

Conceptualizing Consumer Need for Product Authenticity

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates the perceived characteristics of product authenticity and the idiosyncrasies and propensities of consumers who express a need for such authenticity. Based on personal interviews of 10 consumers and three sessions of focus group interviews with 17 consumers, this study identifies six characteristics of authenticity: (1) originality, (2) quality commitment and credibility, (3) heritage and style persistence, (4) scarceness, (5) sacredness, and (6) purity. The study finds that consumers will expend high-acquisition efforts to search for and buy authentic products with one or more of the six authenticity characteristics. It also finds that consumers with a high need for authenticity consume authentic products deliberately, remain loyal to authentic products, and refuse to consume imitation goods.

Keywords: Consumer need for authenticity, consumption value, true self, ideal self

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of consumers today are asking for authentic products and services and are shunning fake and artificial ones [Gilmore and Pine II, 2007]. For many years, consumers have enjoyed the benefits of convenience and availability of consumption in a material world where most products are mass-produced in a standardized production process; lately, however, they are pondering questions such as who they are (based on what they consume) and what their existence means [Zavestoski, 2002].

In a post-modern society, consumption is associated, in part, with the symbolic meaning of products and with hedonic fulfillment. Often, consumers experience hedonic pleasure through the possession of money and materials. Consumers' fantasies and daydreams of hedonic pleasure prompt marketers to promote products using this appeal, which use, in turn, stimulates the materialistic quest of consumers [Solomon, 1999].

Increasingly, however, consumers notice the gap between actual and desired pleasure when they consume products. This gap causes consumers feel that their fantasy is unfulfilled. They then switch from one product to another in search of the intended pleasure [Campbell, 1987]. This restless search fuels their repeated cycle of consumption and drives their materialistic quest. Their quest encourages consumers to seek more and more material goods in order to maintain a constant level of pleasure, resulting in a ceaseless cycle of acquisition and unfulfilled desires. As a result, consumers become discontented, unhappy, and dissatisfied in the material world. They ascribe these feelings to the shallowness of material culture and the mendacious commercial environment [Brown, 2003]. The result is an increased need among consumers for authenticity [Zavestoski, 2002]. As a result, consumers have begun to seek alternatives to the need for authenticity [Rose and Wood, 2005], and to reveal, in the last two decades, their need for authenticity in various kinds of consumption [Lewis and Bridger, 2000].

Observing this need on the part of consumers, some marketers have begun to use authenticity as a brand-positioning strategy and a product appeal [Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Penaloza, 2000]. A number of studies have investigated a variety of authenticity issues [Beverland, 2006; Chen, English and Peng, 2006; Goulding, 2000; Harter, 2002; Kuznesof, Tregear and Moxey, 1997; Munoz, Wood and Solomon, 2006; Price, Arnould and Deibler, 1995; Stern, 1994; Swann and Pelham, 2002; Williams, 2006; Winsted, 1999; Witkowski, 1998)]. These studies show that authenticity is an important topic in both practical and academic areas.

Authenticity is a complex topic [Boyle, 2003] that can be explored with different intents in various contexts [Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006]. Consumers who seek to satisfy their need for authenticity constantly make subjective judgments on the authentic value of goods and their consumption [McNamara, 1997]. Authenticity thus becomes an evaluation and

decision-making criterion that guides consumer choice. For this reason, it is imperative to identify and understand, from the viewpoint of consumers, the perceived characteristics of authenticity, beyond the boundary of specific brand or product category. Knowledge relating to consumer need for authenticity would be beneficial to researchers and marketers. Such knowledge would enable them to identify the property of authentic goods and the characteristics of consumers who are in need of authenticity. The primary purpose of the present study, therefore, is to identify and broaden authenticity properties from the perspective of consumers.

Consumers who satisfy their personal need for authenticity through consumption have different consumption values and criteria than consumers who do not have the same need [Lewis and Bridger, 2000]. The consumption behavior and preferences of consumers who look for authentic value have been explored [e.g., Crosby and Johnson, 2003; Lewis and Bridger, 2000]. Our study aims to investigate further the attributes of consumers of this kind, and also to identify the idiosyncrasies and propensities. Our study focuses, therefore, on these research questions:

- From the consumers' viewpoint, what are the properties of authenticity in consumption?
- Which idiosyncrasies and propensities best characterize consumers with the need for authenticity?

To answer these questions, this study took a two-stage approach. First, we conducted personal interviews of 10 consumers; and, second, for validation, we conducted three sessions of focus group interviews of 17 consumers. From these, we deduced the properties of authenticity and the idiosyncrasies of consumers with the need for authenticity.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The more that consumers seek happiness and personal meaning in today's world, the more attention they give to the question of authenticity [McNamara, 1997]. Many researchers in psychology and marketing have studied authenticity, but few have provided the basis for a general definition of the concept [Beverland, 2005].

2.1. Meaning of Authenticity

The word *authenticity* refers to the qualities of genuineness, truth, and reality [Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005]. Its synonyms include terms such as "ethical, natural, honest, simple, unspun, sustainable, beautiful, rooted, and human" [Boyle, 2003]. Modern consumers often define it with words such as "original, genuine, unique, traditional, and real" [Munoz, et al., 2006]. Authenticity as a descriptive term pertains to an individual's perceived degree of genuineness regarding what is evaluated [Brown and Patterson, 2000;

Leigh, et al., 2006], and reflects that individual's concerns about having his or her real experiences, thoughts, true emotions, and "the process captured by the injunction to know oneself" [Harter, 2002]. Authenticity, therefore, corresponds to how the behavior of individuals is consistent with their thoughts and feelings, which express their true inner self, as opposed to the outward roles they play [Arnould and Price, 2000]. In short, authenticity connotes the display of a real situation rather than an artificial context [Wasserman, 2002].

Authenticity helps individuals to develop self-concept [Gecas, 1986, 1991]. People are stimulated by authenticity to realize the elements that constitute their true self. As Maslow's remarked (1987), self-actualization is the "intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself." Zavestoski [2002] divided Maslow's notion of the need for self-actualization into the need for efficacy and the need for authenticity, and suggested that profane consumption is a relatively easy and effective way to meet the two lower-level needs (i.e., physiological need and safety) and the three higher-level needs (i.e., love and belongingness, self-esteem, and efficacy). He suggested, however, that the need for self-actualization does not easily satisfy the authenticity need. Some consumers have ascribed this need-fulfillment gap to the fact that contemporary consumption of commercial goods has its limits. Recognizing this limitation, these consumers began to decrease consumption and to shift their need fulfillment from consumption to other activities, such as interpersonal relationships or hobbies. The majority of consumers, however, still seek authenticity need fulfillment by continuing or increasing consumption, rather than reducing it [Zavestoski, 2002].

2.2. Types and Characteristics of Authenticity

The need of individuals for authenticity is not new. It is a long-standing factor in consumer choice of consumption [Grayson and Martinec, 2004]. It has been suggested, in fact, that consumption of authentic products manifests a search for authenticity in what is perceived as a fictitious world and is a counteraction to threats of inauthenticity in the post-modern world [Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Rose and Wood, 2005].

Consumers rely on different cues to assess the properties of authenticity and to enjoy the different benefits of authenticity. Consumers seek not only indexical and iconic authenticity [Grayson and Martinec, 2004], but also existential authenticity [Leigh, et al., 2006]. *Indexicality* is used to indicate an object's authenticity when it is believed to be the original one or the real thing. On the other hand, when an object has an icon or an appearance that makes it appear like something indexically authentic, it is said to have *iconic authenticity*, or "authentic reproduction" and "authentic re-creation." Authentic products are by no means imitations. Although the consumer's perception sometimes focuses on one type of authenticity over another, every perceived authentic cue has

indexical and iconic attributes [Grayson and Martinec, 2004]. Some post-modern consumers, however, seem to care less about the originality symbols since they believe that inauthentic attributes can be transformed by man-made techniques into sensorial authenticity, which is sufficient to provide pleasure and fun against the modernist's rationality [Leigh, et al., 2006].

Some consumers, especially collectors, judge authenticity as though objects have special indexical cues [Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, Jr., 1989]. Collectors evaluate the authenticity of collections by relying on such information as the creator's signature, specific creation date or period, designation as a first edition, etc. Often, the objects of authentic signals have sacred meaning to collectors, a situation that is akin to consumers who prefer objects with special attributes [Munoz, et al., 2006]. Other consumers evaluate authenticity to see whether the objects are produced using certain principles [Williams, 2006].

For the most part, authenticity is denoted by the object's inherent traditional characteristics. These characteristics tend to be the most critical factor in judging whether an object is true-born. For example, the perceived authenticity of regional cuisine is influenced by a number of personal, product-related, and situational factors [Kuznesof, et al., 1997], but consumer perceptions often rely on whether the food is produced in the place of origin, whether it is prepared from traditional recipes, or whether it is the best known dish in the region.

After interviewing luxury wine marketers and consumers, Beverland [2006] characterized luxury wine brand authenticity in terms of heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship of place, and method of production, thus downplaying commercial motives. Leigh, et al. [2006] interviewed consumers in British brand-car communities to ascertain meanings of brand authenticity. Altogether, they found that authenticity enables consumers to feel a higher satisfaction toward a brand, to preserve brand heritage, to connect brand to car, and to shape their inner selves.

Whereas prior research has studied the meaning, types, and functions of authenticity regarding a specific brand in a marketing context, the present study intends to discover further properties of authenticity from the consumer's viewpoint without limiting our investigation to any specific brand, product, or consumption context.

2.3. Characteristics of Consumers with Authentic Consumption

Consumers seeking authenticity prefer products with authentic attributes. They are able to discern the subtle differences between authentic goods and mass-produced ones. Having this discernment, they see themselves as unique, but still as "members of small but selective groups" [Lewis and Bridge, 2000]. Because the attributes of consumer possessions usually mirror the personal characteristics of that consumer [Kleine, Kleine III, and Allen, 1995], consumers can create or identify their true selves throughout the individual consumption

experience, or can use products with symbolic meaning as personal signs. To create and maintain a healthy self-identity, consumers want to feel as though they can control their lives and environment and, in so doing, are being true to themselves. Consumers can achieve this feeling through authenticating behaviors that empower the manifestation of true selves and individual existence [Arnould and Price, 1999]. One special feature of authenticating behaviors is the demonstration of individual uniqueness.

The authentic behaviors of individuals portray the kind of people they are and can make others feel that they are honest, open, unfeigned, and not playing a role [Price, et al., 1995]. Authenticity is an important element in interpersonal communication and interaction in that people tend to trust and appreciate others who exhibit authentic behavior. This fact may explain why many businesses cannot win consumers. Building a quality relationship that lasts depends heavily on the amount of trust between consumers and marketers. Unfortunately, marketers are rarely able to make consumers perceive their authentic acts and their desire to build a genuine relationship [Crosby and Johnson, 2003]. This inability is probably the main reason that consumers with the need for authenticity have only transient loyalty to specific brands [Lewis and Bridger, 2000]. The inability also explains why many people would rather live a voluntary, simple material life, as pointed out by Zavestoski [2002].

Researchers have discussed some interesting characteristics of consumers seeking authenticity. Our study similarly aims to identify and discuss the idiosyncrasies of consumers seeking to satisfy their need for authenticity. Although the notion of authenticity has been extensively investigated in past studies, the concept of consumer need for authenticity is relatively under-discussed. In this study, therefore, we use a two-stage qualitative approach to identify the characteristics of authenticity and the propensity of consumers who seek for need fulfillment of authenticity.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to identify the properties of authenticity in consumption and to pinpoint, from the consumer's viewpoint, the idiosyncrasies of consumers with the need for authenticity. Our study uses a two-stage, multi-method approach. Stage 1 comprised one-on-one, in-depth interviews with 10 participants. Stage 2 consisted of three focus group interviews with 17 participants.

3.1. Stage 1: One-on-One Interviews

The first stage of data collection consisted of 10 one-on-one, in-depth interviews to collect information regarding the participants' identifications of authenticity and their attitude and behavior toward authenticity. We used in-depth interviews as the research method for three reasons. First, the in-depth interviews

allowed participants to freely express their opinions at their own pace and in their own words. Second, the in-depth interviews allowed us to probe, individually, whether each participant sought authenticity and, if so, to what extent. Third, the in-depth interviews provided a degree of privacy in which participants could respond to inquiries about private consumption without the peer pressure that may occur in a focus group setting and without the potential for social desirability bias that may occur during group interaction. Further, personal, in-depth interviews were deemed to provide better opportunities to observe each participant's physical and emotional reactions during the session.

For the in-depth interviews, we recruited 10 heterogeneous consumers, using the snowballing sampling method drawn from literature [Strauss and Corbin, 1990]. According to Lewis and Bridger's [2000] marketplace observations and survey results, consumers seeking to satisfy their need for authenticity are not limited to a specific age range. Our study, therefore, recruited participants ranging in age from 20 to 60, in order to identify possible differences in the need for authenticity, based on age. In addition, we recruited the 10 participants from different professions and industries for sample heterogeneity (Table 1).

The personal interviews each began with a request that the participant fill out an open-ended questionnaire to indicate his or her perception and conception of authenticity. The questionnaire included questions such as:

- "What are the meanings of authenticity to you?"
- "Do you perceive differences among authenticity, originality, and genuineness?"
- "What kinds of people, products, and things are authentic ones?"
- "Would you consume authentic products?"

Through questions like these, participants were strongly encouraged to think introspectively about the meaning of – and his or her attitude toward – authenticity before starting the face-to-face, in-depth interview. The authors then conducted the individual in-depth interviews, using qualitative methods and personal interview techniques [Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002]. Each interview ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes, and was audio-taped. The authors used a guideline of 15 interview questions, which they developed based on a literature review and the participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire. The interview questions pertained to their consumption experience with authentic products, motivations for consuming authentic products, extra efforts made to obtain authentic goods, benefits intended to be gained from consuming authentic goods, the individual's extent of need for authenticity, the connection between the participant and the perceived authentic goods, the importance of authentic goods to individuals and their lives, and the participants' opinions of word-of-mouth, experts' recommendations, and marketing communication of so-called authentic goods.

Table 1
Profile of Interview Participants, Stage 1 & Stage 2

Participant	Sex	Age	Profession	Industry
Stage 1: Personal Interviews				
I-F01	F	26 ~ 30	Graduate student	MBA
I-F02	F	51 ~ 55	Housewife	NA
I-F03	F	41 ~ 45	Sales	Manufacturing
I-F04	F	26 ~ 30	Marketing	Consumer goods
I-M05	M	26 ~ 30	Marketing	Health foods
I-F06	F	20 ~ 25	College student	Design school
I-M07	M	56 ~ 60	Soldier	NA
I-M08	M	31 ~ 35	Ph.D. candidate	Computer science
I-F09	F	31 ~ 35	Housewife	NA
I-M10	M	31 ~ 35	Assistant professor	Biotechnology
Stage 2: Focus Group Interviews				
G-F11	F	26 ~ 30	Copywriter	Advertising
G-F12	F	20 ~ 25	Post-coll. student	Chinese medicine
G-M13	M	26 ~ 30	College student	Design school
G-F14	F	20 ~ 25	Model	NA
G-M15	M	31 ~ 35	R&D	IT
G-F16	F	31 ~ 35	Consultant	HR
G-F17	F	36 ~ 40	Teacher	Music
G-M18	M	41 ~ 45	Public relations	Medicine
G-M19	M	36 ~ 40	Manager	Retailing
G-F20	F	46 ~ 50	Administration	Religious group
G-F21	F	36 ~ 40	Marketing	IT service
G-M22	M	31 ~ 35	Finance advisor	Financial
G-F23	F	26 ~ 30	Secretary	Education
G-F24	F	31 ~ 35	Researcher	Biotechnology
G-M25	M	26 ~ 30	Manager	Retailing
G-M26	M	31 ~ 35	Ph.D. candidate	Management
G-F27	F	31 ~ 35	Teacher	Art

3.2. Stage 2: Focus Group Interviews

Although Eisenhardt [1989] has pointed out that personal interviews with from four to ten participants are sufficient to generate meaningful research discovery, we chose to use a second stage to validate the findings of the one-on-one, in-depth interviews and to continue the discovery of any potential new findings until no further information was obtainable. After identifying six properties of authenticity in consumption and three idiosyncrasies of consumers seeking authenticity in Stage 1, we conducted focus group interviews in Stage 2.

For the focus group interviews, we recruited three groups of 17 heterogeneous consumers (see Table 1) using the snowballing sampling method. We asked participants in the Stage 1 interviews to recommend suitable candidates for the focus groups, and then screened and selected the final participants, using their personal information, lifestyle, and consumption attitude [Leigh, et al., 2006]. Having selected the participants, we moderated three sessions of focus group interviews, using the same questions we used in Stage 1. Each focus group interview ranged in length from 50 to 90 minutes, and was audio-taped.

3.3. Data Analysis

From the audio-taped interviews, we made a verbatim transcription of each participant's answers to the open-ended questions. Since consumers are largely unable to articulate the properties of authenticity or to describe in suitable vocabulary the idiosyncrasies of consumers who have a need for authenticity, we ascertained this information through inference, interpretation, and analysis [Schall, 1983]. To analyze the verbal protocols of the Stage 1 personal interviews, we used a multi-phased analysis process [Miles and Huberman, 1994] involving an extensive systematic and interpretive analysis using techniques of coding, categorization, comparison, and integration [Spiggle, 1994]. First, we inferred participants' meanings and recorded those in code. We then categorized the codes of close meanings into a construct. Third, we compared and contrasted constructs between different participants. As a final step, we used the construct coding (meta-level coding) to develop explanations for, and inferences about, constructs embedded in the data. We then checked the resulting draft with another professor of marketing to ensure the validity of our findings.

We analyzed the verbal protocols of the focus group interviews in Stage 2, using the constructs generated during Stage 2. Then, we stripped down the verbal protocol contents of the three focus group interviews and recorded the contents in code. As a final step, we assigned the codes to different content categories and compared them with the constructs identified during the Stage 1 interviews.

4. ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW RESULTS

The study classified the extent of the participants' need for authenticity according to the product scope they seek in order to satisfy their need. Participants who expressed the need for authenticity for various kinds of product consumption were categorized as high-need, and were then separated into two groups for comparison purposes – highest-need and higher-need. The highest-need group presented the most need for authenticity for nearly every product, whereas the higher-need group exhibited such a need only for products relating to personal interests or hobbies, for products used for a long time, or for products requiring more effort to use. Consumers who indicated the need for authenticity only for a specific product category or a special consumption situation were categorized as low-need, and consumers who indicated they would not seek satisfaction of this need were categorized as no-need for authenticity (Table 2).

Table 2
Classification of Extent of Need for Authenticity

Extent of Need	Participant	Products ask for authenticity
Highest need for authenticity	I-M05, G-F16, G-F21, G-F23, G-F27	Every kind of product
Higher need for authenticity	I-F01, I-F02, I-F03, G-F11, G-F12, G-M13, G-F14, G-F17, G-M18	Products relating to personal interests or hobbies, products used for a long time, or products requiring more effort to use
Lower need for authenticity	I-F04, I-M08, I-F09, G-F20, G-M22, G-M26	Products bought for special occasions or for special reasons
No need for authenticity	I-F06, I-M07, I-M10, G-M15, G-M19, G-F24, G-M25	NA

Although participants varied in their need for authenticity and their view concerning the specifics of authenticity, we deduced some common characteristics of authenticity from their perspective.

First, we inferred participants' thoughts and deduced some properties of authenticity from their answers to the first question ("What are the meanings of authenticity to you?") and the third question ("What kinds of people, products, and things are authentic ones?") on the open-ended questionnaire. We then analyzed interview contents to confirm the meaning of established properties and

to add new properties that participants had not mentioned on the open-ended questionnaire. After inference and analysis, we deduced six properties of authenticity from the participants' perspective (Table 3).

Table 3
Properties of Authenticity

Property	# of Times Mentioned	%	Sub-Construct	% of Mention	%
Originality	26	27.4	Original / brain child	8	8.4
			From country of origin / well-known place	6	6.3
			Orthodox	4	4.2
			Pioneer / innovator	3	3.2
			Features cannot be imitated	3	3.2
			Natural material	2	2.1
Quality commitment and credibility	20	21.1	Quality guarantee	7	7.4
			Objective and robust quality	6	6.3
			Honesty	4	4.2
			Fits in with expectation	3	3.2
Heritage and style persistence	17	17.8	Consistent features	6	6.3
			Embodies tradition	6	6.3
			Embodies heritable spirits	5	5.2
Scarceness	13	13.7	Cannot be found easily	7	7.4
			Is scarce	6	6.3
Sacredness	10	10.5	High personal identification	5	5.2
			High personal involvement	3	3.2
			Nostalgia / past memory	2	2.1
Purity	9	9.5	Not mixed with other materials	7	7.4
			Focusing on one thing	2	2.1
Total	95	100		95	100

4.1. Properties of Authenticity

In this section, we discuss the six properties of authenticity identified earlier in Table 2.

4.1.1. Originality

Originality is the main property of authenticity. Its main meanings include being a brain child, being orthodox, having features that cannot be imitated, and being the pioneer or the innovator.

Authenticity means original. (Participant G-F23)

Authenticity means that something has its unique feature. (Participant G-F20)

Authenticity means a kind of (feature) guarantee(Participant I-M07)

With regard to the characteristics of originality, participants having a need for authenticity cited country of origin, the place of production, status as a pioneer, and use of a hand-made process as indicators for evaluating product authenticity. When we mentioned authentic products, most participants thought of either the product's place of origin or the place best known for the product's production (e.g., Italian pizza, German schweinshaxe, or Japanese silk). Participants perceived that products made in or originating from those places are orthodox products. In general, participants perceived the first product or the first style appearing in the market as the most original one.

. . . .the place of production is virtually very important. Things are truly orthodox only if they are from the original producing places. (Participant I-F02)

This is a psychological preemption. We often think that the taste of the food from the first store is the most original and delicious. (Participant I-F04)

Participants also pointed out that being natural is one characteristic of authenticity and that products made of natural materials or by a hand-crafted process are original.

Authentic things are made [from] natural material rather than chemical material. (Participant G-F21)

Compared with existing products, services, or activities, products with originality exhibit new or novel characteristics [Cumming and Oldham, 1997]. Originality of innovation also transcends traditions and differentiates itself from others [Blumler and Spicer, 1990].

Our study discovered that participants judged a product's originality based mainly on the country of origin or the place where the product was made. This finding demonstrates that consumer evaluation of authentic products is greatly influenced by their integral impression of the product's country of origin. If products are tagged with the "made in" label, consumers judge those products based on their information about the country of origin, per se [Nagashima, 1970]. The "made in" label is a mental heuristics based on the country's reputation, its manufacturing, design, and R&D ability, the consumer's past experience, and

even his or her general impressions about products made by various nationalities [Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Darling and Kraft, 1977; Roth and Romeo, 1992].

4.1.2. *Quality Commitment and Credibility*

To our interview participants, authenticity meant representation and a paragon of something, including quality guarantee, objective and robust quality, honesty, and the being able to fit in with expectation.

Authenticity means 100% good quality. (Participant G-M26)

*Authenticity means something consistent with what I expect.
(Participant G-F24)*

*Authenticity means quality of a product being able to stand an
objective, credible test. (Participant G-F12)*

Authenticity is 100% quality and has credibility. (Participant G-F17)

Respondents with a high need for authenticity indicated that so-called authentic products should be adopted by a great number of consumers because of their fine quality, great word of mouth, and strong consumer acceptance. These respondents also indicated that they would believe a product's claim of authentic attributes only after they had used the product themselves in person and had been convinced by its quality. On the other hand, respondents with a low need or no need for authenticity indicated that they would not believe the product's claim of authenticity simply because it was popular and generally accepted, although they agreed that credibility is an important element of authentic products.

I have not eaten local Thai food in Thailand, but I go often to a Thai restaurant in Taiwan. Everyone says it is authentic, and I also feel tasty after I eat. So I think it is authentic. (Participant I-F03)

With regard to the endorsement of an authentic product, participants with a need for authenticity tended to trust other consumers' opinions more than experts' recommendations and business-oriented marketing communications. In contrast, consumers with no need for authenticity regarded the endorsement of experts as the most effective way to impart identity and authority to buyers with a need for authenticity.

I won't trust brands simply by relying on famous person's or celebrity's recommendations, because we know they are in name only. But I think those who ask for authenticity will buy these products. They need experts' proof which is what they actual intend. (Participant I-M08)

4.1.3. *Heritage and Style Persistence*

To participants in the interviews, authenticity also meant that something embodies heritable spirits and characteristics and that its features are consistent with what is in the participant's memory.

I think it (authenticity) means obeying traditional culture, a kind of esteem for tradition. (Participant G-M13)

I would like to say that authenticity represents a long-term pass-down heritage spirit, or something. (Participant G-M18)

As the participants indicated, how well a product is able to hold its authentic attributes is determined mainly by the ability of the producer, over time, to keep the product consistent with the original.

I think they (authentic products) have a persistent spiritmainly because of producers' relentless spirit. (Participant I-F01)

. . . . Those authentic products won't change their characteristics, no matter what happens. (Participant I-M10)

Participants with a high need for authenticity indicated that authentic products can stand the test of time; hence, those who consume authentic products ought to be fashion-free. Participants with a low need or no need for authenticity, however, argued that consumers with a high need for authenticity are actually those who pursue fashion. In response, participants with a need for authenticity expressed a greater concern with the long-term value of authentic products, regardless of whether the products are in fashion.

. . . .To some level, those who pursue authenticity won't pursue fashion (for products they perceive authentic). (Participant I-F04)

Authentic things always attract many fansThey are famous brand products. People who pursue authenticity may just follow others I think they love and pursue fashion. (Participant G-M15)

4.1.4. Scarceness

In the view of interview participants, authenticity implies scarceness because it is hard-to-achieve property. In other words, people have to spend more time, money, or effort to achieve and maintain authenticity.

Authenticity is not an easy thing to find out. . . .You should spend more cost or effort. (Participant G-F11)

Interview participants agreed that most authentic products are scarce and difficult to obtain. Hence, consumers with a high need for authenticity prefer to buy limited editions and would not buy products that are in abundant supply.

I think what I pursue is the uniqueness of that (Brazilian) music group because all members of it are elders.....this doesn't mean I am unique than other people, but the group is unique compared to other bands. (Participant I-F01)

Some authentic products are scarce because their materials are rare, like Chinese herbal medicines, or natural pearls. (Participant I-F06)

Product scarcity is a condition of restricted supply, which turns out to be a market advantage since consumers tend to psychologically resist the limitation [Lynn, 1992]. Koford and Tschoegl [1998] indicate that product scarcity increases a product's market value because of the unavailability which causes asymmetry between demand and supply. Once the supply of the scarce product rebounds, the product utility to existing owners immediately plunges. It is not uncommon for consumers to prefer scarce products because of their uniqueness, yet scarce products do not make consumers feel unique if they are not in good quality [Koford and Tschoegl, 1998]. Interview participants with a high need for authenticity indicated that they might consider a product unique because of its scarcity rather than its ability to exhibit uniqueness.

4.1.5. Sacredness

Authenticity implied sacredness to some of the interview participants because it sometimes relates to memories of past days or because it produces nostalgia. In some cases, participants indicated that authenticity relates to things in which they are interested or highly involved. Authentic products, therefore, may hold a sanctified position for some consumers. Consumers often assign sacred meanings or images to products, arising mostly from the consumers' symbolic interest in the products, or from their profound memories relating to the products.

. . . for some meanings, authenticity means something consistent with my expectation in past memory, so I will buy authentic products for cherishing the memory. (Participant G-M18)

. . . about old songs CD or old movies VCD . . . are sounded or seen different, just feel good, I like (them) very much . . . all of them have conservation value. (Participant I-F02)

To some consumers, what they consume can be a spiritual experience beyond the object itself. This kind of consumption behavior is entangled with a process of sacralization [Belk et al., 1989]. Our interview participants with a high need for authenticity indicated that they focused their daily life, interests, hobbies, and consumption on products of originality, products from licensed editions, or products from the original country and the best-known places of production. In their view, only those products that meet these requirements are "real products" that cannot be superseded. On the other hand, interview participants with a low need for authenticity indicated that they would not apply the above product requirements in daily consumption, except for gift-giving. Interview participants with no need for authenticity dismissed the authenticity seekers entirely, viewing them as trouble-makers. The low-need participants could not understand why the high-need participants expected so much more than the product's basic utility.

4.1.6. Purity

Some of our interview participants also viewed authenticity in terms of purity, indicating that authentic products come from only one source, are focused on and proficient in one thing only, are not alloys, and are not produced by mixing several materials.

Authenticity is that someone focuses on one thing, or something without impurities. (Participant G-F14)

Authenticity means without impurities. (Participant G-F16)

Authenticity just means simple, without any other else. (Participant G-F27)

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *purity* means “unmixed with any other substance, of unmixed race, clean, and mere.” In Morgan’s [1987] study of the treatment of goods and services by courts of law, he points out that many people should view goods and services as unmixed, rather than mixed, in order to exhibit their own characteristics. Then, each one’s value would be easily defined. Purity, then, is an indication that a product’s essential materials are not blended with other materials, and that said materials solely represent the attributes of the product entirely. In our study, all participants agreed that purity is an attribute of authenticity and stressed the importance of this quality. However, those participants with no need for authenticity tended to distrust the purity claim by producers.

Pure juice means the one made in front of me, no water, no sugar, and that is the so-called authenticity. (Participant I-F09)

Authentic products are those without mixing with other material, for example, 100% natural fermentation soy sauce, without any mixture of chemical material. (Participant G-M22)

I consider a brand an authentic one if it only produces single type of product, such as shoes, and doesn’t make other kinds of products. (Participant I-M05)

According to our interview participants, authentic products that are consumed to satisfy the need for authenticity not only possess the six authenticity properties, but also can be obtained only through high acquisition efforts. Participants noted that most authentic products are rare and not easily acquired; hence, they require one to expend higher efforts, more money, or more time to obtain them. Interview participants with a high need for authenticity indicated a greater willingness to spend extra time or money to acquire authentic products, whereas those with a low need or no need for authenticity said they would spend relatively little on authentic product acquisition.

We often have to spend more money or time to acquire authentic products because they are branded. (Participant G-M19)

When things are scarce, it is precious. You have to spend more efforts to carry off authentic products, may because of rare material, from special country of origin, etc. (Participant G-M25)

The price of a product usually signals quality. The higher the price, the better the perceived quality [Lynn, 1992]. Usually, consumers are willing to pay a higher price for quality [Agarwal and Teas, 2001]. Scarcity also spurs the desire to obtain products of limited supply and results in higher acquisition costs in terms of money, time, and effort [Lynn, 1992]. Consumers tend to believe that scarcity warrants higher monetary and time costs, which are accepted as the norm [Seta and Seta, 1982, 1992]. We discovered that our interview participants with a high need for authenticity considered it quite normal to pay higher costs to acquire an authentic product, whereas those with a low need for authenticity considered it extravagant and self-indulgent to pay a high price for authentic products.

4.2. Propensities of Consumers Seeking Authenticity

After the two stages of interviews, we inferred and deduced three propensities of consumers who seek to satisfy their need for authenticity by consuming authentic products. Those propensities are: deliberate consumption, loyalty to authenticity, and a dislike for imitation. In addition, we also contrasted consumers who have a need for authenticity with those who have no need for authenticity.

4.2.1. Deliberate Consumption

Deliberate consumption is a tendency associated with originality, scarcity, and the good quality of authentic products. Our interview participants with a high need for authenticity expressed their declination to buy products that cannot maintain scarce attributes. For them, authentic products not only satisfy their quality request, but also provide unique values such as assuring them of a healthy and sustainable life or providing them a meaning of sanctity. Some participants even stated that they made their own authentic products, using what they called authentic materials. On the other hand, product usefulness meant much more than scarcity to our participants with a low need or no need for authenticity.

Making handicrafts is my interest . . . I will find (authentic) materials painstakingly, if I can't find it, I would not buy the substitutes. (Participant I-F02)

I like to drink Panta orange soda. It is the real orange soft drink to me. If there is no Panta, I wouldn't drink orange soda anymore. (Participant I-F03)

I like authentic products, natural products...those are good for my health . . . I will buy those persistently. (Participant G-F11)

There [are] no 100% authentic products, so when I buy something, I consider function first. (Participant G-M25)

4.2.2. Loyalty to Authenticity

Our participants with a high need for authenticity proclaimed that the more the authenticity of a product is recognized and demanded, the higher their loyalty to authenticity, and vice versa. In contrast, our participants with a low need or no need for authenticity reported that they are more susceptible to price allure.

I am loyal to authenticity. If I think the product is authentic, I will only buy it without considering othersI think the stricter one's request for authenticity, the higher loyalty is rendered to authentic products. (Participant I-M05)

I value authenticity very muchauthentic attribute is important to me . . .if I discover that something is more authentic, I will switch to buy it. (Participant G-F12)

Consumer loyalty strengthens personal attitude and patronage for products and brands [Dick and Basu, 1994; Reynolds, Darden and Martin, 1974, 1975]. In the present study, we found that participants with of high need for authenticity revealed extremely high loyalty to authentic products. We noted that their loyalty was targeted mainly at products that can fulfill authenticity requirements, rather than at a particular brand. To these participants, brand is nothing more than an accompaniment of authentic products. They would hunt for authentic products from brand to brand and would remain loyal to products of authenticity, but far less loyal to brands.

4.2.3. Dislike of Imitation

Putting quality before quantity, our interview participants with a high need for authenticity indicated that they would not buy imitation products, but would instead purchase only the original or licensed products. In contrast, our participants with a low need or no need for authenticity indicated they would base they purchase solely on price, even if the imitation products are of doubted quality.

I would not use imitation goods. (Participant I-F01)

I would not buy and use imitation products. I would buy the copyrighted edition if I want to buy or use it. (Participant G-F16)

I would try my best to avoid using imitation products. (Participant G-F23)

I will use imitations for convenience and cheap price. . . .if the imitations can satisfy function request, why not use it? (Participant G-M26)

Consumer perception of product value is influenced by both the product's quality and the monetary sacrifice. For this reason, not all consumers prefer reduced price, especially when high price signals high quality [Agarwal and Teas, 2001]. All of our interview participants with a need for authenticity agreed that authentic products are of fine quality and worth a high price and that imitations, though much cheaper, have no quality assurance. Resisting the lure of low prices is not easy, however. Among our participants, only the group with a high need for authenticity would refuse lower priced imitations and insist instead on authentic products.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to unveil the properties of authenticity pursued by consumers. From two stages of consumer interviews, we identified six properties of authenticity: originality, quality commitment and credibility, heritage and style persistence, scarcity, sacredness, and purity. We also discovered that consumers with a need for authenticity consume authentic products deliberately, remain loyal to authentic products, and refuse to buy or use imitation goods. The six properties of authentic products are not inherent attributes of the products, but are instead consumer perceptions of those products. We conclude that authenticity is a subjective judgment of consumers about products rather than brands. Nested in product authentic qualities, brand appears to be an accompaniment of authentic products.

Our findings have summed up more differences than were suggested by Beverland [2006]. First, Beverland points out that wineries often use their history as a brand position. This brand position has heritage value to consumers, which indicates a brand's reliability and the high quality of production and products. In this way, wineries can have a price premium. According to our study, however, the heritage of authentic products is a reflection of the producers' spiritual insistence on stylistic consistency and method of production. Producers would be willing to spend more time and effort to produce products by traditional methods in order to maintain their production spirit. When consumers purchase and use authentic products, the producers' spirit is transferred to them from the products.

Second, both Beverland's findings and our study have identified quality commitment as an important attribute of authenticity. Beverland emphasizes that product property is determined mainly by label; whereas, we stress quality as a representation and a paragon of something, which is imparted, not through the label, but through the product's property, great word-of-mouth and strong consumer acceptance. Consumers with a need for authenticity believe in their own experience and other consumers' recommendation, not marketers.

Third, as a cause for downplaying commercial motives, Beverland mentions scarcity as one authentic attribute, citing as an example wine that is produced in small batches. Scarcity can raise a product's market value. We found in our study

that consumers with a need for authenticity might distrust marketers less and not be influenced by the commercial environment in which they live. To some degree, this finding indicates that these consumers exhibit a resistance to the commercial world [Firat and Venkatesh, 1995]. We also found that unusual or special features facilitate the scarceness of an authentic product. These features are the reason authentic consumers prefer authentic products and the reason those products are sacred. Conversely, we found that the higher product value cited by Beverland is not what authentic consumers truly care about.

Fourth, Beverland provides six attributes of authenticity, but discusses product characteristics rather than consumer needs. He discusses authenticity in only the luxury wine industry, although, as shown in our study, authenticity exists in every kind of product.

Our study finds that consumers with a high need for authenticity prefer to consume authentic products made by themselves or authentic products congruent with their interests and product involvement. We found also that they are fond of authentic products that have unique values and their own particular characteristics; in particular, those that represent true self as an exhibition of self-actualization. Our findings resonate with those of Gecas [1986, 1991] and Zavestoski [2002]. After identifying the properties of authenticity and the propensities of those seeking authenticity, this study provides a definition of consumer need for authenticity as a kind of psychological urge or force that directs consumers to seek and consume authentic products as a means of exhibiting their true self, actualizing their ideal self, and minimizing the gap between the two.

Our findings show that consumers with a need for authenticity are highly involved with authentic products. Their deep involvement with authenticity helps increase their knowledge in this particular domain, allowing them to judge product authenticity based mostly on this personal knowledge and prior consumption experiences. Although individuals who demand product authenticity would actively search for authentic product information, they would also rely on word-of-mouth referrals from other consumers. This study also finds that experts and marketers seem to lose their luster when recommending authentic products. Most of our interview participants expressed little trust in the claims of authenticity made by experts and marketers. To some degree, then, consumer need for authenticity mirrors individual loathing toward the commercial world and factitious appeals [Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Rose and Wood, 2005]. This finding leads to Proposition 1 of our study:

Proposition 1: To consumers with a need for authenticity, product knowledge and consumer word-of-mouth have more influence than claims of product authenticity by experts and marketers.

From our findings, we deduce that originality, heritage and style persistency, scarcity, and purity are the four properties of authenticity that best fulfill an individual's original creativity and identity. These four properties are considered time-free and persistent in satisfying the consumer's relentless pursuit for authenticity and in facilitating the growth of one's identity. These four dimensions also contribute greatly to the sacredness of products and the transfer of meaning from authentic products to consumers.

Our study also finds that consumers with a need for authenticity have a clear concept of who they are, what they need, and which goals they would like to actualize, as Gecas mentions [1986]. We infer, therefore, that the search for self-realization and self-actualization not only influences consumers' attitudes toward consumption, but also motivates their consumption behavior. Consumers who use authentic products exhibit their true self and, in so doing, realize their ideal self, thereby reducing the gap between the two. Moreover, consumers with a need for authenticity demand that authentic products be of good quality in order to meet their desire to be quality people living quality lives. Consequently, they are willing to spend more time and money searching for and buying authentic products. This finding leads to Proposition 2 of our study:

Proposition 2: Consumers with a need for authenticity intend to conform personal true self to ideal self and aim to live an ideal life by acquiring authentic products.

This study finds that consumers with a need for authenticity are loyal to a product's authentic attributes because of such attributes are capable of showing their true self and helping them realize their ideal self. Once consumers confirm that products possess authentic attributes, they are highly loyal to those products. We thus infer that these consumers are loyal to their need for authenticity, not to the commercial brands on the market. These consumers, then, are loyal to authentic products and constantly look for more authentic products to appear. This finding might explain why consumers with a need for authenticity are not interested in price discounts, nor will they buy imitations. Hence, we provide Proposition 3 and Proposition 4 as follows:

Proposition 3: Consumers with a need for authenticity are more loyal to a product's authentic attributes than to brand.

Proposition 4: Consumers with a need for authenticity will not change their consumption decisions for the sake of price discounts and imitations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

With the increase in the number of consumers concerned that most marketplace products are too commercial to identify personal meaning, a new

segment is emerging that comprises the growing number of consumers who request “real things.” This consumption tendency has emerged from consumers’ need for authenticity. Whereas prior studies have stressed this consumption tendency, our study has further identified and generated properties of authenticity from the viewpoint of consumers. We also address and study the propensities of consumers who seek authenticity. Based on the results of two stages of interviews with a total of 27 participants, we propose six properties of authenticity; namely, originality, quality commitment and credibility, heritage and style persistence, scarceness, sacredness, and purity. Our study discovers that consumers with a need for authenticity consume authentic products deliberately, remain loyal to the product’s authentic attributes, and reject imitations.

6.1. Managerial Implications

The increasing number of consumers looking for authenticity, and their propensities, might be of great interest to marketers. First, consumers with a need for authenticity have a greater faith in the word-of-mouth endorsement of an individual consumer than they have in the endorsement of an expert. We suggest that marketers maximize the use of opinion leaders by using Web blogs, consumer forums, and viral marketing to approach and influence consumers with a high need for authenticity. Second, consumers with a need for authenticity attach more personal meaning to authentic products. To reach this emerging segment, marketers should appeal to personal inner needs instead of social status. Third, consumers with a need for authenticity are more loyal to the authentic attributes of products than to brand name. If marketers intend to establish brand loyalty in consumers who value authenticity, it would be more appropriate to posit the brand by specific authentic attributes in order to attract this consumer group.

6.2. Future Research Directions

The findings of this study are only conceptual and preliminary, a fact that leaves plenty of room to conduct further empirical studies to examine the four propositions we have set forth. The next step would be to develop a scale for measuring consumer need for authenticity. Another future research direction is to identify the motivations and factors that contribute to consumer need for authenticity. For example, do consumers with different socioeconomic backgrounds, lifestyles, and personalities present different degrees of need for authenticity? Is the need for authenticity a phenomenon that varies across cultures?

Although this study has identified several properties of authenticity, the relative importance of each property and attribute in terms of influencing consumer buying and consumption is yet to be determined. Another avenue for future research concerns how different motivations of authenticity seeking are

associated with different properties of authenticity. This study calls for more attention to the product nature of authenticity and how it may interplay with indicators such as brand name, brand status, and brand loyalty. Will a brand that stresses authenticity attributes increase its market value? Is authenticity a strong element in brand positioning that is applicable to all product categories? These are just a couple of examples of extended inquiries that can be answered in future studies.

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