

Authenticity: Attribution, Value, and Meaning

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Abstract

Consumers and scholars show increasing interest in authenticity in products, services, performances, and places. As typically used, authenticity is an attribution that is socially constructed and appears in many domains of social life. The interest in authenticity presumes that its attribution conveys value and emerging evidence agrees. Authenticity, however, carries some very different meanings, including those about classification, morality, craftsmanship, and idiosyncrasy. Parsing these various interpretations requires attention to cultural and historical context.

A FIRE AND TWO FIRESTORMS

On March 8, 2013 a small restaurant on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley, California experienced an early morning fire that damaged the front of its two-story building. Of course, a restaurant fire is nothing remarkable, especially an apparently minor one such as this; it was doused by the sprinkler system and put out by firefighters in less than an hour. Yet news of the fire spread quickly and received immediate attention in most of the Bay Area media and beyond. The owner even issued a statement in less than 12 h that concluded by saying: “We are deeply touched by the outpouring of support from the community, our friends and extended family. Thank you! It inspires us to think of what might be possible ...”

The remarkable attention accorded this otherwise unremarkable fire stems from the fact that the restaurant in question was Chez Panisse. Started on a shoestring in an old house by the hippie-like Alice Waters in 1971, Chez Panisse became the flagship for California cuisine initially and then an icon in its own right, symbolizing a new type of American food, emphasizing quality, freshness, and localness in its approach. By 2013, Alice Waters’ restaurant was, in many observers’ eyes, the most admirable and influential culinary establishment in the United States, if not the world. It was no surprise, then, that when Chez Panisse caught fire, it became news.

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Although many factors may account for the rise and prominence of Chez Panisse, I contend that its perceived high authenticity resides at the core of its appeal, initially and still today. (I will explain why in detail later.) In this way, Chez Panisse has been at the vanguard of a widespread emerging social trend—a social firestorm, if you will—for over 40 years. That trend is an intensifying and broadening interest among consumers and other individuals in developed markets in appreciating goods and services that express authenticity to them. Other commonly cited examples of highly visible companies making products or offering services that tap into this trend include the original Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, The Body Shop, Patagonia, Honest Tea, and Whole Foods. As Potter (2010) proclaims, “the demand for authenticity—the honest or the real—is one of the most powerful movements in contemporary life, influencing our moral outlook, political views, and consumer behavior.”

A second trend, a firestorm of intellectual sorts, has emerged concurrently with the first and is likely a response to it. This trend is the widening study of the production and consumption of authenticity among social scientists and other analysts (Grazian, 2005; Lindholm, 2008; Peterson, 1997; Phillips, 2013). This trend can be seen readily in the many analyses of authenticity found in the academic writings of sociologists and anthropologists. Predating them is a similar line of scholarly work by philosophers and humanists, and more recently, by marketers and management analysts.

Why did these trends emerge? Where do they operate with greatest force? What difference do they make, if any? How are social scientists and others to make sense of them? While the answers to some of these questions have started to become clear, in many other respects we are still somewhat in the dark. In this essay, I hope to provide some perspective on settled and unsettled issues regarding authenticity, reviewing previous ideas, debates, and findings and highlighting newer ones that now command attention. The promise for progress on this topic is a greater understanding of contemporary social life, including its many motivations and meanings.

WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?

Authenticity. You see and hear it in all manner of places these days. My friend says she owns an authentic Afghan killim. Our neighbors ate last night at a restaurant that they claim served authentic Oaxacan food. A colleague returned from what he says was an authentic vacation among the Padaung tribe of Red Karen in northern Myanmar. On cable TV, my Comcast sports channel routinely flashes messages about being an authentic fan. INSEAD, an international business school, offers what its web page calls an authentic MBA. The chain restaurant Romano's Macaroni Grill uses a simple print

advertisement that states plainly in bold letters: Fresh. Simple. Authentic. The list could go almost forever; surely you have your own favorites.

Given the ubiquity of usage, a good place to start our analysis is to ask what is authenticity, what does it mean, how should we define it? The temptation is to run to one or more of the many meanings that people invoke when they call something authentic. But doing that makes the task inscrutable, because no substantive definition can cover all the meanings in use. Instead, I suggest we opt for an ontological kind of definition, an abstract definition about its role in social life.

By this view, authenticity is an attribution—nothing more, nothing less. Attributions about authenticity are usually made by individuals in reference to other entities of all kinds: persons, places, products, things, experiences, organizations, and so on.

A one-off idiosyncratic attribution by a person is of little interest to the social sciences; rather, as with most things, we focus on patterns of behavior. In this case, that means we pay attention to attributions about authenticity that are well recognized, widely used, and collectively agreed upon by sets of people. Institutionalized attributions are those that have become engrained in cultural life such that they are not only accepted by many others but, in an almost unthinking or cultural way, what psychologists call automatic cognition. Typically, small cues or markers of a behavior, product, service, or place signal when an attribution about authenticity is appropriate according to prevailing social codes.

Authenticity has become an institutionalized attribution in many domains of contemporary social life. Social science has made progress in identifying domains where authenticity comes into play, what value, if any, it accords those labeled as authentic, and what authenticity means to those who use it to describe things and guide behavior.

In modern society, authenticity is often socially constructed.¹ This implies that attributions of authenticity are culturally contingent and historically situated. Both qualities make authenticity hard to study empirically; any test requires applying contextual knowledge appropriately. Moreover, the variety of (sometimes inconsistent) ways that analysts define authenticity makes agreement about the value of any particular test difficult to obtain. For products and services, authenticity also often depends on social constructions emerging from the identity of the underlying producer organization rather than specific characteristics of the products or services (Fine, 2004).

Frazier *et al.*'s (2009) study asks individuals to compare various items and to place values on them. They conclude that, "there is a broad appreciation of authenticity that translates into [individuals] wanting to keep, hold

1. As noted, I do not address here questions about originality, or provenance, which can be answered (at least in principle) definitively with objective facts.

and value original items.” In this study, authenticity depends on an object possessing a “historical link to a person, event, time, or place of some significance,” for example, an original Picasso painting or a gown worn by Princess Diana. This focus on an item’s origins or biography is what Dutton (2003) calls “nominal authenticity.” It differs from socially constructed authenticity in that nominal authenticity can be objectively and definitively evaluated—a painting was either done by Picasso or not, and the underlying facts are potentially knowable without ambiguity (even if difficult to discern in some cases).

While no doubt fascinating in its own right, I do not consider questions about nominal authenticity in this essay. I do so because most of the current social scientific interest, the second emerging trend, concerns socially constructed authenticity.

DOMAINS WHERE WE SEEK AUTHENTICITY

Contemporary research sees authenticity playing a role in numerous domains of modern social life. In advanced market economies, these domains include art, music, beer, tourism, chocolate, cosmetics, film, dance, cosmetics, wine, architecture, furniture, musical instruments, fishing equipment, concerts, distilled spirits, urban neighborhoods, coffee and tea, crafts, politics, ceramics, festivals, and food and dining (see review in Kovaçs *et al.*, 2013). Here and elsewhere in modern society, consumers increasingly embrace products, services, and forms of expression that exude and exemplify the authentic.

Listing these domains gives the impression that bounding authenticity as a phenomenon requires only a systematic examination of domains of social life, checking off where authenticity-seeking is found and where it is not (in say, e.g., modern jet airplane purchasing). The reality, however, is much more complex: Context matters greatly as to whether authenticity is sought after and valued, hence the comment that above that these attributions are historically situated and culturally contingent.

Consider the given list. Trace back in time in any of these domains and it likely will not take you long to find a period when authenticity was not valued, and maybe even devalued, as many analysts have noted. Notice also that for many of these domains, authenticity carries great appeal only in advanced market economies, often only in the West, and often primarily among affluent or education consumers.

Cultural context matters greatly too, as found in studying microbreweries in Hong Kong. There in the late 1990s, Western expatriates found microbreweries highly appealing for authenticity reasons and Chinese drinkers found the same producers as unattractive and undesirable (Carroll & Swaminathan,

2000). Yet, Chinese do go to great lengths to find and appreciate rare teas that are grown in ways or places that cause them to be regarded as authentic, evidenced by the growing number of detailed and sophisticated tea menus found in expensive Chinese restaurants and cafes.

The apparently complex ways that context affects perceptions of authenticity have not been explored in any depth. Instead, many analysts have been content simply to identify contexts where authenticity appears to be operative and to explain how it is signified and interpreted. The result is that many of the studied contexts come from advanced market economies, and are driven by highly educated and often affluent consumers.

Yet even in this context, some apparent contradictions remain unexplained. For instance, when it comes to musicians and artists, illicit drug use and alcohol abuse are often associated with self-expression and authenticity (think Keith Richards, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia, Amy Winehouse, Janis Joplin). But drug use among professional athletes is typically regarded as inauthentic behavior, even cheating when it involves performance-enhancing drugs (think Lance Armstrong, Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, Ben Johnson, Marion Jones). In another example of apparent contradictions, consider that in the United States and Europe, chain restaurants are considered inauthentic in almost all cases. But in the most advanced market economies of Asia, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, this is often the case: Chains such as the Les Amis Group and Crystal Jade Culinary Concepts and Imperial Treasure Restaurant Group are associated with high quality.

THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF AUTHENTICITY

A major presumption behind the two emerging trends noted earlier is that consumers place value in the authentic. Many attributions of authenticity documented by social scientists depend on the analyst's subjective interpretations of observed consumer behaviors rather than systematic analyses of consumers' stated preferences (e.g., Beverland, 2009). While often very insightful, two potential inferential problems arise with this interpretive approach. First, consumers may make authenticity attributions to articulate quality judgments, meaning that the purported association with value ratings could be spurious. Second, an authenticity attribution may represent a post hoc rationalization of an initial assessment of value rather than a trigger of it, a process consistent with observations that consumers are involved in "self authentication" (Arnould & Price, 2000). Both issues are recognized in interpretive studies and raise questions about authenticity in contemporary markets: Is it really important? Does it drive consumer behavior in unique ways?

Systematic demonstrations showing that individuals convert their perceptions of authenticity about a product, service, or organization into higher value ratings are few. I know three. In the first, Derbaix and Derbaix (2010) questioned attendees at “generational” music concerts (comeback tours referred to in French as *Âge tendre* concerts). Using LISREL-based structural measurement models, they found the key latent variables of perceived authenticity and value ratings to be positively correlated. In the second study, Castéran and Roederer (2013) conducted an online survey about the Strasbourg Christmas market in 2010. They found that individuals who perceived the market as authentic visited it more often. Using data on attendance and money spent at the market, they calculated that a one-point decrease in authenticity would generate a loss of 17.6 million Euros. In the third study, Kovaçs *et al.* (2013) conducted content analysis of unsolicited online restaurant reviews by consumers in three major US cities from 2004 to 2011. They found that consumers assign higher ratings to restaurants regarded as authentic, even after controlling for restaurant quality.

The impact of perceived authenticity transcends valuation. Huang, Bridge, Kemp, and Parker (2011) demonstrate with functional magnetic resonance imaging that the human brain responds differently to artworks labeled as authentic versus those labeled copies. Specifically, “viewing of artworks assigned as ‘copy,’ rather than ‘authentic,’ evoked stronger responses in the frontopolar cortex (FPC), and right precuneus, regardless of whether the portrait was actually genuine. Advice about authenticity had no direct effect on the cortical visual areas responsive to the paintings, but there was a significant psychophysiological interaction between the FPC and the lateral occipital area, which suggests that these visual areas may be modulated by FPC.” (p. 1). Huang *et al.* (2011) conclude that their evidence of brain network activation supports the view of art scholars that aesthetic judgments are multifaceted and multidimensional.

Possessing an identity regarded by others as authentic also affects the severity of normative punishment an actor may receive for violating cultural rules, but the evidence about here suggests a complex story. On the one hand, the staggering fall from grace of golfer Tiger Woods after public disclosure of his illicit private liaisons with women other than his wife (hardly an unusual fact for a star professional athlete) is difficult to understand, until you see opinion poll numbers showing he was previously considered by the public to be the most authentic sports figure by a long shot (30.4% compared to 21.4% for Cal Ripken; Zogby, 2000). On the other hand, in studying restaurants in Los Angeles, Lehman, Kovács, and Carroll (2014) found that violations of the public hygiene code recede in importance when a restaurant is regarded as authentic. In other words, authenticity seemed to buffer restaurants from the

usual punishment of a low hygiene rating, while authenticity seemed to lead to a greater punishment for Tiger Woods.

Why the radically different punishments? It would seem that Woods was punished severely because he was widely regarded as very authentic and the scandal led many people to think that he was not and that they had been deceived. For the authentic restaurants, their identity was not at stake when they violated hygiene rules but rather perhaps the legitimacy of the rules themselves.

THE MANY MEANINGS OF AUTHENTICITY

Social scientists studying authenticity typically find that it is not a “real” thing, not something that can be objectively determined. It is as though they are reciting John Lennon’s lyrics in *Strawberry Fields Forever*: “nothing is real.” By this view, certain specific aspects of a product, performance, place or producer somehow get defined and treated as authentic by audiences in a particular social context. Empirical studies of authenticity document the particulars: which aspects of an entity are highlighted at which times, what stories are used to justify them, how different groups interpret them, and which interests seem to benefit most (and least) from these interpretations (Wherry, 2006). A kind of “gotcha” declaration often comes with observations about the fallacious nature of certain interpretations—asserting contrary facts, expert opinions, or variations that cannot all be true (Potter, 2010). Indeed, such assertions help to demonstrate that what is taken as authentic is a social construction rather than an objective fact.

It would be all too easy to conclude from these analyses that what gets socially constructed as authenticity arises arbitrarily and cannot be predicted. Given the complexity of social life, the outcome of any social construction process results from at least some hard-to-predict elements. But social scientific theory also provides strong clues, and even some answers, as to the impact of some other core elements involved. A fundamental starting point for such theory involves parsing the many meanings or definitions that both individuals and social scientists use when attributing authenticity to an entity. So, my response to those reciting John Lennon is to keep going to the next line: “nothing to get hung about.”

TYPE AUTHENTICITY

Philosophers and other analysts have long used two common—but very different—general interpretations of the authenticity of social or cultural objects. The first meaning indicates that an object fits appropriately into a classification for which it has been assigned or someone has claimed for

it. When individuals agree, for example, that the food at a restaurant is authentic Greek cuisine, this meaning is being invoked. Labeled artistic authenticity by Baugh (1988), I refer to it more descriptively as genre or *type authenticity*. As Davies (2001, p. 203) explains, “something is an authentic X if it is an instance or member of the class of Xs.” He by notes generally that, “an interest in authenticity reflects a concern with correct classification.”

In type authenticity, the focus concerns whether the object meets the criteria for inclusion or membership in the type or genre or category. Presupposing this usage is the existence of the associated type or genre, which is a culturally defined social category about which there might be more or less agreement among audience members (Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2007). Evaluations of a particular object’s type authenticity may vary by observer. So, many classifications are matters of degree, depending on audience consensus regarding the classification criteria to be used and how those criteria are applied to specific objects.

MORAL AUTHENTICITY

The second common general meaning of authenticity comes from existential philosophy. As defined here, authenticity carries moral meaning about the values and choices embedded in an object. A person is said to be authentic, for example, if she is sincere, assumes responsibility for her actions, and makes explicit value-based choices concerning those actions rather than accepting socially imposed values and actions. In parallel, an organization is authentic to the extent that it embodies the chosen values of its founders, owners, or members rather than simply following convention by, say, pursuing profits. Grazian (2005, p. 110) explains how this meaning of authenticity may be applied to music, “the credibility or sincerity of a performance [or an object] and its ability to come off as natural and effortless.” According to Dutton (2003), this meaning is “expressive authenticity” and it signifies “an object’s character as a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs.”

In this second meaning of authenticity, the main question concerns whether the individuals or collectives involved in the establishment and maintenance of the object have sincerely attempted to enact their true morals. An important secondary issue concerns whether the object actually embraces them. Baugh (1988) calls this meaning *moral authenticity*.

A restaurant that features food sourced only from producers who treat their animals humanely, or who grow their crops in some special sustainable way (e.g., organic or biodynamic) might well be regarded as morally authentic. Resting behind such an attribution is the notion that the owners/operators behind these enterprises have made certain choices

based on specific morals, beliefs, and values. Some consumers value those embedded morals; for instance, regular consumers of organic food regard it as a way of life, emanating from “an ideology connected to a particular value system” (Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Schultz, & Stanton, 2007, p. 96). To the extent the underlying choices of the producers simply reflect a profit-seeking marketing strategy rather than implicit values, moral authenticity is undermined.

Although both general meanings of authenticity stem from long traditions, current applications of the concept often rely on only one meaning and ignore the other. For instance, in discussing organizational identity, Baron (2004) uses authenticity mainly as moral authenticity. In examining individuals’ searches for authenticity, Grazian (2005) focuses on blues music that comes across as noncommercial. Conversely, other applications conflate the two meanings (perhaps unwittingly) and make the concept appear murky. For instance, Rao, Monin, and Durand (2005, p. 972) claim that, “authenticity entails a tension between innovation and control, and presupposes a space for borrowing and crossover of materials.” They also state that, “what is important is to conform to some of the conventions most of the time.” (See also Jones, Anand, & Alvarez, 2005.) Yet other applications (e.g., Peterson, 1997) simply offer unfiltered dictionary-like lists of definitions of authenticity and do not provide much deep insight as a result.

CRAFT AUTHENTICITY AND IDIOSYNCRATIC AUTHENTICITY

Carroll and Wheaton (2009) offer a conceptual framework that develops two extensions of these two common general interpretations of authenticity. The first of these is labeled *craft authenticity*; it concerns whether something is made using the appropriate techniques and ingredients by a skilled staff.

Craft authenticity trumpets the artistry and mastery of the production and other staff. It recognizes that the knowledge, skills, and techniques of the staff are beyond the normal person’s reach, requiring special training, apprenticeships, and experiences. Craft organization implies a craft socialization system to impart tacit knowledge and skills; it also carries with it an expected degree of professional autonomy and self-administration in many aspects of the operation. Craft authenticity commonly extends to include the identification and sourcing of appropriate tools, supplies, and ingredients. Examples would include Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco, the pioneer of microbrewing.

The second extended meaning is called *idiosyncratic authenticity*. Carroll and Wheaton (2009) define it as the symbolic or expressive interpretation of aspects of an entity’s idiosyncrasies. These peculiarities usually originate from some historical event or fact (or set of events or facts), which then

becomes embodied in a collectively known and oft-repeated story. The quirky aspects of the story appeal as authenticity even though they usually convey no moral message. (It apparently helps if the story runs counter to conventional rational practice in the business, as with moral authenticity, and if the place or product possesses some significant historical age). Many of these places and products would not be found nearly so appealing by consumers without the story, and they might in fact repel them (consider the hygiene of some popular local barbecue joints). An example of a place that appeals on the basis of idiosyncratic authenticity is McSorley's Old Alehouse, the oldest bar in New York, supposedly frequented by Abraham Lincoln.

FOUR TYPES OF AUTHENTICITY AT CHEZ PANISSE

Seeing the four authenticity types reviewed earlier as Weberian ideal types implies that it may be difficult to find perfect concrete examples of each and that any specific organization might simultaneously possess more than one type. I opened the essay with a story about the recent fire at Chez Panisse and argued that the attention it received derived in large part from the restaurant's perceived authenticity. In fact, I contend that Chez Panisse exemplifies all four of the types of authenticity discussed. So, a good way to end the essay seems to be to walk through these points using the restaurant as an example.

Chez Panisse possesses type authenticity because it not only fits to a tee the restaurant category often referred to as "California cuisine" but because Alice Waters and her staff pretty much invented and refined the category at Chez Panisse. Inspired by French country cooking, Waters' Chez Panisse used simple preparations of fresh, local high-quality ingredients to provide deceptively simple and highly appealing meals of the day. Novel combinations and preparations such as goat cheese salad, and California-style pizza with local ingredients baked in an in-house wood-burning oven. Many former employees of Chez Panisse went off to found their own innovative restaurants, farms, and food purveyors. Alice Waters was later asked to start a café in the Louvre in Paris by French museum officials, a nod to the influence of her work and restaurant from the core of the culinary world.

Craft authenticity at Chez Panisse can be seen in the highly skilled chefs and kitchen staff, who originally had little formal training but sometimes knew the best of their day in France and the United States. Subsequently, former employment at Chez Panisse was widely taken as a sign of good craftsmanship in and of itself—it provided an entry point into a career in the fine food and dining industry. A number of Chez Panisse alumni became celebrities themselves, based on their skills and innovations, including Jeremiah Tower, Paul Bertolli, Judy Rogers, and others. The insistence on fresh local

high-quality, and increasingly organic, food items led Chez Panisse to motivate and build its own network of suppliers, many of them small but passionate farmers and artisans making cheese, bread, salumi, and the like. This too was a new development when it was pioneered at Chez Panisse, eventually helping to spawn the locavore movement.

Chez Panisse's moral authenticity has many manifestations, starting with the 1960-ish Berkeley-style countercultural political and social beliefs that Waters and much of her initial staff embraced. It is underscored by the simple high-quality, relatively unprocessed, nature of many of the dishes. Waters is said to have struggled financially for decades, despite the fame of her establishment, signifying to many that she was not in the restaurant business for money but instead to create a better world and to teach people how to live. Her endorsement of the Slow Food movement reinforced this image, as did her starting of a foundation and her activist involvement in school food programs (Edible Schoolyard). Most importantly, the unwillingness of Waters to commercialize her establishment by expanding its size or number of outlets or by licensing her name or by promoting her brand beyond a few cookbooks and posters strikes many as adherence to high moral principles, especially in the face of what must have been untold numbers of lucrative opportunities and proposals. Compare her behavior to that of Wolfgang Puck, another pioneer of California cuisine.

Finally, Chez Panisse exemplifies idiosyncratic authenticity in that many oft-repeated colorful stories circulate about the staff and the place. Berkeley in the 1970s was adrift with drugs, sex, and rock and roll. So too was Chez Panisse. Alice Waters figured in the middle of much of it, as did several of her chefs such as Tower (McNamee, 2007). Legends also arose around how certain people were hired and fired, and who came up with particular ideas that went on to become Chez Panisse icons. Through it all, Waters comes across as this wacky but determined free spirit, who is not particularly skillful at anything specific, but who can envision ideas and standards and see them enacted. People relate to her as an old friend, calling her Alice when they have never met her and seeing in her a humble genius, on their side in life, fighting for what is good and right.

Strawberry Fields Forever.

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