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Article (Published)
(Refereed)

Original Citation:

Kokkoris, Michail and Sedikides, Constantine (2019) Can you be yourself in business? How reminders of business affect the perceived value of authenticity. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. pp. 1-11. ISSN 1559-1816

This version is available at: <http://epub.wu.ac.at/6946/>

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Can you be yourself in business? How reminders of business affect the perceived value of authenticity

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Abstract

Authenticity is generally beneficial to employees and organizations, but do business students believe that the business world affords it? On the one hand, business may be regarded as incompatible with authenticity, as it is arguably ruled largely by etiquette, norms, and conventions that leave little room to be one's true self (*hindering role*). On the other hand, business may be seen as promoting authenticity, as it is arguably based largely on creativity, initiative, and independence that provide opportunities to thrive by being one's true self (*facilitating role*). We proposed that business students would be more likely to endorse the facilitating role of authenticity. We hypothesized, in particular, that mere reminders of business (i.e., primes) would raise the general value of authenticity, but only among those who dispositionally value authenticity less (than more). Results of two experiments were consistent with the hypothesis. We discuss theoretical, managerial, and educational implications.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A good deal of evidence points to the relevance of authenticity—the experience of being, and acting in accordance with, one's true self—in organizational settings (for reviews, see: Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Lehman, O'Connor, Kovacs, & Newman, 2019; Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009). Authenticity, both at the leadership and the followership level, has been linked to positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance. Although the literature suggests that being authentic can be beneficial in organizational contexts, much less is known about the extent to which people believe they can be authentic in organizations in the first place. In the current article, we focus on business students and examine whether they associate business with authenticity. Do they perceive business as promoting or as blocking authenticity? Whereas some research has examined circumstances under which individuals are likely to experience higher or lower levels of authenticity (Sedikides, Lenton, Slabu, & Thomaes, 2018), there is a gap of knowledge regarding perceptions of authenticity in business, a gap that we aspire to narrow.

1.1 | Associations of business with authenticity

The concept of authenticity dates back to Aristotle (Harter, 2002) and re-emerged concurrently with the establishment of psychology as a scientific discipline (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). The concept has been recently re-vitalized. In the current research, we draw on a conceptualization of authenticity as the sense of being aligned with one's true or real self (Kernis & Goldman, 2004; Sedikides, Slabu, Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017). Our focus on subjective authenticity relies, in part, on the literature indicating that individuals believe there is a core “true self” that may or may not be reflected accurately in their behavior (Strohming, Knobe, & Newman, 2017). Viewed in the context of various conceptualizations of authenticity, our definition aligns with *values authenticity*, which refers to “the consistency between an entity's internal states and its external expressions” (Newman, 2018, p. 3).

Authenticity has attracted empirical attention in disparate fields, such as psychological health (Boyraz, Waits, & Felix, 2014; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011), subjective well-being (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008),

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romantic relationships (Brunell et al., 2010; Wickham, 2013), meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011), self-esteem (Schimmel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001), self-control (Kokkoris, Hoelzl, & Alós-Ferrer, 2019), decision making (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013), goal attainment (Stavrova, Pronk, & Kokkoris, 2019), embodied cognition (Landau et al., 2011), cross-cultural psychology (Kokkoris & Kühnen, 2014; Le & Impett, 2013), consumer behavior (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015), and neuroethics (Erler, 2011; Kraemer, 2011). The construct has also gained prominence in business settings, where authentic leadership emerged as an influential leadership style (Diddams & Chang, 2012; Ford & Harding, 2011; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Levesque-Côté, Fernet, Austin, & Morin, 2018). Authentic leadership theory is defined by leader and follower self-awareness and self-regulation, positive psychological capital, and positive moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). Although authenticity may not always be intrinsically ethical (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Knoll, Lord, Petersen, & Weigelt, 2016; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) and it may even have a dark side (Womick, Foltz, & King, 2019), authentic leadership has been predominantly associated with a host of positive outcomes, such as higher organizational commitment and extra effort (Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012), greater team performance, effectiveness and productivity (Lyubovnikova, Legood, Turner, & Mamakouka, 2017), heightened employee voice behaviors (Hsiung, 2012), increased job satisfaction and decreased perceived work stress (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015), improved store performance (Rego, Júnior, & e Cunha, 2015), and good work-life balance (Braun & Peus, 2018). Moreover, high levels of employee authenticity have been linked to such occupational outcomes, such as success on the job market (Moore, Lee, Kim, & Cable, 2017), effective socialization of newcomers (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013), job satisfaction and performance (Metin, Taris, Peeters, van Beek, & Van den Bosch, 2016), and work engagement (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014).

This literature, then, attests to the relevance of authenticity: Being authentic is in many ways personally and organizationally beneficial. It is not known, however, to what extent people spontaneously associate the world of business with authenticity. A line of research has examined conditions under which individuals experience authenticity—both intrapersonal (e.g., positive mood, satisfaction of the need for autonomy, positivity of a recalled behavior) and interpersonal (e.g., acting out personality traits, expressing personal values, interacting with strangers on the Internet)—but these studies were concerned with state authenticity, that is, the experience of being one's true self in the here and now (Sedikides et al., 2018, 2017), and not particularly in a business context. Other research has examined how specific types of business can come across as authentic, such as family business (Lude & Prügl, 2018), or business activities related to social engagement (van Rekom, Go, & Calter, 2014) and corporate social responsibility (Alhouthi, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; McShane & Cunningham, 2012).

Moreover, although there is a literature on the general public's perceptions of business (Pollard, 2000; Theberge, 1981), perceptions that may be indirectly linked to authenticity, no research has specifically examined how business students view the relation between business and authenticity. A focus on this latter population is crucial, given that today's business students constitute tomorrow's managers and will likely shape the future of the business sector as carriers of new ideas and visions. Thus, understanding their view on the link between business and authenticity can provide useful insights into the current and future role of business in society.

The link between business and authenticity is far from intuitive. It can take at least two opposing forms.¹ On the one hand, business is frequently represented in popular media as dehumanizing and alienating. For example, a treatise about the representation of business in the English literature revealed that business is associated with concepts such as antagonism, corruption, cynicism, dishonesty, inhumanity, insensitivity, irresponsibility, and unethicity (Pollard, 2000). Earlier analyses of the portrayal of business in American TV series echoes these themes (Theberge, 1981). More recent analyses of media discourses concerning business leaders indicated that authenticity, although praised, is often portrayed as incompatible with effectiveness (Iszatt-White, Whittle, Gadelshina, & Mueller, 2018), thus implying that authenticity is a valued trait that nevertheless has no place in the business world. Views expressed in the media or cultural outlets may shape the public's general attitudes (Bateman, Sakano, & Fujita, 1992), and indeed some studies document public skepticism toward business in many cultures (Carroll, 2013; Yakovlev & Avraamova, 2008). The recent financial crisis has further increased skepticism about the role of business in society (Steckler & Clark, 2018). Consequently, people may view business and authenticity as incompatible due to the somewhat alienating reputation of business. More relevant to our sample (i.e., business students), concerns have been expressed that business education may have an alienating influence on business students. Specifically, alarm bells have been sounded for business possibly corrupting students via the promotion of a selfish and greedy view of human nature (Elegido, 2009; Ghoshal, 2005; Hühn, 2014; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006; Mitroff, 2004; Queen, 2015; but see also Neubaum, Pagell, Drexler, Mckee-Ryan, & Larson, 2009). Relevant research indicates that students may develop more selfish behaviors as they progress on their business education, but they may also be attracted to business in the first place because this discipline fits their values and personalities (Frank & Schulze, 2000; Gandal, Roccas, Sagiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005; Krick, Tresp, Vatter, Ludwig, & Wihlenda, 2016; Litten, Roberts, Ladyshevsky, Castell, & Kane, 2018; Vedel & Thomsen, 2017). Regardless, this evidence bodes well for a potential association between business and inauthenticity.

¹These two opposing forms represent prototypical abstractions of complex patterns rather than the only two possible forms that the relation between authenticity and business can take. We opted for this dichotomy to simplify exposition (and promote theorizing) in full recognition of nuances and alternative formulations.

On the other hand, business can be seen as providing people with a platform to develop their ideas, be creative, take initiative, implement their plans, and pursue their goals. Take for example Apple co-founder Steve Jobs. He has often been depicted in the media as a leading figure inspiring others to achieve by being true to themselves and their visions. Some of his famous quotes in his 2005 Stanford Commencement Speech like “the only way to do great work is to love what you do” or “you have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever” (Telegraph Reporters, 2016) run counter to the view that business requires giving up who one really is, and suggest instead that staying true to one's self can contribute to success. Indeed, as prior research indicated, situations that satisfy both needs for autonomy/independence and needs for meaning/purpose contribute to authenticity (Lenton, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2016; Thomaes, Sedikides, Van den Bos, Hutteman, & Reijntjes, 2017). Regardless, this view of business reflects a transformation of the business world at the dawn of the new millennium, which is characterized by the rise of IT start-ups and a new culture of seeking self-fulfillment through entrepreneurship (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). Moreover, a large body of literature attests to the beneficial role of authenticity in business, thus demonstrating that the two can be compatible (Freeman & Auster, 2011; Sendjaya, Pekerti, Härtel, Hirst, & Butarbutar, 2016; Steckler & Clark, 2018). Business, then, may be perceived by people as an empowering and liberating environment that encourages rather than blocks authenticity.

1.2 | Hypothesis development

We distill these views on the link between business and authenticity in two formulations. One argues for a *hindering role*, portraying business as an obstacle to authenticity. Business is seen as an alienating and dehumanizing environment that requires individuals to abandon their true selves and endorse a different, if not alien, persona. Another view argues for a *facilitating role*, depicting business as a context that allows individuals to flourish, develop their potential, and pursue self-congruent goals. We argue that business students will endorse the facilitating role of business for authenticity, because they may be frequently exposed to instances where business affords authenticity, such as job interviews (Moore et al., 2017) or newcomers' socialization (Cable et al., 2013). Note that these associations of the business world with self-fulfillment and self-actualization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007) need not necessarily derive from business students' own working experiences—if they have any—but may derive instead from the way business is construed, taught, and communicated in the classroom in the frame of business education. For example, the above-mentioned research about authenticity in the job market (Moore et al., 2017) or organizational socialization (Cable et al., 2013) may be part of the curricula of management studies, and thus shape students' views of the business world. In other words, we mostly refer to social representations (Moscovici, 1961/2008) of business shaped by business education and shared among business students, which may or may not correspond to the business reality.

Building on the above theorizing, we reasoned that, if business students perceive business as encouraging authenticity, then mere reminders of business (e.g., through words related to it) might further sensitize them to the general value of authenticity. On the basis of the construct accessibility literature (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991; see also Payne, Brown-Iannuzzi, & Loersch, 2016), we expected the construct of “business” to be capable of activating a network of associations relevant to it. If business has a strong association with authenticity, then simply priming it should temporarily make authenticity more accessible and raise the general value of being one's true self. Put otherwise, if authenticity is thought of as an integral part of the business world, then mere reminders of business should activate the concept of authenticity.

Whereas prior work has shown that individuals differ in the extent to which they feel authentic (Kernis & Goldman, 2004; Wood et al., 2008), not much research has examined whether individuals also differ in the extent to which they *value* feeling authentic. We propose that personal value of authenticity is a key moderator of the impact of business primes on general value of authenticity. Specifically, we expected that a business prime would temporarily increase the general value of authenticity only for business students who personally value authenticity less, as these would have more room to change their general authenticity beliefs after being primed with business. The effect would not hold for business students who personally value authenticity more, as these would be more likely to manifest a ceiling effect and would not have much room for an increase in their personal value of authenticity. Our expectations were based on findings that priming is highly contingent on ceiling or floor effects (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2014). Critically, we further expected that only reminders of business-related words would activate the concept of authenticity, not reminders of work-related words more generally. More formally:

Hypothesis: Priming the concept of business (vs. control) increases the general value of authenticity among business students who are low (but not high) on personal value of authenticity.

We tested this hypothesis in two laboratory experiments with business students as participants. In both experiments, we used a priming task to activate the construct “business” (vs. two control conditions in Experiment 1 and one control condition in Experiment 2).

2 | EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, we examined whether the construct “business” primes authenticity among business students. We expected for primes of this construct to have no substantial influence (ceiling effect) among business students who ascribe higher personal value to authenticity, but to have a strong influence among business students who ascribe lower personal value to authenticity. Thus, we

hypothesized that simple reminders (primes) of business would raise the general value of authenticity among business students who personally value authenticity to a *lesser* degree. Personal value of authenticity, then, would moderate the influence of business primes on general value of authenticity.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 224 students from a major European Business School to take part in a laboratory experiment in exchange for course credit. We removed from further analyses data from two participants who did not complete the questionnaires, and from another two participants who mentioned serious problems with English comprehension (the language of the study was English, which was not participants' native language). The final sample comprised 220 participants (102 women; 118 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.90$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.01$).

2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants, seated in front of individual computers, were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: business, European capitals, jobs. The first one served as the experimental condition and the other two as control conditions. We implemented a jobs control condition in addition to a neutral (European capitals) control condition in order to ascertain that the hypothesized effects are bounded to the world of business and do not generalize to work-related concepts. To prime participants, we used a word search puzzle that included 15 words (horizontally and vertically) referring to the respective concepts. In the business condition, we used 15 words associated with the world of business (*advertising, capital, competition, contract, corporation, customers, finance, headquarters, investment, management, marketing, merger, monopoly, real estate, Wall Street*). We pre-tested these words by asking 142 students (97 women, 45 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 25.60$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.21$) of the same Business School to drag and drop each word in one of two boxes named "fits the world of business very well" and "fits the world of business less well." Participants classified all words as fitting the world of business very well (ranging from 62.2% to 95.9%). In the European capitals condition, we used the names of 15 European capitals (*Athens, Berlin, Brussels, Budapest, Copenhagen, Kiev, London, Madrid, Oslo, Paris, Rome, Sofia, Tirana, Vienna, Vilnius*). Finally, in the jobs condition, we used 15 professions (*architect, baker, cook, dentist, engineer, fireman, fisherman, nurse, painter, pilot, plumber, singer, taxi driver, teacher, travel agent*). We allotted participants 4 min to spot as many words as possible and rewrite them in empty spaces below the word search puzzle.

Subsequently, we directed participants to the next page, presenting them with a definition of authenticity that we borrowed from the prior research (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013, p. 279). Participants read: "According to psychologists, the experience of authenticity is defined as 'the sense or feeling that you are

in alignment with your true, genuine self.' In other words, the experience of authenticity is the feeling that you are being your real self." Next, we asked participants to rate the general value of authenticity ("How important do you find it that people feel authentic, i.e., they are being their true selves?"; 1 = *extremely unimportant*; 5 = *extremely important*). This measure served as our dependent variable. Afterwards, we asked participants to rate the personal value of authenticity ("How important is it for you personally to experience authenticity, i.e., to be your true self?"; 1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *very important*). This measure serves as our putative moderator. Finally, participants reported their level of English comprehension and provided demographic information.

2.2 | Results

Prime (business, European capitals, jobs) had no effect on personal value of authenticity, $F(2, 217) = 0.05$, $p = 0.96$, allowing us to use this variable as a moderator in the analyses. Overall, business students ascribed high personal value to authenticity ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.70$), with the mean being significantly different from the scale midpoint, $t(219) = 26.53$, $p < 0.001$. Moreover, women ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.59$) ascribed higher personal value to authenticity than men ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(218) = -2.95$, $p = 0.004$, but women ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.96$) and men ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.01$) did not differ on general value of authenticity, $t(218) = -1.51$, $p = 0.13$.

To test our hypothesis that personal value of authenticity moderates the effect of business primes on general value of authenticity, we conducted a moderation analysis with a multi-categorical independent variable and a continuous moderator (PROCESS model 1; Hayes, 2013). The categorical independent variable (prime) had three levels: business, European capitals, and jobs. Therefore, we created dummy codes representing two comparisons between the three conditions: business versus European capitals (D1) and business versus jobs (D2). We categorized personal value of authenticity as low (one standard deviation below the mean; $M = 3.55$) and high (one standard deviation above the mean; $M = 4.96$). In total, the model included the two prime comparisons (D1, D2) as the independent variables, personal value of authenticity as the moderator, the personal value of authenticity \times D1 and personal value of authenticity \times D2 interactions, and general value of authenticity as the dependent variable.

Results of bootstrapping with 5,000 samples yielded an overall significant moderating effect of personal value of authenticity on the relation between primes and general value of authenticity, $F(2, 214) = 3.25$, $p = 0.041$ (Figure 1). Simple slope analyses showed that personal value of authenticity was positively related to general value of authenticity in the European capitals condition, $B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = 0.007$, and the jobs condition, $B = 0.49$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$, but personal and general value of authenticity were unrelated in the business condition, $B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.70$. The business prime condition raised the general value of authenticity among business students who personally valued authenticity to a lesser degree.

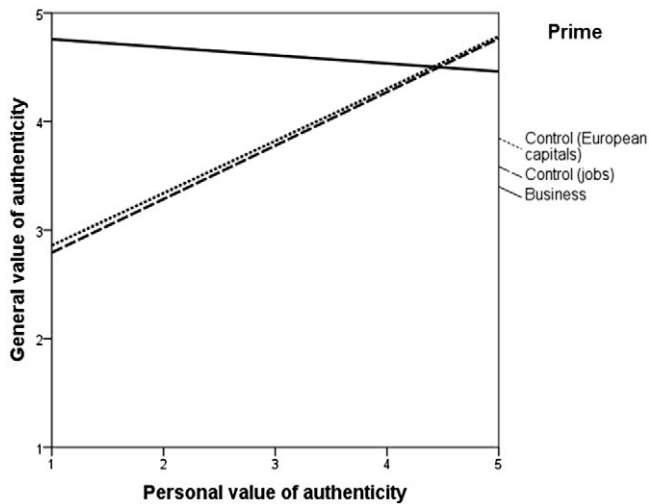


FIGURE 1 General value of authenticity as a function of prime and personal value of authenticity in Experiment 1

In addition, both the personal value of authenticity \times D1 interaction, $B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = 0.033$, 95% CI = [0.045, 1.066], and the personal value of authenticity \times D2 interaction, $B = 0.57$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = 0.017$, 95% CI = [0.105, 1.029], were significant. Spotlight analyses showed that participants low on personal value of authenticity assigned higher general value to authenticity when they were exposed to the business prime than to the European capitals prime ($M_{\text{business}} = 4.57$, $M_{\text{capitals}} = 4.09$, $B = -0.48$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = 0.049$, 95% CI = [-0.957, -0.002]) or to the jobs prime ($M_{\text{business}} = 4.57$, $M_{\text{jobs}} = 4.05$, $B = -0.52$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = 0.049$, 95% CI = [-0.969, -0.065]). For participants relatively high on personal value of authenticity, the difference in general value of authenticity across the three primes was not significant, all $ps > 0.22$ and all 95% CIs included zero. That is, the conditional effect of business prime on general value of authenticity was significant only for those low on personal value of authenticity. Taken together, reminders of business particularly (and not of jobs in general) increase the general value of authenticity among business students who personally value authenticity to a lesser extent. Finally, a robustness check showed that the interaction effect above remained statistically significant after controlling for sex, $F(2, 213) = 3.17$, $p = 0.044$.

2.3 | Discussion

Reminders of the concept of business made business students who ascribed low (rather than high) personal value to authenticity value authenticity more. This effect occurred only when students were primed with the concept of business and not when they were primed with other work-related concepts (i.e., various jobs). In fact, the jobs prime had a virtually identical effect to that of the neutral control prime (names of European capitals): The effects of a business prime were distinct from that of a jobs prime.

These findings suggest that business in the minds of business students bears associations with authenticity, and this is best manifested among those who ascribe relatively low personal value to authenticity. We proposed the following explanation. Business students chronically

link “business” with high-agency concepts (see below). Hence, reminders of the world of business draw on these concepts highlighting the value of being authentic. Nevertheless, for students who already personally value authenticity much, business primes have little impact on that link (i.e., ceiling effect). In contrast, for students who personally value authenticity less, the business primes strengthen the link.

We conducted an online follow-up study to test the explanation that business students link “business” with high-agency concepts. We asked 148 business students (102 women, 46 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 25.61$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.11$) from the same Business School to indicate how well each of 12 words fit the term “business” (1 = *does not fit at all*, 7 = *fits very well*). Six of the words were high-agency (creativity, freedom, independence, initiative, personality, uniqueness,) and six were low-agency (conformity, convention, obedience, regulation, restriction, submissiveness). We averaged responses to form high-agency ($\alpha = 0.78$) and low-agency ($\alpha = 0.77$) indices. Participants associated “business” more strongly with words related to high agency ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.11$) than low agency ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(147) = 8.28$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.37$ (paired-samples t test). Moreover, the associations of “business” with words related to high agency were significantly higher than the scale midpoint (4), $t(147) = 8.14$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.34$ (one-sample t test), whereas the associations of “business” with words related to low agency were significantly lower than the scale midpoint, $t(147) = -2.60$, $p = 0.010$, $d = 0.43$ (one-sample t test). These findings support that business students are more likely to associate “business” with high-agency than low-agency words.

There is an alternative explanation. Business students may associate business less with the classic, corporate view of it (which we primed here) and more with a contemporary, start-up view. That is, although the specific content of the prime we used favored the corporate view of business, this may not be the view that business students endorse. We put this alternative to test. We asked 68 students of the same Business School (52 women, 16 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.82$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.14$) to indicate whether they spontaneously associate business more with corporations or with start-ups (1 = *start-up*, 7 = *corporate*). Students associated business significantly more with corporations than with start-ups ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(67) = 5.21$, $p < 0.001$. The alternative explanation was not supported.

3 | EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 1 provided preliminary evidence in support of our hypothesis, namely that the construct “business” is associated with authenticity among business students and therefore simple reminders of business will raise the general value of authenticity among those who personally value authenticity less (vs. more). Experiment 2 sought to test the replicability of these findings with a different and more elaborate set of measures. In Experiment 1, we used single-item measures of the core constructs, personal value of authenticity, and general value of authenticity. In Experiment 2, we used multi-item measures of them.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 214 students of the same Business School as in Experiment 1 for course credit. We removed from further analyses data from 20 students who indicated in a question at the end of the survey that they had taken part in a similar experiment before (due to anonymity protection, we had no way of preventing re-participation). No participants indicated serious problems with English language understanding. The final sample comprised of 194 participants (97 women, 97 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.51$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.71$).

3.1.2 | Procedure

Given the equivalence of the two control conditions in Experiment 1, we used in the current experiment only the jobs condition. We randomly assigned participants either to the jobs or business prime. We used the same priming task (i.e., word search puzzle) as in Experiment 1. Next, we presented participants with the same definition of authenticity as before. We assessed the dependent variable, general value of authenticity, with three items ($\alpha = 0.71$): "How important do you find it that people feel authentic, i.e., they are being their true selves?" (1 = *very unimportant*; 5 = *very important*), "How valuable do you find it that people feel authentic, i.e., they are being their true selves?" (1 = *very worthless*; 5 = *very valuable*), and "How beneficial do you find it that people feel authentic, i.e., they are being their true selves?" (1 = *very detrimental*; 5 = *very beneficial*). We assessed the putative moderator, personal value of authenticity, also with three items ($\alpha = 0.74$): "How important is it for you personally to experience authenticity, i.e., to be your true self?" (1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *very important*), "How valuable is it for you personally to experience authenticity, i.e., to be your true self?" (1 = *not at all valuable*; 5 = *very valuable*), and "How beneficial is it for you personally to experience authenticity, i.e., to be your true self?" (1 = *not at all beneficial*; 5 = *very beneficial*). Finally, participants declared whether they remembered having taken part in a similar experiment and provided us with demographic information.

3.2 | Results

Prime (jobs vs. business) had no effect on personal value of authenticity, $F(1, 192) < 0.01$, $p = 0.99$, allowing us to use this variable as a moderator. On average, students assigned high personal value to authenticity ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.60$), with the mean being significantly different from the scale midpoint, $t(191) = 29.37$, $p < 0.001$. Women ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.57$) assigned higher personal value to authenticity than men ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(192) = -2.24$, $p = 0.026$, and women ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.65$) also assigned higher general value to authenticity than men ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(192) = -2.16$, $p = 0.032$.

We conducted a moderation analysis (PROCESS model 1; Hayes, 2013) with condition (0 = *jobs*; 1 = *business*) as the dichotomous

categorical independent variable, personal value of authenticity as the continuous moderator, and general value of authenticity as the dependent variable. Again, we categorized personal value of authenticity as low (one standard deviation below the mean; $M = 3.65$) and high (one standard deviation above the mean; $M = 4.88$).

Replicating Experiment 1, results of bootstrapping with 5,000 samples revealed a significant interaction between prime and personal value of authenticity, $B = -0.36$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.012$ (Figure 2). Simple slope analyses indicated that personal value of authenticity was positively related to general value of authenticity both in the jobs condition, $B = 0.72$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$, and in the business condition, $B = 0.36$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.001$, although the association was stronger in the jobs condition, Fisher's $z = 2.77$, $p = 0.006$. Moreover, results of a spotlight analysis showed that the business prime ($M = 4.23$) augmented the general value of authenticity compared to the jobs prime ($M = 3.93$) only for participants low on personal value of authenticity, $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.014$, and not for participants high on personal value of authenticity, $B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.27$. Lastly, a robustness check indicated that the above-mentioned interaction effect remained statistically significant after controlling for sex, $B = -0.36$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.011$.

3.3 | Discussion

Using more extensive measures of the respective constructs (i.e., personal value of authenticity, general value of authenticity), Experiment 2 corroborated the findings of Experiment 1. Reminders of business (as opposed to reminders of jobs) increased the general value of authenticity among business students who ascribed relatively low personal value on authenticity. Business bears associations with authenticity in business students' minds. Moreover, authenticity is only activated by thoughts about the world of business in particular and not about work in general.

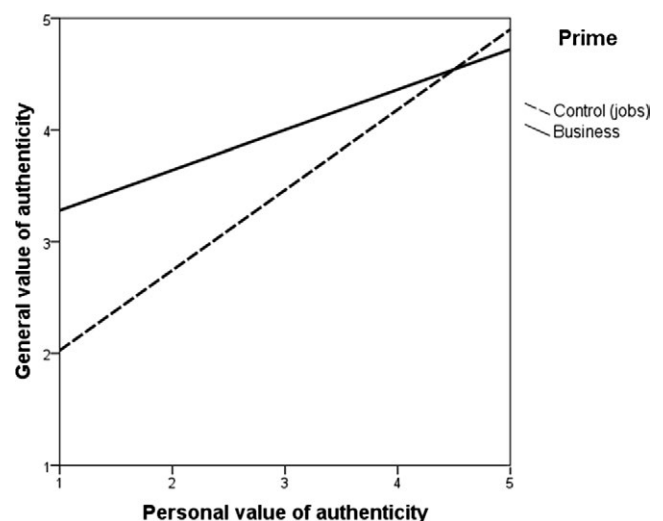


FIGURE 2 General value of authenticity as a function of prime and personal value of authenticity in Experiment 2

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

We set off to examine how activating the construct “business” affects business students' view of authenticity. We reviewed literature indicating that business would be equally likely to be seen as compatible or incompatible with authenticity. We argued that business students would endorse the belief that business is compatible with authenticity and, if so, we would expect that priming the concept of business would elicit associations of authenticity. Specifically, we hypothesized that priming business (vs. control) would increase the general value of authenticity for individuals who personally value authenticity less (than more). Results of two laboratory experiments were consistent with this hypothesis. Business appears to be associated with authenticity in business students' minds and therefore mere reminders of business are enough to boost the general value of authenticity among those dispositionally valuing it comparatively less. Below we discuss three novel contributions that our findings make to literature and practice, while highlighting respective paths for future research.

4.1 | Contribution

4.1.1 | Authenticity in context

The findings contribute to the study of authenticity. Specifically, we added to antecedents of authenticity (Sedikides et al., 2018, 2017) by examining whether a business context is perceived by a specific population, business students, as facilitating authenticity. Moreover, unlike prior research focusing on what makes people *experience* authenticity, we examined what makes people *value* authenticity. We showed that business bears associations with authenticity among business students, and mere reminders of business activate authenticity-related associations (at least among those who value authenticity less). Although limited only to perceptions of business students, this research adds to the understanding of the meaning of business and its relation with authenticity.

Yet, we do not wish to argue that all business students feel they can be their true selves in a business context. Whether they feel so depends on several factors, such as their majority or minority status. Prior research in organizational settings indicates that authentic self-expression may be more challenging for individuals whose attributes and characteristics (e.g., beliefs, appearance) diverge from those of the majority (Hewlin, 2015). For those individuals, being their true selves is not easy. A similar point is made by the State Authenticity as Fit to the Environment (SAFE) model, which suggests that the context subtly cues desired social identities and may thereby elicit a sense of (mis)fit between a person and her or his environment (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Along these lines, we argue that business might be perceived as more permissive of authenticity by individuals who belong to the majority rather than the minority. For those in the majority, their true selves are already largely aligned with normative expectations of the context, and therefore the task of being authentic incurs few, if any, social risks or internal battles. Our findings might

be thus primarily driven by the majority's sense of fit between their true selves and the business context. Follow-up investigations could examine more nuanced differences in authenticity perceptions by taking into account participants' majority/minority status.

4.1.2 | Implications for management education

Our findings also afford insights into the realm of management education. We propose that management education could capitalize on business students' mental associations of business with authenticity in order to promote a psychosocially healthy way of being one's self. Literature on self and identity has explored various ways of being oneself. Whereas some of these ways might be constructive and beneficial, others can be maladaptive, counterproductive, and detrimental (e.g., being self-obsessed or narcissistic). Narcissism has been an issue of growing concern in the management education literature with regard to business students (Bergman, Westerman, & Daly, 2010), where narcissism has been considered an obstacle to critical thinking (Tomkins & Ulus, 2015), and also with regard to faculty, where narcissism has been linked to poorer student academic outcomes (Westerman, Whitaker, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2016). Narcissism has also been an issue more generally in organizations (Braun, 2017; Roberts, Woodman, & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017), following general rising trends across various cultures (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012; Twenge & Foster, 2010; for an opposing view and a response, see Wetzel et al., 2017; and Campbell, Twenge, Konrath, Cooper, & Foster, 2018; respectively).

From an applied perspective, we argue that authenticity could be an antidote to narcissism. If business bears associations with authenticity among business students, then nurturing these associations between business and authenticity (as opposed to business and narcissism) could be one way for management education to proceed. Authenticity has a mostly advantageous influence in organizations; narcissism has a mostly disadvantageous one. Both are somehow linked to the world of business. The challenge for professionals shaping management education is to enforce the positive associations between business and authenticity, while curtailing the negative ones between business and narcissism. This way, business students may become further aware that, although business allows them to be themselves, this does not need to be at the expense of others (e.g., seeing themselves as superior to others). Building on prior research suggesting that self-affirmation interventions (e.g., recalling self-relevant values) can reduce narcissism (Thomaes, Bushman, de Castro, Cohen, & Denissen, 2009) but can also increase authenticity (Choi, Iyengar, & Ingram, 2017; Smallenbroek, Zelenski, & Whelan, 2017), we propose that authenticity might serve as a buffer to narcissism. Future work will need to put this proposal to test.

4.1.3 | Toward a “business priming” paradigm

Lastly, our findings add to the topic of shared representations of business. The world of business is sometimes depicted in unflattering terms, that is, as rather cynical, dishonest, or insensitive (Pollard,

2000), and business education in particular has been criticized for promoting selfishness, greed, and immorality (McCabe et al., 2006; Mitroff, 2004). Some scholars, though, have pointed to a paradigm shift being underway, according to which business is increasingly seen as contributing to self-fulfillment and self-actualization by allowing individuals to be their true selves and thrive (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). In our research, we obtained evidence that business is generally linked to authenticity in business students' minds. In addition, we demonstrated that the construct "business" activates a rich network of associations that can temporarily alter beliefs on topics such as general value of authenticity. Assuming that business is a meaningful construct relevant to many spheres of life (such as money; Vohs, 2015), follow-up work could examine other effects that business primes may have among students of different majors or career tracks (e.g., humanities).

4.2 | Limitations and future research

Our research has several limitations. To begin, we focused on beliefs about the extent to which business affords authenticity rather than examining participants' actual experiences of authenticity (i.e., whether business enables their true self). However, given that people's lay beliefs and subjective realities shape to a substantial extent actual experiences and behaviors (Gebauer, Sedikides, Leary, & Asendorpf, 2015), these beliefs might be likely to translate into phenomenological experiences from the first-person perspective. Future work could assess this possibility.

In addition, our findings are silent on why the observed effects occur. Our theorizing posits that business education provides business students with knowledge that business is not an alienating and dehumanizing context, but rather one that enables their real selves. However, we presented no direct evidence for this idea, although a follow-up study (reported in Discussion of Experiment 1) showed that business students are more likely to associate the term "business" with high-agency (e.g., creativity, independence, initiative) than low-agency (e.g., conformity, convention, obedience) words. An alternate explanation resides in motivated reasoning (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Kunda, 1990; Sedikides, 2018). Given that authenticity is socially desirable, individuals engaged in business might be more motivated to believe that business promotes authenticity in order to maintain a positive self-regard. This explanation would not necessarily require that business students represent business as encouraging authenticity. Their perceptions might simply be biased in a self-serving way, that is, they might want to believe that the world of which they are part is a force of good. Future work would do well to test this alternative.

Finally, as we conducted our experiments only with business students, we do not know if our findings are generalizable to business employees. In line with prior work suggesting lifespan differences in leadership development (Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018), it would be interesting for future research to examine whether this association between business and authenticity holds not only for business students but also for professionals in this field. This would

advance our understanding of whether the association between business and authenticity found here is rooted in a specific representation of business as taught in business schools or it extends to everyday practice in the business world. Regardless, we hope that the findings prove generative.

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How to cite this article: Kokkoris MD, Sedikides C. Can you be yourself in business? How reminders of business affect the perceived value of authenticity. *J Appl Soc Psychol*. 2019;00:1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12596>