

## **Understanding authenticity in culture through a cross-perception of artists and consumers**

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the concept of authenticity. It proposes to study authenticity in its deep roots through the concept of self-appropriation going beyond the existent literature contributions based on self-authentication. In order to carry out this analysis, we have focalized our attention on the relation between individuals (manager-artists/consumers) and cultural products. The methodology is based on in-depth interviews with 7 managers-artists and 14 consumers.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, culture, self-authentication, artists, consumers.

## **1. Authenticity as a process of self-appropriation**

Authenticity is a topic that is generating great interest in marketing scholarship. It is considered one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010) and a pivotal attribute of contemporary life (Jacknis, 1990). Individuals intensify their search for authenticity reacting against the dominant postmodernism (Thompson et al., 2006) and unfolding what some philosophers define as new realism (Ferraris, 2012): they look for truth rather than fiction, mix reason with feeling as a basis of their daily behavior and build knowledge combining subjective and objective visions of reality. Authenticity is seen as a new way of approaching individual life in contemporary society. An increasing body of research studies authenticity in consumption processes and its marketplace manifestations combining consumer and company perspectives (Belk and Costa, 1998; Grayson and Schulman, 2000; Beverland, 2005; Kozinets, 2002; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Despite this intense attention the concept of authenticity resists a universally accepted definition. It can be associated with the notions of genuineness, truth and reality (Thompson et al., 2006, Arnould and Price, 2000; Peterson, 1997), which, from an individual point of view, can assume heterogeneous meanings. Indeed, what is true and genuine for one consumer will not necessarily be so for another. Authenticity is a subjective, constructed interpretation of reality rather than a set of specific, identifiable properties of objects (Beverland, 2006; Thompson et al., 2006), so it does not exist collectively and universally. Consumers can find authenticity even in inauthenticity: more specifically authenticity may reside in original and real things but also in “something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is original” (Grayson and Martinec 2004, p.298) and consequently in authentic reproductions. Thus authenticity can be “indexical”, if based on a search for originality, and “iconic” if based on a similarity emerging in the consumer’s mind between a reality and its recreation. Authenticity is contained in the contrived objects of reality shows; in this case it will be the result of the paradox negotiation between individual subjectivity and an unreal reality (Rose and Wood, 2005). In other words, authenticity becomes a reflexive paradox negotiating: consumers blend fantastic elements of television programs with indexical elements connected to their lived experiences creating a form of self-referential “hyperauthenticity”. It follows that what makes something authentic is the consumer’s self-authentication process; consumers recognize authenticity in products, brands, experiences that are the result of their authenticating acts conceived as “self-referential behaviors that reveal or produce the true self” (Arnould and Price, 2000, p.8). The search for true self fosters the consumer’s authentication and, thus, a personal dimension of authenticity based on a tension towards a self-consistency over time (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). The introspective dialogue between individual self and objects has become a key for interpreting authenticity in marketing (Boyle, 2003; Beverland, 2005; Pine and Gilmore, 2007). Not only consumers, but also brands can activate self-authentication by pursuing their coherence to their “brand aura” (Brown et al, 2003, p.21) regardless of markets and times. All the contributions in the literature are focused on the relationships between the true self and objects, between a brand identity and its manifestations on the marketplace; all these relationships are seen as authentication acts in terms of expression of the true self. In our research we embrace the concept of self-appropriation, which has its roots in the existentialist philosophy of Sartre (1956) and Heidegger (1962). For both authors, the essential nature of authenticity is developmental and thus a process of continually becoming that marks human nature and leads to the attainment of true-self. Individuals undertake during their lives paths of self-appropriation (“eigentlich”) (Heidegger, 1962, p. 159) by authenticating in products, experiences and brands. Authentication is seen as a way of appropriating the true-self in a logic of self-consistency. More specifically, authentication

acts are instrumental steps in a self-appropriation process through which individuals search for the recognition and the production of their true-self. The set of the authentication acts causes self-appropriation where objects, experiences and brands reflecting the true-self do not remain external to the individual but rather become an integral part of the individual's self as the true-self finds in them its detection. They do not influence individuals but are the individuals who dominate them; moreover they can be seen in a retrospective prospective, which includes paths the individual follows in the course of self-appropriation. These paths imply self-authentication acts that generate choices underlying individual compromises and interior flights. While self-authentication is recognition and production of its true self in a product/brand, self-appropriation is something more: it identifies auto-referential behaviors that make what reveals and produces the true self as part of the individual. Self-appropriation may presuppose self-authentication and can be articulated according to different life moments; in fact, in his life, the individual can show a tension in achieving different nuances of the true-selves that co-evolve while maintaining an internal coherence over time. This analytical approach opens towards a subjective and also an objective dimension of authenticity (Mancuso, 2009). A brand is authentic if it respects its core brand values and if it becomes part of a consumer's identity; a consumer is authentic if he is coherent with himself and if this coherence is recognized by others. The analysis of authenticity implies a study of these twofold dimensions; it is their convergence that can reveal paradigms of the concept of authenticity. Our analysis will focus on culture where artists are emblematic examples of authenticity producers: their works are authenticating acts of their self-appropriation and their legitimation requires that the audience finds in them its true-self as a step in its self-appropriation.

## **2. Authenticity in culture: our analytical approach**

If the search for authenticity is gaining increasing importance in the contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003) of convenience goods, durable goods and services, the same seems to be true also in many aspects of culture consumption. Peterson (2005) asserts that all products of cultural industry, in some way or another, are concerned with claims to authenticity. As for all goods, also in cultural goods, authenticity is closely linked with originality and genuineness, as well as with discrete, unique objects: a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, a sculpture by Rodin, etc. In this perspective, reproductions, copies, imitations cannot be considered as "indexically" authentic (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and may constitute a limit to authenticity: Benjamin (1969) argues that works of art have lost something of their sacred aura in the present industrial era because they can be easily reproduced. On the other hand, we can assume that reproductions of fine art (books, postcards, websites, CDs, etc) can encourage people to discover the originals. However an authentic work can be seen as genuine and real if it comes from the artist's "soul", whether he is creator or performer. According to McCarthy (2009), authenticity is a particular language of the self, intensely sentimental and reflecting the artist's identity. Thus, authenticity in culture is primarily linked with the artist's expression of him or her self: the artist authenticates himself in his works making them a way to reach his true self. In many creative fields (music, painting, cinema, etc.), authenticity is directly related with the value of the work of art (Peterson, 2005), which depends on its intrinsic quality and on the freedom of an artist who is untouched by influences from the artistic world (Peterson, 2005). Authenticity in culture does not seem to inhere in an object or performance, but should be understood as a claim made by or for an artist, thing or performance, a claim that can be accepted or rejected (Peterson, 2005). Therefore a key observation is that authenticity in culture

must be evaluated not only from the artist's or performer's perspective but also from that of audiences. In particular we propose to study authenticity as a process of self-appropriation for an artist as well as for a consumer of culture. A cultural product is for the artist an expression of his personality and also a way to self-appropriate; ~~the~~ authenticity (subjective dimension) is thus what an artist pursues with his artistic work. This authenticity exists, however, only if it is legitimated by the market: consumers search in cultural products for their true self (objective dimension), discovering in them their identity and individual values. Through a process of self-appropriation cultural products reflect the true-self of the artist and of the consumer; they are an integral part of their deep identity. Thus self-appropriation produces dominance and control over objects that identify individuals as constitutive components of their self (Heiddeger, 1962). Leveraging on this concept of dominance, we have decided to investigate the self-appropriation of managers-artists who have a particular artistic experience and of expert consumers who possess a high level of cultural knowledge. These artists and consumers consider art as a part of their life and have appropriated in art their true-self. We analyze them in a specific moment without investigating the constituting authentication acts, being also aware that their true-self unfolds in a coherent co-evolution along the course of life assuming new nuances and reaching other levels of self-appropriation. Our research remains static even though it is based on a twofold prospective. In accordance with our analytical approach we focus on performing arts (opera and drama) and visual arts (sculptures, paintings in museums) to identify areas of convergence between managers-artists' and consumers' self-appropriation focalizing our attention on what makes them survive both over time and across ~~t~~-generations. The identification of these areas represents a way to exploit culture to define the components of authenticity.

### **3. Methodology and research aim**

Our research questions are the following: (a) What makes a cultural product a constitutive part of the true-self in manager-artists and consumers? (b) What are the self-dominant assessments of cultural products converging in manager-artists and consumers? (c) What meaning can authenticity assume through a self-appropriation analysis? The research is based on different steps and methodologies: (I) an analysis of secondary literature contributions concerning authenticity in cultural organizations, see sections 1. and 2. above; (II) in-depth interviews with manager-artists working in cultural organizations; (III) in-depth interviews with consumers who participate in the cultural organizations whose managers have been interviewed. The interviews were based on the methodology of the in-depth interviews (Legard et. al., 2003) and were carried out in Neuchatel (Switzerland) and in Florence (Italy) in February-March 2013. They have involved 7 managers-artists and 14 customers who were selected on a convenience basis due to their educational background and their knowledge of the artistic world (see table 1). We posed a mix of prepared questions and floating prompts; we investigated the personality (personal evolution) of the individuals interviewed; their relationship with their identity and cultural products and their ideas about authenticity. Informants selected personally lived experiences to describe their co-evolution with the artistic world identifying indirectly in what they find themselves and thus what is authentic from their perspective. Only at the end of the interviews were they invited to explain their concept of authenticity. This procedure allowed us to verify the existence of a match condition between the concept of authenticity defined directly and indirectly. Interviews lasted on average one hour, although several lasted considerably longer; they were audio recorded and transcribed. Then we analyzed the transcriptions of the interviews, employing a horizontal content analysis (by themes). This analysis was followed by a cross interpretation of the results (Spiggle, 1994) to come to a discussion in the next sections.

**Table 1: Profile of informants involved in the in-depth interviews**

	<b>Role in the interview</b>	<b>Informants</b>	<b>Profession</b>		<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Educational</b>
1	Manager-artist	M	Theater (drama) Manager		Italian	46	Postgraduate
2	Manager-artist	M	Museum Manager		Italian	55	Postgraduate
3	Manager-artist	M	Museum Manager		Italian	60	Postgraduate
4	Manager-artist	M	Theater (lyric) Manager		Italian	52	Undergraduate
5	Manager-artist	M	Opera Manager		Swiss	40+	Postgraduate
6	Manager-artist	M	Museum Manager		Swiss	40+	Postgraduate
7	Manager-artist	M	Theater (lyric) Manager		Swiss	40+	Graduate
	<b>Role in the interview</b>	<b>Informants</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Attended organization</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Educational</b>
1	Consumer	F	Artist in troupe	Theater (drama)	Italian	35	Undergraduate
2	Consumer	M	Festival Manager	Theater (drama)	Italian	28	Undergraduate
3	Consumer	F	Professor	Theater (drama)	Italian	48	Postgraduate
4	Consumer	F	Theater actor	Theater (lyric)	Italian	55	Undergraduate
5	Consumer	M	Professor	Museum	Italian	48	Postgraduate
6	Consumer	F	Student	Museum	Italian	21	High School
7	Consumer	M	PhD Student	Museum	Italian	32	Postgraduate
8	Consumer	M	Theater critic	Theater	Italian	36	Postgraduate
9	Consumer	F	Student	Theater (lyric)	Italian	22	High School
10	Consumer	F	Student	Theater (lyric)	Italian	20	High School
11	Consumer	M	Independent	Theater (lyric)	Swiss	48	Postgraduate
12	Consumer	M	Pensioner	Classical music	Swiss	71	Graduate
13	Consumer	M	Director of a music school	Classical music	French	50	Graduate
14	Consumer	F	Specialized employee	Theater (drama)	Swiss	46	Graduate

Legend: M= Male; F = Female

#### 4. Key findings: authenticity through the process of self-appropriation

The interviews that we have conducted with both groups of manager-artists and expert consumers have shown different characteristics featuring self-appropriation that can be summarized as follows:

For the manager-artists, the key characteristic of authenticity as self-appropriation is without a doubt the unrestricted *freedom to express oneself in depth*, in the content rather than in the form, when the artist creates a work. His creativity is based on an *instinctive genius* which fosters the curiosity of the audience and acts as expression of self-appropriation. This latter lies in the artist’s creation or performance where he makes a *projection of himself* that can in turn modify the perception of the audience. Finally, through self-appropriation in creations or performance, the artist searches for a progressive *renewal*. As a result he may produce different artistic interpretations in different periods, and this is because his being is evolving.

For the expert consumers, the appropriation of their true self implies cultural productions where the artist transfers *something complex* in his content as well as in his form. Standardization and predictability are the antithesis of authenticity: in this sense, authenticity is found in unexpected and *unpredictable* works and performances, not standardized. Expert consumers appropriate their true self in something profound and *independent* that exists apart from its being a brand or a media phenomenon. They seek themselves in the *dialogue and involvement* between art forms and their components within a single art form. Self-appropriation of expert consumers is often linked to a territory, even to a “terroir” where artistic and authentic links have been rooted over time. These links can also assume an introspective dimension and generate a *dialogue* with oneself. The *involvement* means that the consumer feels emotions, positive or negative, but intense, depending on his participation to the exhibition or to the performance.

#### 5. Discussion: convergence between manager-artist and consumer perspectives

The findings described in the section 4 lead us to compare and highlight the elements marking authenticity as self-appropriation from the perspective of artists and consumers (Table 2: sections 1 and 2). Now we propose to investigate the semantic fields emerging from the convergence of the both perspectives (Table 2: section 3) in order to identify the constituting elements of this concept of authenticity through self-appropriation.

<b>Table 2: Converging semantic fields in the authenticity as self-appropriation</b>		
<b>Manager-artist perspective (1)</b>	<b>Expert consumer perspective (2)</b>	<b>Authenticity as self-appropriation: main contents (3)</b>
Depth	Complexity	<b>(A) Essence</b>
Freedom	Independence	<b>(B) Autonomy</b>
Creativity	Novelty and unpredictability	<b>(C) Creative force</b>
Self-projection	Involvement and dialogue	<b>(D) Participation</b>
Renewal	Truth	<b>(E) Process of change</b>

(A) *Essence*. The artist as well as the expert consumer finds himself in everything that expresses *depth*: the concepts become more important than the form. The artist expresses what he really is,

searching for his essence in the depth and *complexity* of concepts, which marks the artistic language and is recognized by the consumers.

(B) *Autonomy*. Authenticity is *independence*, self-expression *free of constraints* from a brand as well as media. It is something that emerges in an unconditional way, as an expression of one's self and can bear the characteristics of eternity. What is authentic remains beyond the present time.

(C) *Creative force*. Authenticity is seen as an *unpredictable* and unrepeatable act resulting from the *creativity* of an artist who is inspired by his instinct, who expresses his genius. The consumer is attracted by this creativity as a new stimulus and a synthesis of emerging interpretative ideas of reality.

(D) *Participation*. Authenticity may be seen as a crossroads between the participation of the artist (through his *self projection* into an artwork or performance) and the participation of consumer (through the *involvement* generated by his visit or attendance). The perception of authenticity stems from participation of both artistic offer and demand.

(E) *Process of change*. Authenticity is a process based on the constant *renewal* of the individual in search of *truth* as self-concept. Authenticity is a process composed of steps of different levels of one's self. Therefore it requires the identification of a self-concept and actions for its achievement.

## **6. Conclusion, limits and further research**

Our explorative research has studied authenticity going beyond the existent literature contributions based on self-authentication; it has investigated authenticity in its deep roots through the concept of self-appropriation. Authenticity does not only imply the identification in something, but also the domination of that something, which becomes part of one's self. In order to carry out this analysis, we have focalized our attention on the relation between individuals (manager-artists and expert consumers) and cultural products; the individuals analyzed exert dominance over cultural products and make culture a significant reason for their existence. In other words, they search in culture for their self-appropriation. While self-authentication implies the recognition and the production of its true self in a product/brand, self-appropriation implies something more: it identifies auto-referential behaviors that make what reveals and produces the true self as part of the individual life. The subjective and the objective perspectives investigated converge in similar semantic fields marking authenticity as self-appropriation; these fields are essence, autonomy, creative power, participation and a process of change. Depth, free ideology, geniality, immersion and progressive self-transformation to reach a self-objective are what characterize self-appropriation and thus authenticity by differentiating from self-authentication. In fact, with reference to self-authentication applied to consumption experiences, the literature identifies (Beverland and Farelly, 2010) dominance, connectivity and morality as the feelings underlying the consumers' purposes in authentication acts. In particular consumers find themselves in objects transferring the sense of control over life situations, of evocative and real connection to communities and of virtues corresponding to an ethical vision of life. On reflection, connectivity with an original productive location, expression of moral values together with genuineness make advertisements an expression of authentic brands (Beverland et al., 2008). Despite the results achieved, a significant limitation of our research is the small sample of persons interviewed in only two countries. We propose to enlarge our research by carrying out other qualitative interviews not only in Italy and in Switzerland, but also in other countries

marked by their cultural heritage. We will also broaden our field research to other artistic fields (e.g. dance, cinema, literature, etc..) identifying not only the convergences as described in the latter section but also the possible divergences emerging from the two perspectives investigated together with the compromises individuals have to face in terms of the authentication act to self-appropriate. Another research avenue is to determine whether authenticity is perceived differently according to the gender (male, female) of the artists and consumers. These future analyses are, for us, essential to face in a more critical way the relation between self-authentication (as reported in the literature) and self-appropriation (as emerges from our research).

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