# THE IDEAL MARKETER IS AN AUTHENTIC MARKETER

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## ABSTRACT

Interest in authenticity is on the rise. Marketing literature touts authenticity as a point of differentiation (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Tourism literature continues to investigate authenticity in reference to the consumer experience (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Modern psychology considers what is, and what is not, authentic behaviour (Golomb, 1995; Guignon, 2002). And of course, Philosophy has been working on the question for centuries, with a resurgence in the last forty years (Trilling, 1974).

Although marketing research has indicated that authentic marketing is effective, transformational and positive, defining marketing authenticity and applying it is challenging. The 360 degree authenticity approach is one way that researchers and practitioners can consider marketing in a qualitative way. Each dimension of the 360 degree model, however, is strongly linked to cultural context.

## INTRODUCTION

> The simulated situations… in persuasive communication cannot be put to a test of "true or false" in the modernist sense of scientific discourse. These are transformational propositions… They could and do become "true" only after the fact, when and if the consumer feels that s/he is having the experience. (Firat & Venkatesh, 2002)

Authenticity is difficult to describe, and yet one knows it when one sees (or feels) it. Authentic experiences are meaningful. They are transformative (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). The create connections and bonds between people, experiences and objects (Leigh, et al., 2006; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). Authentic experiences can reach the lofty heights of sacredness (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), or be as base as popular culture (Firat & Venkatesh, 2002).

Regardless on the language or culture, to describe something as authentic is to put it in a positive light. Authentic product experiences are the holy grail of marketing: authentic experiences are the most effective at connecting with the customer on an emotional and sometimes spiritual level (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lewis & Bridger, 2000).

Marketing is an industry that already struggles with a reputation of insincerity. In the last twenty years, authenticity in marketing has been touted as everything from a sophisticated consumer sensibility (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) to a market position (Godin, 2005) to one of the most significant challenges in brand management (Beverland, 2005). The ideal marker is an authentic marketer because authentic marketing is effective (Gilmore & Pine, 2007); and marketers can no longer afford to be perceived as inauthentic in a global and internet-connected marketplace. Authentic marketing is not a strategy; it is a method of marketing research and practice.

Although industry and research publications concur that authenticity is a positive thing, there is little proposed in terms of definitions, measurement, application and evaluation of authenticity in the marketing literature. The purpose of this paper is to support the move toward defining a framework for authenticity for practitioners and researchers.

The first part of this paper introduces the 360 Degree Authenticity Framework as a tool marketing researchers and practitioners can use to holistically examine authenticity as it is depicted in various disciplines: philosophy, religious studies, tourism, psychology and, of course, marketing.

The second part of this paper describes the worldviews and paradigms that are conducive to authentic marketing. A postmodern worldview delivers a specific perspective on the role of consumer culture in shaping, and reshaping something as personal as one's own identity or as vast as an economic market. The Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) paradigm delivers cogency to marketing within a postmodern world. It is through the foundations of postmodernism, consumer culture and S-D Logic that authenticity comes in to strong focus; this is because a modernist perspective cannot deliver the richness required to grasp the authenticity concept in all of its dimensions.

Finally, the last part of this paper proposes that marketing graduates may be ill-equipped to navigate cultural milieus without a stronger cultural component to their education and training. As long as marketing is perceived, researched and applied through a modernist worldview, concepts such as authenticity will remain problematic. The authors recommend marketing education include sociological and anthropological research techniques to better equip marketing practitioners' literacy, investigation, application and portability of cultural concepts such as authenticity.


## 360 DEGREE AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK

The meaning of authenticity has been discussed in tourism research for decades. Purposeful and meaningful leisure travel is a concept thousands of years old, with pilgrimages drawing travellers from around the globe to sacred sites (Collins & Murphy, 2010; Peterson, 2005; Vukonic, 1996). Whether a sacred site or artifact was authentic was based on a variety of opinions and standards that we would find odd today (Did the artifact perform miracles? Did it draw a crowd?). Perception of authenticity was complex even thousands of years ago.

A taxonomy of authenticity has been concluded as being too problematic due to the variety of meanings of the word authentic (Peterson, 2005). This is unsurprising as a taxonomy is a mainly reductive methodology (Franklin & Graesser, 1996; Norman, 1963). When more holistic methodologies are used (Trilling, 1974; Wang, 1999), there seems to be a greater understanding of authenticity from a variety of perspectives. When considering authenticity, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The 360 Degree Authenticity Framework synthesises and broadens definitions of authenticity from several sources and applies those definitions to marketing-specific propositions as in Table 1 (Collins & Murphy, 2010; Collins, Watts, & Murphy, 2011).

### Objective Authenticity
Objective authenticity asks if the claims made about the object be verified, usually empirically (Wang, 1999). For example, with historical relics there are agreed standards and techniques in the industry for verifying the age and authenticity of artifacts (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Peterson, 2005).

Although this kind of authenticity seems the most straightforward, it is poses its own challenges. The standards for confirming authenticity in this context are a social and cultural construct, subject to bias and cultural norms. As scientific innovations evolve, these standards change, casting uncertainty where previously there may have been certainty (Peterson, 2005). Therefore something as straightforward as verifying the authenticity of a historical artifact is, all of a sudden, not so straightforward after all.

For marketers, particularly those in the fashion and entertainment industry, the battle to devalue fake merchandise is one of the greatest challenges of their brand management. Discerning an original from a fake is increasingly difficult; however convincing consumers that one is more desirable than the other is the more significant battle (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Peterson, 2005).

Objective authenticity is the baseline for any marketer. Legally, marketers are required to represent their products accurately. Even if the marketer clears this hurdle, s/he should take the extra step of digging deeper to investigate the cogency of the cultural and social context from which validation occurs when approaching the next step: constructive authenticity.

### Constructive Authenticity
Constructive authenticity focuses on the cultural context (Wang, 1999).
Does the product/brand fit or leverage the cultural context in which the product/brand experience takes place? Is the product/brand story or mythology a cultural fit? The Saab automobile gained a following around the world even though it was built specifically for extreme Nordic weather. It's anti-fashion statement was a fashion statement in itself—indicating that look were not as important as durability. The Saab was an authentic Swedish vehicle designed for Swedish conditions; which appealed to car buyers beyond Swedish shores (Maynard, 2009).

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A meaningful match between product experience and cultural context can provide conditions for extreme connections to the product/brand, such as a Transcendent Customer Experience (TCE) (Schouten, et al., 2007) and spark consumer religiosity and Customer Evangelism (Collins & Murphy, 2009).

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is a family of theories and research relating to consumer actions and cultural meanings. At CCT's core are questions of personal and collective cultural identity and how identity is worked and reworked through consumption; and that activity in and of itself generates and regenerates collective culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Featherstone, 1991).

Constructive Authenticity requires an understanding of cultural context. While empirical analysts work with statistical and predictive models of consumer behaviour; cultural analysts, such as CCT researchers, provide a rich understanding of the context within which those activities occur (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Empirical methodologies have a role in in consumer behaviour analysis; however they do not tell the whole story. Culture is cumulative and holistic. The value of cultural analysis and associated methodologies is to provide a better understanding to those outside the culture. Those within the culture do not require the analysis to navigate it; marketrs, and researchers however, are often not fully immersed in the culture to which they are operating or analyzing (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

For example, Peterson discusses authenticity in Chicago Blues music scene. Tourists frequent blues clubs in the mainstream parts of town. A few tourists who consider themselves more knowledgeable about the blues venture out to the North side of Chicago. These North Side clubs are rougher and harder to find. Those who consider themselves most knowledgeable go a step further and explore the roughest clubs of Chicago's South Side. Tourists navigating this type of authentic experience also have to consider other issues, such as personal safety. However the process of participating in a South Side experience where most tourists do not go can lend the experience a greater sense of authenticity even if the music played on the North and South sides are exactly the same (2005).

Valuing CCT related research, and the accompanying methodologies, is key to any marketer seeing to deliver an experience with the potential for perceived authenticity.

**Commercial Authenticity**

The centre of commercial authenticity is the is about one being true to oneself. American literary critic Lionel Trilling (1974) brought this phrase up as the closest he could get to a definition of authenticity. The only way to whether one is true to oneself is to know oneself in the first place. This is the message of commercial authenticity: know yourself (your product/brand).

Gilmore & Pine's (2007) work features a two by two matrix. One axis asks the question: is this product what it says it is? The second axis asks the question: is it true to itself? Something that is not what it says it is, but is true to itself is *Fake/Real*. Something that is what it says it is, but is not true to itself is *Real/Fake*. Something that clears both hurdles attains is *Real/Real*. *Fake/Fake* experiences can be lucrative; they just do not necessarily hit the mark in terms of authenticity.

An example offered of a successful *Fake/Real* is Disneyworld. Disneyworld is not, as it purports to be, a "Magic Kingdom". It is neither magical nor is it a kingdom. It is a representation of what such a place would be like should it exist. The vision is realised coherently down to the finest details (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

**Existential Authenticity**

Wang opens discussions of existential authenticity in a tourism context. He describes existential authenticity as been fully engaged within a tourism experience (1999). Others have described peak(Schouten, et al., 2007) or flow (Csikszenthmihalyi, 1997) experiences as signals of total engagement, which can be connected to authenticity.

In pre-Socratic times, Heraclitus claimed that one could not step in the same river twice as change is constant in the natural world. The modern sensibility that rose of the science, industry and manufacturing of the industrial age sublimated that view. Progress and a single truth are the hallmark of modernist thinking. However Western philosophers of the 20th century proposed that authenticity was possible even in a postmodern context; where one's self-identity is fluid (Golomb, 1995; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

Kierkegaard was the first to propose that to be authentic meant to be true to oneself in a holistic sense, consistent across all facets of one's life (Golomb, 1995; Guignon, 2002). Heidegger went further and indicated that an authentic experience transcends automated responses, engaging in deliberate action consistent with being true to oneself. A specific person, at a specific moment, in a specific cultural context, with a specific set of circumstances which has led to that point is a moment of convergence, and an opportunity to cut through all the preprogrammed and automated expectations and act in a very deliberate, and therefore authentic, way (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

Modern Psychology takes a Heideggerian approach: authenticity is when one rises above one's training/programming/cultural norms/expected behaviour to act in manner true to oneself whether that way is what is expected or not (Guignon, 2002).

For the Heideggerian, anxiety drives one to act in a culturally predictable manner. An authentic actor cuts through; driven from a heightened awareness they take the opportunity to act deliberately in a way which connects with their inner self, and the inner and outer selves are in harmony (Ameli, 2009; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

An existentially authentic experience is relatively rare and therefore meaningful. It is unsurprising that tourism leads the way in some of the literature on this topic, as creating meaningful experiences is at the core of tourism (Schouten, et al., 2007; Turner, 1969).

An example of this type of authenticity is the way Nike portrays their merchandise in their *Just Do It* campaign. Physical achievements become a form of poetry; a way of interacting with oneself so authentic a level it is sublime. Nike is a vehicle; transformation is the goal. Nike sponsors athletes who they break through boundaries of society and class and are considered postmodern heroes; Nike's advertising dares customers to do the same with their products (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1994).

The consumer buys into the expectations Nike builds and the challenge to meet it. *Just Do It* is a command, an imperative to use the merchandise while reaching inside oneself and transcending one's own expectations and everyone else's. This is a postmodern message, implying that perception is reality. You can dictate who you are, Nike says. You can formulate your own identity through your actions. *Just do it*.


## OF WORLDVIEWS AND PARADIGMS

**Marketing                                    paradigms:                    theory                    versus                    reality**
In 2004, a paper (Vargo & Lusch) proposing a uniquely marketing-based paradigm capitalized on themes emerging for the previous several decades: marketing theory and education was delivering a goods-based perspective, based on economics. This perspective more highly values empirical facts, which become difficult to quantify. It could not quantify services as well as goods, or customer experiences as accurately.

As a result of the poor fit, marketing theory became more fragmented in the late twentieth century. Traditional marketing research models and methodologies were (an still are) the dominant view in the academy; but practitioners were dealing with a different reality. While attempting to describe what was going on in the marketplace, researchers strayed from the dominant goods-based paradigm. Service-Dominant Logic proposed that a more authentic theoretical basis for marketing: approach all products as services: some with physical goods as part of the transaction, and some without (Firat, et al., 1994; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Unconcerned with paradigms and worldviews, practitioners try a variety of approaches. As a result, cases emerged where some business models should not have succeeded and did. Marketing pundits would write about these cases ceaselessly, and still do. Defying the conventional wisdom, these marketers were geniuses! Radical (Hill & Rifkin, 1999)! Visionary (Godin, 2003)! Enchanting and charismatic (Kawasaki, 1991, 2011a)!

A less magical proposition was that these individuals sensed an oncoming cultural shift, developed a vision and leveraged it, applying their cultural knowledge to a business context (Firat, et al., 1994).  Guy Kawasaki's described market research at Apple in the 1980s when he worked there: "Steve Jobs' left hemisphere [of his brain] connecting to his right hemisphere.

That was the [Apple] focus group." (Kawasaki, 2011b). Kawasaki claims Jobs questioned the wisdom of market research in innovation, as most people could not envision  Customers would have said they wanted bigger, cheaper machines like the ones on the market, because they could not imagine an alternative (Kawasaki, 2011b).

Steve Jobs' vision was that computers could be friendly and accessible to everyone. They would not only help users create aesthetically pleasing things, they would themselves be designed in an aesthetically pleasing way (Firat, et al., 1994). Steve Jobs had a mental model. His business model followed. His market practices followed that. And then he created a market *where no marketed had existed before*.

**Visions,                    realized,                    authentically,                    create                    markets**
The above process: mental model, business model, business practice, market creation is proposed in a rconceptual paper about market elasticity based on the paradigm of S-D Logic (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2010). The proposition in the paper is the following: there is no one market as described in economics and other empirical business literature. Markets are socio-cultural, phenomenological spaces, always in flux. Firms are actors within these networks, enrolling other actors in their vision through their power or *clout*. Navigating markets effectively requires garnering support from market actors. Some actors are staff and customers, but others are companies in the value chain, media partners, authorities in the field and so on.

By creating a market where there was none before, the visionary is *articulating* a market (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2010). Effective articulation requires a consistent vision and practice. That consistency is authenticity. Marketers should understand themselves, and, if they wish to be perceived as authentic, take deliberate action that is in keeping with their business and mental models.

Creating, maintaining and growing clout is at the heart of marketing and requires cultural skill. Markets are cultural places, with people generating and regenerating their individual and community identities through their decisions to consume, or not consume products (Storbacka & Nenonen, 2010). This makes creating clout a cultural activity, as much as, or more, than an economic one.


## CREATING AUTHENTIC MARKETERS


Economics is a science rooted firmly in a modernist perspective. The quantification of economic investigation lends itself to empirical perspectives. However, western culture moved into a postmodern era during the last century. An overreliance on empirical testing is fraught with risk for the marketer. A postmodern approach is rooted more firmly in the subjective and phenomenological nature of consumer culture of the last century (Firat, et al., 1994).

One way of understanding postmodernism is to describe what it is not. Postmodernism does not concern itself with absolute or empirical truths. Postmodernism does not contend that empirical science will deliver a more unified world. Postmodernism does not contend that there is one truth and the greatest challenge is to find it, harness it and build upon it (Firat, et al., 1994; Hiebert, 2008).

The postmodern worldview is comfortable with differing and conflicting discourses. Narrative is essential to developing and maintaining cultural, political or economic power, regardless of the material or empirical validity of the claim. In the postmodern world, cultural literacy is a key skill (Firat & Venkatesh, 2002; Godin, 2005).

In the postmodern world, sometimes the producer and consumer change places; and the consumer becomes the generator of content, discourse and cultural positioning. Ideas detach from their origins and are consumed and regenerated, out of context, transferred from one context to another by consumers about products they do not own or maybe even use. Boundaries about ownership, such as brand ownership, blur. Again, the focal power rests with those who can control the narrative and discourse (Firat & Venkatesh, 2002). Therefore, the articulation of markets is rooted firmly in the postmodern era.

Like authenticity, the discourses about postmodernity have roots in philosophical, anthropological, sociological and artistic circles (Firat, et al., 1994). These disciplines concern themselves with cultures: how they are developed, communicated, consumed and change. The cultural content of marketing curriculum varies

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Conceptual thinking in marketing is often reserved for those who have done their time in empirical, quantitative analysis; it is not a beginner's game and in fact is not necessarily encouraged even at the Doctoral level, unless one is a student of Consumer Culture Theory. And yet, in the academy, conceptual papers have a disproportionately high impact in the marketing community, and, arguably, outside the community as well (MacInnes, 2011). Recent discourses in North America indicate that greater integration of the liberal arts in business education is required to produce graduates who are more culturally literate (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011).

Marketing students, once they graduate, will be faced with the reality of learning different cultural norms. Those who have the  most cultural mobility will be the most agile in the employment market. This is yet another reason why learning about culture, and learning how to learn about culture, is a particularly important skill in marketing education  (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Firat & Venkatesh, 2002).

## Conclusion

Authenticity has been an area of growing marketing interest for the last twenty years. The purpose of this paper is to consider Authenticty as a form of marketing practice instead of a marketing strategy. Authentic practice requires being knowledgeable about, partaking in, and leading cultural narratives and discourses.

The 360 Degree Authenticity Framework is an assessment tool, and a step toward a structured approach to authentic practice. Rather than take an empirical, reductionist approach, the 360 Degree Authenticity Framework is holistic, recognising that the evaluation of authenticity is one consumer's make from a holistic perspecitve as well.

The ideal marketer is one who has cultural literacy and mobility, an understanding narritive and discourse and one who understand the power dynamic of the customer in the postmodern, connected era of social media and globalised markets. Although there are authentic marketer in the field, and many case studies of authenticity done well, authenticity may be a happy accident, rather than a cornerstone of the marketing discipline and profession.  This paper calls for recognition that authenticity is a cornerstone of authentic marketing. The ideal marketer is an authentic marketer.

## TABLES

Table 1: 360 Degree Authenticity Framework as it relates to the product experience development and delivery (Collins, et al., 2011)

| Authenticity | Question |
|---|---|
| Objective | Does the product have the attribute(s) it claims to have? |
| Constructive | Is the product experienced within its most appropriate context? |
| Commercial | Is the product experience true to itself ("Keeping It Real")? |
| Existential | Is the product experience constructed to co-create authenticity with the consumer? |

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