AUTHENTICITY AND PERSUASION:
HOW MUCH IS THE ‘SELF’ WORTH?
AN EXPLORATION OF PRODUCER AUTHENTICITY AND ITS IMPACT ON PRODUCT EVALUATIONS.

Thesis submitted by
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in July 2007

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
In the School of Psychology
James Cook University
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I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has been supported by the following organisations and people. Financial support for university fees and living expenses were funded through an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA), and by departmental scholarships from the School of Psychology at James Cook University, Townsville. Editorial contributions to this thesis were provided by my supervisor Ben Slugoski. Additional editorial contributors include, Peter Raggatt, Renee Brimstone, Lynne Doonan, Ryan Nuttall, and Paul Bowers.

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Acknowledgements

Well here I am after four or so years. What a journey! There are many people that I need to thank! If it wasn’t for so many of you, I’m not so sure I would have made it to this point! But here I am… Yay! So here goes! To Ben Slugoski, my supervisor, I want to thankyou for your support and ear throughout my time completing this thesis. I’m really thrilled to have written a thesis I think other people will actually be interested to read (fingers crossed). If it hadn’t been for our random conversations I don’t think we would have stumbled across this gem! To my family, John, Lynne, Aimee and Oanie, I want to thank you all so very much for believing in me, being proud of me and supporting me through my studies. It means the world to me. A special shout out to my mum, who never ever complained when I wanted to ‘just reread this paragraph to you to see how it sounds one more time.’ I seriously don’t know how you didn’t strangle me.

On the academic front, I want to thank Barbara Kennedy who has always been a huge support for me, and made me feel like I could achieve anything if I put my mind to it. Thankyou so very much. Thanks to Peter Raggatt who spent time with me debating theories, reading my work, and being just generally entertaining! Cheers Pete! To James Cook University School of Psychology and the Graduate Research school for providing financial support to complete this thesis and grants to present these findings around the world.

Renee Brimstone! What a woman! You have been the sweetest and most generous friend a girl could have whilst writing a thesis. Thank you so very much for being there for me, reading my thesis multiple times, and always encouraging me.
Your affirmations have picked me up when I was feeling hopeless on so many occasions. Thank you. Truly. Mel Harris, thanks a) for handing out ridiculous amounts of vignettes with me for hours on end. And b) for being a supportive and caring friend who always listens. I never take you for granted.

My partner Ryan Nuttall, who has possibly seen me through the hardest part of this thesis; its completion. Thankyou for being such a wonderful and supportive person. I love you very much. To all my students over the years, who always obliged when I asked them to complete a survey, I am really appreciative.

To all my participants! Thankyou! I want to thank Terry Kempnich, Managing Director of Enhance Management, for being extremely supportive of me finishing this PhD. You didn’t have to, but you did and I am very grateful! Richard Petty, for taking the time to discuss my research with me. Brendan Peters, for handing out surveys with me… and for making me laugh. Paul Bowers, for opening my eyes to the world of marketing and for just being an awesome mate during this time. You’ve always been proud of me and believed in me.

My friends, Lisa Brand, Tami Brown, Belinda Ott, Belinda Stocks, Donna Bonde, and Glenda Blackwell. You’ve all supported me in one way or another during the last four years and it has not gone unappreciated! Uncle Wayne Morris, for being a great friend to me during this time. I’m sure there are countless people who should be here but for one reason or another (lets put it down to exhaustion) I’ve forgotten, so thankyou! To my markers who are about to read this – Thank you for having the interest and taking the time to read this.
Abstract

This dissertation examines the persuasiveness of producer authenticity and its influence on product evaluations. Though there has been a substantial amount of research within the social and consumer psychology literature examining the persuasiveness of other source characteristics (e.g. attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, honesty, similarity, etc.), producer authenticity has not been empirically examined as a persuasive cue. ‘Authenticity’ is defined as the quality of being true to one’s self. For the purpose of operationalising this construct, producer enjoyment and producer culture/ethnicity were used as authenticity cues. Three broad objectives were established for this research: 1) to establish the persuasiveness of producer authenticity; 2) to explore some of the potential boundary conditions of this phenomenon; 3) to identify the psychological processes underlying the persuasiveness of producer authenticity. Ten studies were conducted to address the three research objectives. The first three studies aimed to establish the persuasive impact of producer authenticity on product evaluations. It was hypothesised that producer authenticity would have a favourable impact on evaluations of product quality, but also on the amount individuals were willing to pay for a product. Across the three studies, results provided support for both hypotheses. Studies four and five were designed to test the hypothesis that producer authenticity would influence participant preferences when forced to choose between several service providers. In support of this hypothesis, results of these studies show this producer characteristic to be a clear service differentiator with the majority of individuals exhibiting a preference for the authentic provider. Aligned with the second research objective,
Studies six to nine aimed to address the boundary conditions of authenticity as a persuasive cue. More specifically, these studies aimed to explore the potential conditions under which effects of producer authenticity would be moderated or attenuated. Study six examined the impact of producer authenticity when a producer’s formal expertise was manipulated. Results indicate that producer authenticity remained persuasive both when the producer was tertiary-trained in the appropriate field, but more interestingly, also when the producer failed to possess the appropriate degree. Furthermore, the results of this study illustrate that participants relied more on producer authenticity than formal learning when assessing the expertise of that producer/service provider. Studies seven and eight explored the interaction between multiple authenticity cues (e.g. high enjoyment, culturally appropriate). Results of these studies are conflicting, with authenticity cues having an interactional effect for evaluations of product value, but not product quality. Study nine re-examined the interaction between multiple producer authenticity cues whilst also incorporating a product authenticity manipulation. The results failed to provide any evidence that the authenticity of the product itself detracts or adds to the persuasiveness of producer authenticity cues. Interestingly, in this study producer authenticity cues were found to be independently persuasive. Finally, Study ten examined the psychological processes rendering some individuals to be more susceptible to this persuasive cue than others. Results show that individuals exhibiting authentic preferences are more likely to engage in magical thinking (specifically the law of similarity), have more essentialist conceptions of self, have a lower need for cognition, and possess a more idiocentric ideology than individuals
not susceptible to this cue. Other results revealed that producer authenticity failed to be discounted when the producer was paid for completing the task. Participants’ racist beliefs (about the authentic producer’s ethnic group) also failed to influence the persuasiveness of producer authenticity when it came to evaluating a cultural product. Though the results of this dissertation contribute to the psychological literature by establishing another persuasive source characteristic, the findings also have implications for both marketers and consumers, which are also discussed.
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