Network Narratives Revisited:
Authenticity in Seeded Online Community Promotions

Introduction

In 2010, the Journal of Marketing published *Networked Narratives: Understanding Word of Mouth Marketing in Online Communities* (Kozinets et al., 2010). This study followed a seeded online Word of Mouth (WOM) promotion. An agency sent mobile phones to bloggers on behalf of the mobile phone company, with the hope that the bloggers would generate positive WOM about the phone to their online communities. The researchers followed the subsequent WOM activity. They found that WOM does not amplify promotional communication; rather WOM generators customise their promotional messages for a variety of reasons. A Network Coproduction Model, where WOM generators customise their messages and the meaning of the messages is co-produced by the generator and their audience, should therefore replace the traditional amplification model.

This paper revisits *Network Narratives*, analysing the data from an authenticity perspective. Using the holistic 360 Degree Authenticity framework (360da), the authors test whether authenticity is a factor in audience acceptances of seeded online blog promotional WOM. The findings of this study run parallel to those from *Networked Narratives* (Kozinets et al., 2010), finding that the most authentically handled promotional communications were the ones most likely to be accepted by online communities. This study differs from *Networked Narratives* on a key assumption: that seeded promotions are purely WOM. The authors propose that this type of

promotion generates a hybrid of WOM and advertising, subject to the same authenticity conventions as advertising.

Networked Narratives: The WOM Study

Networked Narratives followed a Canadian seeded promotion campaign mediated by a marketing agency on behalf of a North American mobile phone provider. The marketing agency "Buzzablog" contacted bloggers on behalf of a mobile phone company "Mobitech". The bloggers were screened for the size of their audience (over 400 unique visitors per day) and their perceived level of influence. The bloggers were sent a mobile phone (the "Mobitech 3839") with no obligation to mention the phone on their blog, although they were encouraged to do so. The researchers followed 83 seeded blogs for up to three months before and three months after the campaign, although the researcher did not participate in any of the discussions. Buzzablog considered the campaign a success, with 84% of the bloggers positively mentioning the phone. Buzzablog indicated that an increase in sales could be directly tied to the campaign and the blogger's influence. How the agency determined this and the volume of sales was not disclosed in the article (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Kozinets and his co-authors engaged in a netnography to analyse the volume of communication arising from the promotion, specifically the way WOM communication is formed and embedded in online communities. Previously, WOM was believed to simply amplify traditional advertising. *Network Narratives* demonstrated that WOM generators are co-producers of value (Vargo et al., 2008), meaning (Muniz and Schau, 2005, Kozinets, 2001) and culture (Collins and Murphy, 2010b, Collins, 2013). In *Networked Narratives*, WOM generators (bloggers) altered their

Mobitech phone-related messages with the intent of embedding them effectively with their audience. *Networked Narratives* outlines strategies used by WOM generators to gain acceptance for promotional messages. Therefore demonstrating that WOM generators do not amplify promotional messages, they alter messages for their own purposes (Kozinets et al., 2010).

From the researchers' perspective, a measure of successful WOM was acceptance of the promotional message with enthusiasm (positive comments) or acceptance (no comments). When the blog audience gave negative feedback about promotional post, the WOM strategy was considered less successful (Kozinets et al., 2010).

The success of the strategy was considered to be an outcome of the following considerations. First, WOM content and style should be consistent with the personal narrative of the blogger. Secondly, the blog forum content is a consideration in terms of content of the WOM message and the product. Third, the cultural norms of the blog forum should be considered in terms of socio-economic, national or ethnic norms but also the social norms. Finally, the type of product/brand and the marketing message, approach, and cultural capital of the product/brand affect the messages/meaning/acceptance of WOM (Kozinets et al., 2010).

These four considerations align closely to considerations of authenticity in promotional communications, such as advertising (Stern, 1994). Negative feedback in the blogs examined in *Network Narratives* usually consisted of accusations that the blogger had "sold out", was a "walking wallet", or was otherwise extrinsically incentivised to mention the phone (Kozinets et al., 2010). This type of feedback is consistent with audience expectations of authenticity,

especially as they relate to commercial promotion and product placement (Stern, 1994). By examining *Network Narratives* from an authenticity perspective, one may be able to discover more about authenticity in the context of seeded promotions and WOM; as well as whether the strategies Kozinets, et al proposed are consistent with the 360 Degree Authenticity framework.

The 360 Degree Authenticity Framework

A postmodern revival in authenticity originated in the fields of philosophy, literature and critical theory in the 1970s. *Sincerity and Authenticity* amalgamated perspectives on authenticity (Trilling, 1974). Even after an interdisciplinary analysis, authenticity was difficult to define or evaluate. As interest in authenticity grew in the areas of Business, Tourism, Psychology and the Social Sciences, different perspectives on authenticity emerged and converged into different, but not mutually exclusive categories and definitions.

The 360 Degree Authenticity framework (360da) was first developed in a discussion of religious tourism (Collins and Murphy, 2010a). It was then developed further and applied to a promotional campaign for the Social Work profession (Collins et al., 2011); and later as an argument for a stronger focus on culture in the Marketing discipline and in Marketing education (Collins, 2013). 360da incorporates views on authenticity from a variety of disciplines, and is applied as a qualitative analysis tool for researchers' and practitioners' to evaluate authenticity through a holistic, rather than reductive, approach.

The 360da framework, as in Table 1, encompasses a survey of the literature on authenticity, building on Wang's (1999) approach toward authenticity as a construct with many dimensions;

and Gilmore and Pine's perspective (2007) that commercial authenticity is one dimension of a greater discourse about authenticity.

Table 1: 360da Framework

Type	Question	Examples	Source(s)
Objective	Is the object what it claims to be?	A Prada handbag is made by Prada.	(Wang, 1999)
Constructive	Is the cultural context in which the object is produced/ consumed consistent with the symbolic/constructed value of the object?	An Alani The Stormborn Mount on the online World of Warcraft game, earned through the skill of the game rather than through Gold Farmers (Gold Farmers are gamers whose purpose is to obtain game currency and sell the currency online)	(Wang, 1999)
Commercial	Is the object what it is rendered to be and is it true to that image?	A wine purporting to be from Margaret River having the grapes grown in Margaret River and being produced by a winemaker from that region, in that region.	(Gilmore and Pine, 2007, Beverland, 2005, Lewis and Bridger, 2000)
Existential	Is the object value co-created freely and in a holistically consistent manner?	An online product review from someone who is not affiliated with the firm or producer.	(Guignon, 2002, Golomb, 1995, Liao and Ma, 2009, Leigh et al., 2006, 2010)

Objective Authenticity

Objective authenticity seems the most straightforward at first. When people use the terms *genuine*, *real*, or *original* to mean *authentic,* this is usually the kind of authenticity they are referring to. Objective authenticity is when an object is what it claims to be, usually inasmuch as it is able to be verified by an external source (Wang, 1999). Although one must note the validity of that external source is constructed. The more complex the verification process is, the objective authenticity blends into constructive authenticity (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

A recent example of cloudy objective authenticity is the horsemeat scandal in Britain. Each member of the food processing supply chain believed they were creating food products with

beef; and each took the word of the previous supplier that the meat was indeed beef. The products (like frozen lasagne) were advertised as beef to consumers. However, horsemeat was integrated into the beef as cheap filler at the abattoir. The misrepresentation commenced at the commencement of the supply chain. Subsequent DNA tests indicated that 1 out of every 80 processed food products in Britain branded as beef included meat from other animals such as horse and pig, unbeknownst to the food processors or consumers (Mason, 2013).

In retail, for example, convincing customers that an imitation designer garment is not as valuable as one made by the brand manufacturer is one of the biggest issues facing fashion retailers (Beverland, 2005).

Constructive Authenticity

Constructive Authenticity is constructed value within a specific context. For example, Chicago is considered the home of Blues music. This would mean that experiencing a Chicago South Side Blues Club would lend an enhanced experience for Blues tourism due to the authenticity of the South Side Blues clubs, versus Blues clubs elsewhere (Beverland, 2005).

Another example of cultural authenticity is the Lance Armstrong doping scandal. The doping Armstrong engaged was not problematic *per se*. The issue that doping is against the rules of his sport (constructive inauthenticity). Also he lied about engaging in the doping (objective inauthenticity) and this undermines trust in his word for consumers. The negativity surrounding this breach of trust contaminated his brand and affected the work of the foundation he started (Hayward, 2013).

Commercial Authenticity

This relates specifically to Gilmore and Pine's key questions about authenticity: is the object rendered to be authentic, and is the subsequent activity true to that rendering? Gilmour and Pine (2007) see this question as a continuum, with Fake/Fake on one end (A product is not what it says it is and it is not true to itself) and Real/Real on the other (A product is what it says it is and it is true to itself). Vintage clothing, for example, is only Real/Real if it is from the era it purports to be, and not new clothing designed in a vintage style.

The admittance of professional athletes into the Olympics, especially in high-profile sports such as basketball and tennis, has led to "Dream Teams". As the struggle of amateur athletes has been the narrative of the modern Olympics, amateur athletes seem Real/Real, whereas professional athletes competing seems Real/Fake (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

Commercial authenticity is focused on rendering; that is, generating an impression of authenticity in an effective way, as opposed to objective authenticity (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). This is in line with published research on authenticity in advertising, where audiences reward advertisers with suspension of disbelief if the imitation is effective. Effective imitation is completed through appropriate use of rhetorical purpose, fictive status, narrative structure and use of a persona; similar requirements discussed for authenticity in artistic works (Stern, 1994).

Existential Authenticity

Existential authenticity is the most challenging to evaluate. Wang (1999) describes it as a level of active engagement with an experience. Although Wang does not specify this, his description of existential authenticity is similar to accounts of flow (Csikszenthmihalyi, 1997) or peak (Schouten et al., 2007) experiences. Based on the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it is about acting consistently with one's inner self and without the constraint of societal pressures (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). The basis of existential authenticity is leading a less fractured existence. Modern psychology views authenticity indicates that healthy existential outlook is one acts from within one's inner oneself regardless of the context (Damasio, 2010). This does not necessarily mean one acts contrary to expectations; rather it is about acting in a manner consistent with one's authentic self, regardless of the consequences (Guignon, 2002).

Recent theoretical developments in marketing suggest that value is co-created by the producer and consumer via the product experience (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Sweeney, 2007). If an experience is perceived to be existentially authentic, it can deliver a heightened sense of value for both parties and lead to a deep emotional connection (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

An example of existential authenticity is personal identification in social media, such as Facebook and Google+. The debate about whether people should be able to use their real names for their online persona (something Facebook encourages but Google+ attempts to enforce) centres around the notion of a consistent self in all of the worlds (on and offline) one inhabits (McCracken, 2011). Beyond catfishing (lying about one's identity online to mislead others) (Peterson, 2013), consistent behaviour on and offline is culturally, commercially and existentially authentic and therefore create relationships of higher value.

A key component of existential authenticity is agency; transcending the expectations of society and acting independently. For example, Southwest Airlines has been recognised for their consistent branding message that includes "company spirit" (Miles and Mangold, 2005). The way this spirit is expressed differs with different employees and therefore customers regard their deliberate, individual expression of the holistic company image as authentic brand expression, such as rapping the safety induction on a flight (Jamieson, 2009).

Using the 360da framework

To date, the 360da has been applied as a qualitative analysis of authenticity. Cases are considered holistically and then each dimension of the framework is applied. Modelled on a 360-degree evaluation of employee performance, the 360da framework is a thought experiment that is more valuable in its holistic assessment rather than in any one part. The series of questions are considerations that the producer/marketer goes through to consider their approach. If all of the types of authenticity are achieved, the product/brand experience will not only be authentic in each aspect but also achieve an overall level of authenticity (Collins and Murphy, 2010a, Collins, 2013, Collins et al., 2011).

Methodology

The authors of this paper obtained permission from the lead author of *Network Narratives* (Kozinets et al., 2010) to revisit the content of their paper as it presented when published. Another author of *Network Narratives* provided the raw data of the original study.

An examination of the content of *Networked Narratives* (Kozinets et al., 2010) was conducted by the authors of this paper. Although the raw data was provided, it was not used for this analysis. Rather, the content of the published paper was used as the basis for analysis in this paper. Although this decision may be perceived as limiting the authors of this paper, there were two reasons for this approach.

Firstly, the lead author of *Network Narratives* pioneered and has extensively published on the methodology of netnography (Kozinets, 2010, Kozinets, 2002), and therefore the quality of the netnography in this paper is likely to be very high. Secondly, the means of discovering the opportunities provided by the *Network Narratives* paper was through the lead author of this paper reading it several times and referring to it in her other work. It was not possible for her to unlearn what the article had taught her. Rather, she chose to accept any bias she may have had toward the *Network Narratives* team and to bring another author on board with experience in authenticity research in order to contribute to this article.

The lead author of this paper commenced data analysis with deconstructing *Network Narratives'* (Kozinets et al., 2010) presentation of different blogs seeded in the study. Extensive attention was paid to the in-depth description of the exemplar blogs presented in *Network Narratives*.

The lead author applied the 360da framework to each of the exemplar blogs in *Network Narratives* (Kozinets et al., 2010). Then the second author reviewed the *Network Narratives* paper and then first authors work product. Both authors convened several times to discuss the analysis, and during those discussions the content and 360da framework was further considered,

developed and shaped. All four narratives in the *Network Narratives* paper were included in the analysis. The discussion below includes the two most disparate exemplar blogs as these offered the greatest divergent picture for illustration purposes. These two examples were also selected because the blogs selected had not, before the seeded promotion, seem to have accepted any type of promotional communication, paid or otherwise.

Findings

Frank's Blog

Frank's was the only exemplar blog achieving 360da, with a positive rating for each dimension. Frank's blog is about his move to a new town. It does not accept any commercial support (advertising, Payperpost, etc) before the seeding campaign. His interest in consumer electronics comes through in his blog. He uses his online following to encourage offline friendships and develop ties in his new home (Kozinets et al., 2010).

When Frankie is offered the phone deal from Buzzablog, he discusses the opportunity and jokes about it with other bloggers. His on-the-blog discussion about the ethics of the deal creates a discourse positioning himself as someone who is reflecting on the conflicts that may be inherent in the deal. By doing so publicly, he is also communicating that he values what his audience thinks and sees them as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end (Liao & Ma, 2009). He concludes his reflection about the deal by positioning himself as a trusted reviewer as opposed to a compensated endorser. He decides that by taking on the reviewer role, he is entitled to the phone (as consumer electronic reviewers often receive the merchandise they review for free). He does not, however, indicate any bias that may have been created by the flattery of being

chosen (Vonk, 2002) or any notions of obligation or reciprocity (Kolyesnikova et al., 2010) he

may feel toward Buzzablog or Mobitech. He also does not acknowledge that as he is adopting

the persona of a reviewer, rather than actually being a reviewer, he is not exposed to the variety

of products a reviewer would. Nor does he have the expertise a reviewer would have. However,

his blog audience seems to accept his narrative, as he receives no complaints about his positive

blog posts about the phone.

Network Narratives (Kozinets et al., 2010) named Frank's approach to the seeded campaign the

Explanation strategy. The full disclosure of the campaign, his acknowledgment of the tension the

seeded campaign created; and his subsequent resolution of that tension combined to affirm him

as the opinion leader worked as a strategy from a WOM perspective.(Kozinets et al., 2010).

From a 360da perspective, Frank's strategy was successful, as set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Frank's Seeded Campaign: Achieving 360 Degree Authenticity

Type	Question	Description
Objective: Positive	Is the object what it claims to be?	Frank disclosed the full terms of the agreement
Constructive: Positive	Is the cultural context in which the object is produced/ consumed consistent with the symbolic/constructed value of the object?	As Frank's blog is about being a techie, his mention of the phone and the review is culturally appropriate; his discussions with himself and other bloggers about the ethical issues creates a discourse on how to handle concerns form the audience's perspective.
Commercial: Positive	Is the object what it is rendered to be and is it true to that image?	Frank presents himself as a source to be trusted with his stewardship of the community. He develops a way of discussing the promotion in a manner that presents the move as being true to the honest discussions within the community. His approach to completely disclose the terms of the promotion supports the view that he is someone who can be trusted.
Existential: Positive	Is the object value co-created freely and in a	The discourse he engages in regarding advertising endorsements from the audience's perspective demonstrates

	holistically consistent manner?	a willingness to ameliorate any considerations of inauthenticity from the audience's perspective. He indicates that he is more authentic than a celebrity being paid to do an endorsement from a script. He confers with other bloggers about the opportunity and shares those musings with his audience—he creates a discourse of experts that support this new direction of his blog.

Network Narratives (Kozinets et al., 2010)indicates that the explanation strategy is open about the moral hazards inherent in introducing commercial communication into a non-commercial space (Kozinets et al., 2010). Authenticity research in advertising, developed from similar perspectives in literature, indicates that the more closely fictive discourse (advertising) mimics natural (conversational) discourse, the more the audience will reward the discourse with suspension of disbelief. Therefore, the goal of the blogger is to make the discourse about the phone seem as natural as possible in context of the blog (Stern, 1994). Frank excels at this through his attempt at transparency. Carrie, the blogger who has the least success by *Network Narratives* terms, also is the least successful by the 360da standard.

Carrie's Blog

Carrie's blog was about her sharp, critical, judgmental take on the world. While not revealing names, she recounts aspects of her life as a girl about town. Her nightlife, romantic life and burgeoning professional life are all fodder for her blog. Offline, she enjoys a level of celebrity, interviewed on local radio as a relationship expert, presenting her generation's point of view. Carrie does not accept any commercial support for her blog before the seeded campaign (Kozinets et al., 2010).

She introduces the seeded campaign as an affirmation of her status within the community as an opinion leader. She gushes about the phone, which is a different tone from her usual critical one.

She, like Frank, openly solicits marketers for more "schwag" (celebrity gifts). However, she does not disclose the terms of the deal, nor does she demonstrate any kind of ethical quandary in accepting the phone. Her posts about the phone strike a different tone than her other posts. And when her parents buy her a car, and she gushes about that too, and is once again under criticism for hawking commercial products on the blog. Any terms she may have had with a car dealer is not disclosed. However, when accused that she has a promotional deal regarding her car, Carrie take on a defensive tone. Her argument is not so much that she is impartial; her argument is that she deserves free products and that she is the authority on the blog (Kozinets et al., 2010).

From a 360da perspective, Carrie struggled, as in Table 3.

Table 2: Carrie's Seeded Campaign: A 360 Degree Authenticity Analysis

Type	Question	Description
Objective: Negative	Is the object what it claims to be?	Does not disclose terms of the agreement in full. She only mentions an agreement when she feels the tone of the email warrants it.
Constructive: Negative	Is the cultural context in which the object is produced/ consumed consistent with the symbolic/constructed value of the object?	There was no advertising on the site or product endorsement before Carrie starting mentioning the phone. Her off-blog life as a relationship expert and spokesperson for her generation centres the blog on sarcasm, judgment, and entertainment. Her first blog entry about the phone was self-congratulatory (as a marker of her success) but also a support for the blog, and therefore was supposed to improve the quality of the blog. However, as the posts about the phone are gushing they are not a cultural fit for the blog and are therefore responded to negatively by some readers. When Carrie starts blogging positively about her car (any kind of deal/discount she may have made with the dealership is not disclosed), she is accused of being a "sell out".
Commercial: Negative	Is the object what it is rendered to be and is it true to that image?	Carrie presents initially as someone who "is what she says she is". The more she discusses products, the less her audience seems to be feeling like they understand or appreciate the terms under which she has acquired these goods, and therefore the validity of the content she is creating. Her readers doubt her, thus the value of what she is generating becomes compromised.
Existential: Negative	Is the object value co-created freely and in a holistically consistent	As Kozinets points out, diverting from her critical wit to a gushing tone when discussing products comes across as Carrie's personality being inconsistent and her carrying out an

	manner?	external party's programming. This perception is hard to dispute as her product posts are a departure from her other posts.

One of the key issues with Carrie's WOM from an authenticity perspective is its failure to resemble natural discourse. Carrie's natural tone on and off line is a critical, sharp wit; and yet when she discusses the phone she is gushing and positive (Kozinets et al., 2010). In terms of a strategy, Kozinets et al call this *embracing*, meaning that Carrie embraces her role as a WOM generator enthusiastically, but risks credibility with her audience. The risk does not pay off for Carrie because she does not customise her message to be consistent across her communication channels. Her discussion about the phone does not come across as natural, and her self-aggrandisement does not increase her credibility with her audience.

Existential authenticity values consistency and agency. One can argue that Carrie exercised her agency by gushing about products on her blog; indeed she argues that her purchases are part of her life and therefore she will blog about them (Kozinets et al., 2010). However, some members of her audience are not convinced that she is acting with agency in regards to the product endorsements. Agency becomes the crux of existential authenticity in Carrie's case. Her promotional blogs divert from her persona. It is possible that she does have agency, that she is taking the blog a new direction. But her audience does not accept the promotional blogs as being authentic because they are different—and therefore she is in a trap of her own making. In order to convince others she is being authentic in the posts, she needed to exercise her agency in a manner consistent with the persona she created. Frank does this convincingly; Carrie does not.

Finding and Implications

Network Narratives' (Kozinets et al., 2010) findings indicated that WOM was not an amplification of marketers' messages. Rather, WOM generators alter messages. This study examined the role authenticity plays in the crafting and acceptance of WOM messages in seeded promotions.

This study found that WOM messages in seeded promotions more closely followed the test of advertising rather than natural peer-to-peer conversation. That is to say that the closer that the promotional messages resembled natural conversation, the more likely were accepted by the blogging audience. Even if the blogging audience recognises the blog posts as promotional communication, they do not protest it if the content of the post seems natural. The findings in this study lend support to Stern's perspective on authenticity in advertising (1994) and Gilmore and Pine's arguments (2007) on rendering authenticity.

This study measured the proximity to natural communication through the 360 Degree Authenticity framework. The blog posts found to be the most authentic as per the framework were also found to be the most effective as WOM. The blog posts found to be the least authentic were also the blogs that were considered the least successful by the standards of the study. Although the scope of this study is limited, preliminary results demonstrate that the 360 Degree Authenticity tool is a qualitatively sound method for evaluating authenticity. Results also support the argument that a key part of crafting a WOM message is authenticity.

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