

A Consumer Perspective on Brand Authenticity: Insight into Drivers and Barriers

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Abstract

Purpose

Although much has been written about the relevance of authenticity in personal identity development, only a limited number of studies have investigated the significance of authenticity when associated with brands. The present qualitative research study addresses this oversight by examining the influence of brand authenticity on consumer perceptions.

Design/methodology/approach

A multi-method qualitative method incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups was employed to provide insight into consumer perceptions of brand authenticity.

Findings

Thematic analysis was used to identify four main themes that influence perceptions of brand authenticity: (1) credibility, (2) transparency, (3) uniqueness, and (4) reliability. Several barriers, including (1) inconsistency, (2) unreliability, and (3) pretentiousness, served to explain consumers' reservations.

Originality/value

This article presents an alternative view of authenticity that accounts for the variety of perceptions that customers may perceive as drivers or barriers to brand authenticity. Thereby, this study contributes to an improved understanding of brand authenticity, based on a consumer-centred approach, and reflects on how consumer perspectives can enhance corporate branding.

Keywords: consumer perspective, brand authenticity, drivers and barriers

1. Introduction

Brand authenticity has emerged in recent years as both an important academic construct and a pressing item on the corporate agenda. In the face of increased uncertainty, brand authenticity has been positioned as the long sought-after solution to falling customer loyalty (Mills & Robson, 2020). Authentic brands in contemporary societies mitigate some of the negative consequences of distrust and loss of brand equity.

Previous research establishes that brand authenticity can enhance customer loyalty, trust, intimacy, and brand equity (Schallehn et al., 2014). As such, authentic brands promote a sense of security among consumers, which facilitates brand engagement. A study by Fabrik Brands showed how authenticity helped brands navigate through unprecedented levels of uncertainty, ambiguity and disruption during the pandemic by responding to consumers' needs for security (Campagna et al., 2023). Hence, authenticity is highly desirable for personal and societal well-being and fits well with the new frugality embraced by consumers. It also helps mitigate consumption risks, including distrust and uncertainty (Oh et al., 2019). However, the connection between what brands really do in terms of enhancing authenticity and how consumers perceive it is often blurred.

Interest in authenticity is increasing among both practitioners and scholars, and the number of published articles is continuously growing. Among other factors, authenticity has been recognised as playing a key role in boosting brand value and trust (Srivastava et al., 2020), raising consumer perceptions of product quality (Murshed et al., 2023) and promoting brand love (Septianto et al., 2020).

Early work focused on authenticity drawn from the object itself, by exploring the characteristics that distinguish the 'real' from the 'fake'. Subsequent efforts identified social and ideological aspects of authenticity (Murshed et al., 2023). As it became evident that authenticity is a socially and personally constructed phenomena, researchers began focusing on the emotional and moral aspects of brand authenticity (Tarabashkina et al., 2020).

In spite of the apparently strong orientation of the marketing literature towards the value of brand authenticity, a small, but developing body of work has sought to understand the personal and social aspect of brand authenticity consumption. Importantly, research has called for more insights into which authenticity dimensions are particularly important in shaping consumer perceptions (Moulard et al., 2021). Establishing an overall correlation between brand authenticity and consumer behaviour has proven to be elusive in prior studies prompting research into the dynamics underlying that relationship. Therefore, the exploration of the consumer perceptions of brand authenticity is an important research direction.

Given that the business significance of brand authenticity has wide acceptance, the critical issue now is the nature of customer relationship with brand authenticity. While the flurry of research activity surrounding authenticity represents substantial progress in evaluating the importance of establishing a brand authenticity, it also highlights an important branding issue that warrants further exploration. Namely, what makes one brand authenticity more impactful? In particular, this study explores consumers' motivations, or reservations regarding the appeal of a brand's authenticity.

The goal of this research was to examine the underlying factors that support or impede consumer perceptions of brand authenticity with the objective of enabling companies to better understand how to overcome the factors that limit the successful development of an authentic brand. To achieve that, this study took a consumer perspective and identified five drivers (credibility, transparency, uniqueness, and relatability) of and four barriers (inconsistency, pretentiousness and unreliability) to brand authenticity. This framework of drivers and barriers related to brand authenticity adds to growing research pertaining to the personal and social aspect of brand authenticity (Goulding, 2000; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Tarabashkina et al., 2020), as well as a broader research tradition focused on brand (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). The implications of this study revealed broad opportunities for further research to improve our understanding of brand authenticity.

The following section of this article offers an overview of the literature on brand authenticity, then subsequent sections discuss the proposed research methodology and data analysis, while the final section highlights some of the study's theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is a multifaceted, multidimensional construct (Wood et al., 2008) that has been examined in multiple contexts and in relation to a variety of sociological and marketing outcomes. Despite its importance, no unifying formal definition of authenticity exists across philosophy, sociology, anthropology, or psychology literature. Notably, authenticity has many definitions, with the two most common revolving around genuineness and truthfulness (Fritz et al., 2017). Recent studies of authenticity have also stressed that authenticity is not a unidimensional construct but includes many different dimensions (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). Dimensions that constitute more "objective" concepts such as originality, or verifiable identity, as well as more "perceptual" concepts such as sincerity and innocence.

Sociology and anthropology scholars regard authentic experiences as original, credible, sincere, genuine, natural, and unaffected. In this context, Goulding and Derbaix (2019) hold that authenticity is the opposite of fake, kitschy and plastic. Within the field of psychology, authenticity is defined as behaving congruently with one's inner values, beliefs, and sentiments. Relatedly, authenticity is regarded as a condition of being in which one is true to oneself and acts in ways consistent with inner thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, behaving in a way that is consistent with one's true or genuine self has a positive impact on psychological well-being (Rivera et al., 2019). In fact, an increased perception of self-authenticity has been shown to enhance life satisfaction, self-determination and autonomy.

Some of the basic ideas of authenticity have been around for a long time but the postmodern view crystallized in the twentieth century with Wang (1999) who contended that authenticity is individually and socially constructed. This body of work has shown that authenticity was strongly related to self-esteem and aspects of both subjective and psychological well-being. Previous research provided support for the influence of authenticity on some favorable attitudes and behaviors at the individual level including self-esteem (Yoo & Arnold, 2019) and subjective well-being (Rivera et al., 2019).

Three perspectives of authenticity are prevalent, the objectivist, constructivist and the existentialist approaches. The objectivist perspective conceptualize authenticity as an evidence-based process in which sensory input is combined with provable facts about the product to objectively evaluate it. According to this perspective, authenticity is seen as a quality inherent in an object.

Brand authenticity from a constructivist perspective is a socially or personally constructed phenomenon (Wang, 1999). Here, brand authenticity does not revolve around the inherent quality of an object but is rather formed through an external projection of interests and expectations.

The existentialist perspective contests the view that authenticity is being true to one's self. Essentially, the existentialist view of brand authenticity is best demonstrated through consumer subjective interpretations, which reveals the tension and dilemmas presented to individuals as they seek to balance personal freedom and social responsibility.

2.2 Brand authenticity

While the authenticity concept has a long tradition in some disciplines like psychology and anthropology, it is relatively new in marketing research. The concept of authenticity can be traced back to the thirteenth century but in more recent times it appeared in the marketing literature in the early 2000s and since then it seems to have become a viable attribute for brands.

In spite of the reviews published thus far, the brand authenticity literature remains highly fragmented. Brand authenticity was considered through different disciplinary lenses, like tourism (Hede et al., 2014), social media (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Varela-Neira et al., 2023), luxury (Halwani, 2019, 2020, 2021a) and advertising (Septianto et al., 2020). As noted by Beverland and Farrelly, "what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true" (2010a, p. 839). Along the same lines, Beverland and Farrelly (2010b, p. 838) commented that "the nature of authenticity in consumption is contested".

There are various definitions of brand authenticity in the marketing literature. Some definitions claim that brand authenticity is something genuine and real (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020), while others assert that it is something true to one's values and beliefs (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010b). Hence, definitions of brand authenticity in prior literature have primarily focused on certain aspects of brand authenticity.

Brand authenticity can include a range of constructs that are already acknowledged within marketing research, including expected quality (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019), loyalty (Portal et al., 2019a), and trust (Moulard et al., 2016). Each of these can be seen as a positive behavioural outcome of brand authenticity. Hence, there is much evidence in the literature to support the notion that brand authenticity impacts consumer behavior. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007) perceived brand authenticity has emerged as a decisive purchase factor over product quality, cost and availability. It has also been argued that brand authenticity is related to credibility which seems to correlate with brand trustworthiness (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

While such outcomes have received attention in specific literature streams, the existing literature has not sufficiently explored the underlying consumer perceptions. The study of underlying consumer perceptions of brand authenticity remains fragmented and scarce (Morhart et al., 2015). Although brand authenticity stems from a corporate initiative, consumers also play an active role in shaping brand experiences (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). Specifically, consumers' attitudes toward brands affect their perceptions of brand value and trust. Additionally, the increase in uncertainty combined with loss of traditional sources of meaning and the negative attitudes toward brands by consumers (Portal et al., 2019a) has made the pursuit authenticity a major corporate goal. Taken together, several studies suggest that brand authenticity is associated with stronger emotional connection with customers (Goulding, 2000).

A paper by Guèvremont and Grohmann (2016) finds that very few studies in brand authenticity research provide insight into the acts of consumer authentication. Most notably, this phenomenon has been included in current marketing debates. As Kennedy et al. (2021) have pointed out in the context of authenticity consumption, understanding consumer perceptions is essential since the search for authenticity is part of a consumer's identity development. During the "authenticating act" consumers process self-referential cues that help construct their own identities (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). Brands that are perceived as authentic provide strong self-referential cues that can assist consumers in constructing their self-identity. Equally, it is important to emphasise that each consumer perceives brand authenticity differently. This is because consumers do not process these cues passively or in the same way as others. In fact, consumers make sense of brand authenticity attributes and initiatives according to their personal frame of reference, which reflects their values, feelings, needs and attitudes.

In an attempt to broaden the definition of authenticity and adapt it to the contemporary social environment Campagna et al. (2023) developed a framework which encompasses consumers' desire for individualization and customization. Understanding consumer perceptions of authenticity is essential since the search for authenticity is part of a consumer's identity development (Kucharska et al., 2020). A wave of recent research has established authenticity as a self-authentication emotion and has yielded insights into its subjective experience. However, neglected in prior research has been a deeper analysis of the consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. This research adds to the developing literature documenting the importance of consumer perspectives in brand authenticity.

3. Data Collection

The exploratory intention to examine what brand authenticity represents to contemporary consumers in their own life contexts called for in depth data; therefore, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. Similar qualitative methods have been used by other researchers examining brand authenticity (eg. Arnould & Price, 2003; Goulding, 2000; Halwani, 2021b; Leigh et al., 2006; Rose & Wood, 2005).

The study's data was collected in two phases. In the first phase one-on-one interviews were conducted with 130 participants. Then, in the second phase, focus group discussions were conducted with 20 groups of 10 participants each. Participants in personal interviews and focus groups aged between 17 and 80 years and were recruited across various Metropolitan areas in France, Germany, Austria, Spain and Italy. The demographics of the sample reflected the diversity of the participants included in the study. The participants worked in a variety of industries and varied across marital status, education, and income levels (Table 1).

Interviewees were recruited via purposeful and snowball sampling. Interviews and focus group meetings occurred in various convenient locations (e.g., coffee places, participant's home, researcher's office) and were conducted between January and March 2023. In sum, 200 pages of interview transcripts were reviewed individually after each interview or group discussion.

The use of a mixed data collection approach helped compare one-on-one interviews with focus group discussions. In fact, participants' group conversations yielded additional evidence, clarified opinions, and disclosed whether opinions were salient among participants.

Phase 1. The one-on-one interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview guide used was informed by a list of topics based on the existing literature. This format provided structure, while the open form of dialogue aided in the discovery of new, relevant issues.

More specifically, the use of a semi-structured interview guide allowed participants to situate the influence of brand authenticity through subjective experiences. The participants were asked general questions such as to provide examples of authentic brands and to discuss the influence of authenticity on their brand preferences. Additionally, the participants were asked to discuss impediments to brand authenticity. Finally, the follow-up questions were asked to explore the general response to brand authenticity and, more specifically, to allow the participants to discuss the attributions they ascribed to authentic brands.

Phase 2. Twenty focus groups of 10 participants each were set up in order to explore various perceptions of brand authenticity, and to compare their views with the results of the "Phase 1" interviews. This study's author facilitated the focus-group discussions, which lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The discussions were recorded and transcribed for each of the focus groups and summary notes were made immediately after group meetings.

The focus group discussions posed questions similar to personal interviews, with less specificity in the focus group discussions and more detailed probes in the phase one interviews. First, focus group participants discussed the topic of brand authenticity in a general manner (e.g. 'What does brand authenticity mean to you?' 'How is it demonstrated and how is it hindered?'), then the group discussed their views and perceptions in more detail. Focus group discussions mostly confirmed the findings from the study's first phase, as the participants were able to identify brand authenticity drivers. Additionally, the focus-group discussions helped complement the themes with more insight.

Table 1. Participant demographics

| Demographics | One-On-One Interviews | Focus Groups |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Age Range | | |
| 17 to 30 | 37% | 38% |
| 31 to 56 | 42% | 40% |
| 57 + | 21 % | 22% |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 48 % | 46% |
| Female | 52 % | 54% |
| Education | | |
| High school diploma | 7% | 5% |
| College Degree | 20% | 15% |
| Bachelor's Degree | 42% | 48% |
| Master's degree | 16% | 20% |
| Doctorate | 15% | 12% |
| Income | | |
| < Euro 25,000 | 10 | 7 |
| Euro 25,000-50,000 | 22 | 20 |
| Euro 50,000-100,000 | 34 | 36 |
| Euro 100,000-150,000 | 21 | 23 |
| >Euro 25,000 | 13 | 14 |

4. Data Analysis

The interview and focus group data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which helped recognize overarching themes relevant to brand authenticity perceptions. The NVivo 12 software was employed to ensure accurate coding, organization, and analysis of data. The study followed an inductive and a deductive approach to thematic analysis as some of the codes were theory driven (i.e. credibility, uniqueness), while others were data-driven (i.e. relatability, pretentiousness).

First, data coding involved the search for recurrent patterns, and then the classification of key words and expressions to represent categories. Codes were further combined to reflect higher-order categories. For example, the following transcript quotation “some companies are schizophrenic... their product says one things and then their ads say something different” at the data level was grouped under the category of “conflicting communication”, and then further incorporated under the broad theme of “inconsistency”. Hence, each higher order category included sub codes. For instance, transparency included sub-codes such as “vulnerability” and “not afraid to show true self”.

In a later step, codes and themes were reviewed and refined at two levels. First, the extracts for each theme were revised to check whether they form a coherent pattern. Then, individual themes were evaluated in the context of the entire data set.

5. Findings

Several themes emerged from transcripts of the interviews and focus groups in relation to participants' perceptions of brand authenticity. These themes are supported with representative quotations from participants, under two main sub-headings: perceptions of brand authenticity; and barriers to brand authenticity. In an effort to avoid excessive quotations, the findings will only include illustrative quotations demonstrating salient views and opinions.

The first and most common driver identified by participants as influencing brand authenticity is credibility. Participants held a positive attitude toward brands that deliver what they promise and fulfil their claims. A positive perception of a company's authenticity evoked the association that the company behaves genuinely. Illustrative arguments include: “It's doing what you said you'd do. you trust brands that keep up their promise”. Another reported, “what you see is what you get”. The theme that authentic brands are credible converges with evidence in the literature that there is a strong association between perceived credibility and brand authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017). Some respondents, however, indicated that authentic brands are more than just credible, they are coherent and powerful. One focus group participant eloquently articulated this theme, stating “credible brands are more established. They stood the test of time and remained true to themselves. I believe that made

them strong and even iconic”.

The findings also suggest that participants predominantly value genuine brand communications as a content source, but some of the remarks suggest that independent data sources further enhance the brand’s credibility. As one participant explained: “The stuff they tell you. I don’t know whether to always trust. That’s why I think you can better judge when you get the information from somewhere else. Like people talk and that’s authentic”. That is, beyond being passive recipient of brand related information, consumers value the opinion of trusted independent parties. Although the benefits of consumer generated content have been acknowledged in the social media literature (Noguti, 2022), insights into consumers’ perceptions of authenticity remain scarce.

The second factor that emerged as a driver of brand authenticity is transparency. Participants viewed authentic brands as open and transparent about their initiatives and acts. Generally, these participants expressed confidence in brands that are willing to openly communicate and address problems as shown in this quote: “Authentic brands share without hiding anything. When they make a mistake, they own up to it ...”. Another reported, “some brands try to manipulate you or trick you into buying something you don’t need”. Therefore, the dimension of transparency was very critical for participants as it is was perceived as an integral part of brand authenticity. In fact, participants believed that being transparent, and vulnerable about struggles and mistakes, makes the brand more human and relatable.

A large majority of participants suggested that uniqueness is an important attribute of brand authenticity. Participants’ responses indicated that authentic brands are unusual and different. They believed that this, in turn, increases the likelihood to consciously opt for a company’s products. This concept relates to the notion of brand differentiation, which, when achieved, can enhance brand attachment (Yan, 2010). Participants also discussed the ability of unique authentic brands to inspire customers. Notably, one focus group participant suggested “I would prefer brands that are true, different. Maybe they’re fun, or they’ve got original ideas like no one else”.

An important theme that emerged from the analysis was that perceived authenticity helped participants relate to the brand. Several participants reported that they closely identify with unique and distinctive brands. One said, “authentic brands give you that good feeling, you can connect with them, this is what makes up the whole experiences”. Similarly, another participant stated, “such brands make me feel special and proud. I really feel like I am part of their philosophy”. Overall, these participants tended to believe that unique authentic brands allowed them to express their individuality. That is, beyond seeking unique, differentiated brands, participants appreciate intrinsic satisfaction enabled by inspiring engaging experiences. Authentic brands thus evoke a positive emotional response that goes beyond simple satisfaction to create relational connections.

This theme also revealed that customers engage with authentic brands with a personality that fits their self-perception. Self-congruency is the alignment between the actual self-concept and product concept. Self-congruency was widely discussed in the consumption literature in general (Japutra et al., 2018) and authenticity literature in particular (Morhart et al., 2015). By choosing and being loyal to authentic brands, customers are also communicating something about their own authenticity.

In addition to identifying with the authentic brand, participants expressed the desire to take part in content creation and design of personalized brand experiences. For example, one interview participant talked about certain interactions being “one way”. He added “brands that are really honest won’t mind getting you involved in their communications. They are not afraid of that. I would like to share my advice or give some recommendations”. Through such involvement, consumers start attributing authenticity to themselves, rather than simply attributing them to the brand. This in turn triggers a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Although the benefits of such consumer involvement was acknowledged in the general consumption literature (Itani et al., 2023), insights into its influence on brand authenticity perceptions remains scarce. In addition to suggesting a need to relate to the brand, focus group participants indicated that a brand that has a story is more human and relatable. As one interviewee noted, it “I like a brand that has story. It feels way more authentic. They treat you like a person and wanna talk to you, just like a friend”. Likewise, Beverland’s (2005) found that the narrative of a sincere story was critical to conveying brand authenticity in the fine wine context.

Findings from interviews and focus groups revealed that consumers perceive numerous barriers to a brand’s authenticity. Participants were in general agreement that inconsistency was a major impediment to brand authenticity. This view was reflected in comments such as: “I don’t trust brands that give out mixed messages. It’s like you can’t really tell which story is the real one”. Participants reflected on the relationship between poor communication and brand authenticity: “some companies are schizophrenic. Their product says one things and then their ads say something different”.

Relatedly, many participants only considered a brand authentic when its actions are aligned with its core values. The participants felt that corporate communication and actions that are totally disconnected from the business a company are perceived as less credible. In general, participants agreed that consistency is influenced by the alignment of corporate actions and core values. These participants expressed strong negativity toward brands, who send out uncoordinated messages.

Perceptions of unreliability were another important barrier identified by participants. The subcategories of unreliability indicated that many of the participants faced poor quality or service. Trust was another barrier frequently identified. Participants were skeptical of a brand's motivations and communications after a negative product or service experience. An illustrative example of a negative brand experience based on unreliability is provided here by one of interview participants "I'm losing faith in brands that fail me. I lose trust in their products and their brands. I surely won't trust them again". In line with existing research on brand trust (Srivastava et al., 2020), consumers' confidence in a brand can evoke a favourable brand association, a purchase intention and loyalty.

Participants uncovered the third barrier of pretentiousness that is rarely considered among authenticity researchers. Pretentious claims were generally described by participants as promotional rather than authentic. The subcategories of pretentiousness indicate that many of the respondents were skeptical of corporate communications and claims. The brand's communications and tone of voice are, according to the participants, an indication of whether or not it employs authentic practices. Illustrative arguments include "authentic brands stay true to who they are and don't even try to be something that they're not", "they need to face up mistakes, like think about it no one is perfect so why pretend?" Interestingly, such participants frequently expressed that were not able to relate to brands that seem to perfect and flawless.

Most studies focused on pretentiousness in the context of personal relationships (Wood et al., 2008). However, this barrier doesn't appear in prior brand authenticity literature. In fact, research on personal identity development demonstrates that pretentiousness is associated with lack of perceived authenticity (De Vries & van Kampen, 2010). This study extends this reasoning to the context of corporate branding, wherein pretentiousness is identified as one of the key barriers to brand authenticity perceptions.

6. Implications and Conclusion

While extant research related to brand authenticity investigates the concept mostly through the lens of a particular marketing problem (Septianto et al., 2020; Tarabashkina et al., 2020; Yoo & Arnold, 2019) or with a focus on a specific industry (Kennedy et al., 2021), the findings of this study reveal four general drivers and reservations that contributes to a better understanding of brand authenticity. The findings of phase 1 and phase 2 studies helped identify four drivers (credibility, transparency, uniqueness, and relatability) of and three barriers (inconsistency, unreliability, and pretentiousness) to brand authenticity. This framework of drivers and barriers adds to growing research relating to brand authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010b), as well as a broader research tradition focused on consumers' brand perceptions (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020).

Prior research suggests that dimensions such as credibility and integrity can lead to brand authenticity perceptions (Portal et al., 2019b). This study extends these findings by introducing factors such as differentiation motives and a desire to identify with the brand as drivers of consumers' authenticity perceptions. It also portrays the consumer as an involved entity, rather than a passive recipient of marketing communications. The research is also built on previous works that focused on the personal and social aspects of brand authenticity perceptions, such as Guèvremont and Grohmann (2016).

The findings of this study may be useful to scholars, industry professionals, and companies seeking authentic brand associations. By demonstrating that the key elements affecting brand authenticity perceptions are centered on the four themes of credibility, transparency, uniqueness and relatability, marketing practitioners can adapt their marketing initiatives, and communications accordingly. As the findings indicate, these drivers are interdependent, and brands should strive to position themselves on the four dimensions in a unified way, instead of considering them as isolated factors.

As the participants of this study considered attributes such as relatedness and transparency as important authenticity drivers, marketers need to tackle the issues of uncoordinated communication and poor styles. Therefore, brands are well advised to create engaging content that add a human voice to the company, rather than taking purely formal approaches. More specifically, brands should consider engaging with consumers by using interactive content. For instance, strategies developed to engage consumers in frequent positive word of mouth are likely to be effective. In essence, brands can leverage this emotional connection with consumers, to overcome important barriers to brand authenticity raised in this study. The aim is to stimulate consumers'

affection, ultimately strengthening their intention to co-create brand value. A related strategy is using storytelling to establish a connection with the consumer as several participants noted the value of a meaningful brand story.

The research also identifies barriers with actionable suggestions for brands seeking to enhance their authenticity perceptions. While being open about issues and mistakes is something that doesn't seem intuitive to brands, it is nevertheless critical that corporate communications are perceived as genuine. Essentially, this suggests that brands must strive to align their brand's marketing and messaging with the reality of their products, values, and actions.

Further, perceptions of unreliability are another barrier identified. Products and services must meet consumer expectations. Several participants claimed overtly that some companies intentionally mislead consumers by distorting information and lying about their intentions. Brands also need to recognize that perceptions of authenticity depend on trust, and that their image as a reliable brand is likely to generate more positive perceptions.

7. Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to this study that need to be addressed by future research. First, the present study was entirely conducted in various European countries, namely, France, Germany, Austria, Spain and Italy. Future research can conduct replication studies in other parts of the world to assess the findings across regions. Second, some of the study participants were selected through the use of snowball sampling which narrows the diversity of the selected sample. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach helped reveal four drivers and three barriers to brand authenticity. Future research could employ quantitative methods to identify the impact these factors on consumer behavior.

The findings of this study also raise a number of additional research questions. This study examined brand authenticity perception of consumers, however, future researchers can gain valuable insight through different perspectives, such as managers and front-line employees. Finally, exploratory investigations could address the impact of the technology on consumers' authenticity perceptions.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal and publisher adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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