticity. In our view, the three perspectives of authenticity outlined here provide a framework that allows for a balance between these “large bucket” and “small bucket” approaches to the conceptualization of constructs (Hirsch & Levin, 1999; also see Suddaby, 2010). Each of the three perspectives is large enough so as to reflect the complexity and richness of the concept. At the same time, the themes within each perspective provide smaller buckets that should enable scholars to more precisely theorize about it as well as possible mediating and moderating mechanisms. We encourage scholars to more clearly articulate the meaning of authenticity that is being invoked and, as appropriate, situate their research within or in relation to these themes. The three guiding questions with which we initially approached this literature review should serve as a useful guide for doing so.

*Whose perspective is being considered?* With few exceptions, most studies tend to focus on a single perspective with little consideration given to other possibilities. A lack of clarity about whose perspective is being considered—and why—limits theorizing or, worse, runs the risk of omitting an alternative perspective that may be of equal or greater importance. We encourage scholars to consider two issues when asking this question: relevance and variance. Regarding relevance, some audiences might have more or less relevance for the authentication process. This might be particularly true when considering authenticity as conformity where the authentication process tends to be more democratic and negotiated among multiple audiences. For example, scholars should consider whether the perspectives of consumers and critics (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005) or different types of consumers (McKendrick & Hannan, 2014) would lead to similar or different conclusions for the research question at hand. Regarding variance, some authenticity judgments might vary widely across individual observers within a given audience, whereas others might vary across audience types. The former might be particularly true when considering authenticity as consistency where the authentication process tends to rely more heavily on lay judgments. The latter might be particularly true when considering authenticity as connection where the authentication process tends to rely more heavily on expert judgments. The meanings and values attached to authenticity might

also vary widely across geographical regions and cultures, but the literature is curiously silent on this issue (c.f., Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Peus et al., 2015). In sum, we encourage scholars studying authenticity to consider whose perspective is being considered with respect to both theorizing and empirical study.

***Authenticity presents a paradox over time.*** Labels such as “real” and “genuine” and “true” seem to imply some level of permanence or stability. Lay beliefs seem to tell us that what true today should be true tomorrow (Trilling, 1972). Indeed, research across all three perspectives suggests that individuals implicitly expect authenticity to remain constant. However, as highlighted within each of the perspectives, there exists some degree of tension about the temporal nature of the concept: the true self might be discovered or even created over time, social categories might evolve over time, and spatiotemporal connections might be reinterpreted as time goes on. Consequently, attributions of authenticity might change over time even if an entity itself remains unchanged. This, too, might happen in one of two possible ways.

First, the same observers might apply different meanings over time. For example, Weber et al. (2008) discuss how the same farmers who were viewed by some as inauthentic through the lens of conformity came to be viewed as authentic through the lens of consistency; over time, however, the dominant perspective once again shifted as grass-fed dairy and beef emerged as its own category, creating a new social code to which they conformed. Alternatively, Frake (2017) discusses how craft brewers once viewed as authentic through the lens of conformity came to be viewed as “sell-outs” after being acquired and, therefore, inauthentic as consumers shifted their perspective to a lens of consistency.<sup>8</sup> Cattani et al. (2017) offer an interesting case study of how Steinway & Sons was previously viewed as authentic through the lens of conformity; however, as the category disappeared over time, its authenticity came to rest on the notion of connection and its ability to sell pianos that are representative of its iconic originals. In each of these cases and others, observers invoked *different meanings* of authenticity over time.

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, this study exploits a natural experiment in online review websites to show that consumers unaware of the acquisition did not come to apply a different meaning of authenticity, suggesting that the beers in question indeed remained the same.

Second, the same observers might apply the same meaning but the referent might change over time. This may be especially true in the case of authenticity as conformity, given that category boundaries are negotiated over time in a somewhat democratic fashion. For example, Negro et al. (2011) discuss how “traditionalist” winemakers came to be viewed as inauthentic after “modernists” spurred changes to category boundaries. Of course, the referent might evolve in cases of authenticity as connection or even consistency as well. Beverland et al. (2008) show how some Trappist beers came to be viewed as inauthentic after distinctions emerged between different types of connections to the respective abbeys. Schlegel et al. (2012) show how individuals often create or discover their “true selves” over time and, as the backstage evolves, might come to realize that their front and backstages are misaligned. In each of these cases, the same meaning of authenticity is applied but the referent changes over time, thereby posing a threat to authenticity. Of course, such changes may also present opportunities. Chefs once deemed inauthentic might become authentic as category boundaries change (Rao et al., 2005), surface acting (i.e., inauthenticity) might evolve into deep acting (i.e., authenticity) as individuals come to identify more strongly with a particular role (Humphrey et al., 2015), and, even “fake” jewelry might become “real” if worn by a famous person (Gelman, 2003). In each of these cases, the meaning of authenticity remains the same but observers rely on *different referents* against which to verify authenticity over time.

Despite lay expectations that authenticity ought to be stable, therefore, the attribution may come and go even if the entity itself remains relatively unchanged. As such, authenticity presents a paradox over time such that what is real or sincere today can become phony tomorrow—or vice versa. This insight is also more readily apparent when one considers the three different meanings of the concept together and, once again, points to two important questions that scholars should ask themselves when developing further theory about authenticity.

*How might the meaning change over time?* The vast majority of studies tends to focus on a single point in time and suggests, even if implicitly, that the conclusions drawn would be equally applicable to the past or the future. However, this may not be a fair assumption if meanings of authenticity might change over time. For example, individuals might be increasingly inclined to view entities through the lens of consistency to the extent that their particular economy advances and becomes more globalized, perhaps prompting

new existential questions (Arnould & Price, 2000; Hahl et al., 2017). The lens of conformity may become more or less dominant in the face of macro trends of category emergence and decline (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000). Or the lens of connection may be especially pertinent when individuals or communities develop nostalgic leanings (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). Even if scholars are only able to study authenticity at a single point in time, theories offered and conclusions drawn would be enriched by considering how dominant perspectives or meanings of authenticity might change over time; we encourage a deeper consideration of these possibilities.

*How might the referent change over time?* Implicit assumptions about the stability of referents over time might be equally unwarranted. For authenticity as consistency, many individuals view their true self as constantly evolving (Schlegel et al., 2012) or multi-dimensional such that “multiple selves” make up their backstage (Suh, 2002). Similarly, organizations frequently seek to rediscover and even reshape their identity in new ways (Hatch & Schultz, 2017). For authenticity as conformity, category boundaries frequently shift as different audiences serve as gatekeepers (Peterson, 2005). For authenticity as connection, the past is frequently being rewritten by those in the present (Beverland et al., 2008; also see Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Taken together, scholars would do well to consider how a referent might change over time. Returning to the notion of construct clarity, we would also encourage scholars to offer “context-specific” conceptualizations (Suddaby, 2010: 348) of authenticity when possible and as appropriate by situating definitions not only within the framework discussed here but also within the dynamic cultural contexts in which individuals make authenticity attributions; doing so will enable readers to draw more appropriate conclusions from reported findings.

### Methodological Implications

The theoretical implications discussed above point to important methodological considerations as well. We offer here a few pieces of guidance that we see as particularly important for the study of authenticity moving forward.

Following from issues of construct clarity above are matters of construct validity. In some studies, measures confounded multiple meanings of authenticity. In others, measurement and conceptualization were simply misaligned. For field-based research, measurement scales must be carefully selected or created; some are

multidimensional and different dimensions might invoke different meanings and thus produce different findings (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015); others are so general that the meaning invoked is unclear. Text analysis offers new possibilities to capture and preserve distinctions among meanings (O'Connor et al., 2017), but careful consideration needs to be given to the similarities and differences across them. Similarly, creative proxy measures are underused (c.f., Frake, 2017) and represent exciting opportunities if appropriately aligned with the conceptualization. For qualitative studies, probing inquiries might uncover alternative meanings of authenticity to be relevant. For experimental research, manipulations and comparisons of distinct meanings might prove particularly promising. Regardless of methodological approach, measures at varying levels of analysis may add complexity to conceptual and measurement alignment. For instance, assessing the authenticity of a brewery as opposed to a brewer or a beer may produce divergent results that vary within meaning or even shift the meaning invoked; researchers should thus be deliberate and clear about the particular entity of interest. Our review suggests that both discriminant validity between meanings and predictive validity related to unique outcomes may be even more important than previously considered. Of course, these implications are compounded by potential changes in authenticity over time. Measures that are sensitive to contextual cues and a temporal perspective will undoubtedly yield greater understanding. In sum, we encourage scholars to pay equal attention to construct clarity and validity and to carefully align conceptualization and measurement.

Of equal importance are issues of sample selection that echo the focus on audience relevance and variance above. Studies in this review varied widely in terms of samples, including undergraduate students (Vess et al., 2014), MTurk participants (O'Connor et al., 2017), cross-cultural respondents (English & Chen, 2007), art critics (Anthony, 2012), retail employees and customers (Grandey et al., 2005), leaders and employees across diverse settings (Gardner et al., 2011), online reviewers (Kovács et al., 2014), auction bidders (Smith et al., 2016), organizational newcomers (Cable et al., 2013) and historians (Hatch & Schultz, 2017), and tourists (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), among many others. Each of these may be more or less appropriate for a given research question. Most studies focused on a single sample and those that included multiple samples tended to do so with the aim of generalizing findings rather than detecting potential differences across samples. In our view, such differences represent a rich opportunity for insightful findings. Replications with different samples or in different study

contexts could also prove promising. In short, coupling conceptual and construct alignment with a relevant sample points to new possibilities to theorize and develop our understanding further.

Finally, longitudinal or archival designs might open the most promising new directions for conceptual development. For example, a sample that suggests the authenticity of an entity at one point in time may seem to contradict a different sample purporting its inauthenticity at another point in time. Yet, an archival or longitudinal study that captures a longer time span may detect systematic patterns, rates of change, and mechanisms that can explain seemingly fickle attributions, rather than surrendering to comments about inconsistent or inconclusive evidence. Many scholars in our sample have, admirably, already taken these routes; we encourage even more to follow suit. One challenge with such analyses is that, in examining such rich study contexts, we often learn just as much or more about a specific context (e.g., a single site brewery) or domain (e.g., craft brewing) as we do about a theoretical generalization of authenticity. As such, it would seem important for scholars to explore the robustness of context-specific studies through replications in other contexts and domains. It is here where studies on authenticity might provide even broader theoretical developments in understanding macro patterns that extrapolate to insights about wide-ranging industries and audiences.

### **New Research Directions**

What do we not yet know about authenticity? Several fruitful lines of inquiry arise from the implications outlined above. We hope that this review prompts scholars to creatively tackle questions of authenticity in new ways. To aid in that endeavor, we discuss here a few general directions that come out of this review and that we see as most promising.

First, how are different meanings of authenticity invoked? That is, what might prompt an individual to evaluate whether or not Waylon Jennings is authentic through the lens of consistency versus conformity or connection? Prior work has not addressed this question directly but does offer some hints. One possibility might be that such variations are associated with individual differences of observers. For example, sensitivity to contagion (Newman & Dhar, 2014), personality traits (Sheldon et al., 1997), and age (Grayson & Shulman, 2000), among others, have been associated with increased perceptions of authenticity; however, in each of these studies, a single meaning of authenticity was assumed. Even so,

such individual differences might also prompt observers to view entities through a particular meaning of authenticity. Another possibility might be that such variations are associated with audience factors, such as culture (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000), role (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), or consumer type (McKendrick & Hannan, 2014). Alternatively, differences might stem from the entity itself. Returning to the theoretical foundations, it is possible that observers would be inclined to evaluate an individual musician through the lens of consistency, a band through the lens of conformity, and a song or even musical instrument through the lens of connection. Given the different meanings of authenticity, such questions represent exciting new directions.

Second, how are the different meanings of authenticity related with one another? As discussed in the previous section, some interesting patterns emerged from the review about relationships among meanings; however, more work remains to be carried out in in this regard. For example, it is possible that some combinations of the meanings might serve as complements (Beverland, 2005); Waylon Jennings might be considered even more authentic if he is viewed as not only conforming to the category of country music but also connected to country roots. Alternatively, some combinations of the meanings might serve as substitutes, possibly even through compensatory mechanisms (Weber et al., 2008); he might be perceived as authentic through the lens of consistency *because* he refused to conform to the norms of the music establishment. We noted earlier that authenticity is in the eye of the beholder and, as such, an entity might be considered authentic by some observers but inauthentic by others. To the extent that prior studies have considered multiple meanings of authenticity, they have generally focused on such across-observer differences in meanings of authenticity. However, is it possible for individuals to simultaneously hold conflicting views about an entity's authenticity? For example, would an observer ever conclude that Waylon Jennings is authentic because he is true to himself and, at the same time, inauthentic because he refuses to conform to the norms of the genre of country music? If so, how would she resolve such conflicting views? It is likely that such conflicts would be resolved based on which referent carries greater appeal for the individual: Jennings' values and beliefs (i.e., his backstage) or the genre of country music (i.e., the social category). However, few studies ventured

into such within-observer differences in meanings of authenticity (c.f., Rose & Wood, 2005) and extant research thus has little to say about these questions. Greater clarity about how the different meanings of authenticity are related across and within observer will begin to provide some answers.

Third, what triggers shifts in meanings or referents over time? It is possible that authenticity according to any one meaning might be more or less stable, and shifts in meanings or referents might pose either threats or opportunities to entities seeking an authentic identity. For example, given that authenticity as connection tends to rely on more objective assessments, it is possible that an entity is better able to retain its authenticity from this perspective than from that of consistency or conformity. Conversely, authenticity as conformity may introduce threats within the meaning (i.e., shifting category norms) or across meanings (i.e., no longer true to self). Considering such shifts over time may also aid in understanding how assessments of authenticity change in different ways for different observers. For example, multiple observers might conclude that a particular winery is authentic but, for some, the attribution might be made on the basis of its adherence to its values rooted in organic production; for others, on the basis of its conformity to a type of wine; or for others, because its ingredients are certified local and originate from a specific geographic region. Such cases in which authenticity attributions are made but for different reasons are problematic without an appreciation for those different reasons because changes to the entity may or may not result in changes to the attributions. Such shifts can be better understood if one acknowledges the different meanings of the concept. More work is needed to understand when and how such shifts occur over time.

Fourth, how do observers react to the different meanings of authenticity? Based on extant research, it is unclear how exactly authenticity is related to audience responses. It is reasonable to assume that, at least in some cases, particular outcomes may be associated with one meaning but not another. For example, we suggested that authenticity as consistency is viewed as a more subjective assessment, whereas authenticity as connection is viewed as more objective. As such, it is possible that individuals might respond in systematically different ways to questions about Waylon Jennings when asked through the lens of consistency versus conformity or connection. In short, even when

individuals or collectives are shown to act on authenticity, it is unclear what exactly is the independent variable. Often equally unclear are mediating and moderating mechanisms that might be part of the processes at play. Greater clarity about which meaning of authenticity is being invoked will aid in studying such questions.

Finally, how can entities effectively engage in “authenticity work”? Such questions are particularly challenging, given that multiple meanings must be managed simultaneously across multiple audiences over time. For example, authenticity as consistency might require impression management via amplifying some claims (McDonnell & King, 2013) or even silencing others (Carlos & Lewis, 2017); however, this comes with a risk of not feeling true to one’s self over time. Authenticity as conformity might require efforts to redefine one’s own identity relative to others (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001) or to reshape categorical boundaries (Rao et al., 2005); however, doing so may come off as hypocritical if inconsistent with one’s own past (Effron, Lucas, & O’Connor, 2015). Finally, authenticity as connection might require the ability to manage carefully any critical spatiotemporal ties (Beverland et al., 2008) or to recreate such connections if they have disappeared (Hahl, 2016); however, these efforts may need to consider any current or anticipated constraints posed by relevant social categories. Of course, any blatant claims to authenticity are tenuous at best and often liable to backfire (Kovács et al., 2017). Greater clarity about which meaning of authenticity is being invoked and from whose perspective will allow for greater insights into how individuals and organizations alike might be able to create and project an image of authenticity in the long run. Regardless of which meaning of authenticity is invoked, authenticity work appears to be just as much temporal work as anything else. As Orwell (1949: 44) noted: “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”

## CONCLUSION

In this review, we set out to better understand authenticity and its multiplicity of meanings. Despite an apparent consensus that authenticity refers to that which is real, genuine, and true, our review revealed that distinct interpretations diverge from these shared qualities. As such, authenticity attributions depend in large part on the referent at hand—the *to what?* We have developed here a framework that

organizes and clarifies the multiple meanings of authenticity and their relationships. Looking back, it offers conceptual clarity and provides a structure to understand extant research. Looking forward, it offers insights, implications, and guidance as an agenda for scholars approaching these intriguing questions with fresh ideas.

A compelling afterthought arises from our analysis. Authentication resembles a truth-seeking process (Kreuzbauer & Keller, 2017). However, it refers to that which is intangible and seemingly unstable. The essence that makes an object authentic is by definition unobservable and dependent on spatio-temporal proximity (Gelman, 2003). Categories and boundaries are elusive and seem guaranteed to evolve (Hannan et al., 2007). Even our backstage may be as inaccessible to us as it is to others, making us feel like “strangers to ourselves” (Wilson, 2004). This intangible and unstable nature of authenticity is further compounded by questions of objective versus subjective cues, which are debated among audiences applying the same or different lenses that evolve over time. If authenticity rests on such shifting qualities beyond our reach, it may be natural to ask whether any entity can actually ever be *truly* authentic. Indeed, some critics have wondered whether the human experience is so reliant on the subjective perception of a system of signs and symbols that, to us, reality itself is just a simulation (Baudrillard, 1983). Perhaps authenticity is similar: simply a series of changing perceptions of signs and symbols represented in the mind as a compelling truth, but where “imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (Eco, 1986: 8). Through authentication processes, individuals test an entity against a referent and, in doing so, perhaps “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard, 1994: 3). Is it possible that authenticity is merely imagined fantasy?

Such questions probe deeper meanings of authenticity and even those connected to perceptions of reality itself. Regardless of how one opts to address them, however, it is clear that authenticity—whatever it is and however it is interpreted—produces a range of important and very real outcomes for organizations and their various stakeholders. If the attribution seems intangible and even elusive, the outcomes are more concrete. Even if authenticity itself may be at times difficult to define or verify, there seems to be clear proof that it has a powerful pull on audiences and markets, regardless of whatever meaning is invoked and wherever it arises. At a time

when interest in the topic has never been greater, sustained scholarship should continue to promote important theoretical and practical implications for some time to come. We hope that our review and analysis will offer guidance for those who wish to do so.

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