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Keeping it real: applying 360 degrees of authenticity

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Abstract

Marketers tout authenticity as the new reality, a means by which consumers in markets of abundance determine value and, at times, prestige. Approaching consumption from a Service-Dominant perspective, where every product has a unique experiential component within which the consumer and producer co-create value, means authenticity is problematic. How can a marketer represent authentically the infinite possibilities of the experiential component of a product? This paper builds on emerging research and a qualitative example to explore the meaning and application of an authenticity framework: the 360 degree model of authenticity.

Perspectives on Authenticity

Types of Authenticity

Authenticity generally refers to an original, not a copy or reproduction (Burchfield, 1987). Usually an expert in the field empirically confirms the authenticity of a physical object or a state. Extending the concept, Wang (1999) proposes *objective authenticity* as the genuineness of an object and *constructed authenticity* arising from the community's story about the object. In order for constructed authenticity to be recognized, Wang indicates that an experience must occur within the appropriate cultural context. Beyond these two types of authenticity lies a third possibility, *existential authenticity*: an experiential state of being. Existential authenticity comes to Wang through philosophical work in authenticity, primarily by Keirkegaard.

Soren Kierkegaard posited 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). Similarly, Lionel Trilling (1974) used existentialist ideas to examine authenticity in an academic context, referencing Kierkegaard's holistic approach. Wang (1999) claims that tourism experiences can deliver a feeling of the wholeness of self. This existential state of genuineness, of people coming together with themselves, reflects Wang's proposed existential authenticity.

Gilmore and Pine (2007) identify *commercial authenticity* with a matrix combining Wang's objective authenticity and constructed/existential authenticity. They cite the prevalence of perceived value of authenticity as prevalent in consumer and popular culture. For example, slang phrases referring to authenticity such as "keep it real"(Urban Dictionary, 2010), are positive indicators of value.

Modern Psychology and Authenticity

Modern psychology, particularly positive psychology takes a Kierkegaardian approach, and incorporates the work of Martin Heidegger (Guignon, 2002). For Heidegger authenticity is fleeting and experienced through moments where the individual connects with a network of people/objects in a unique, conscious and deliberate way based on the particular background and circumstances (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

For the Heideggerian, an authentic experience transcends automated responses. Authenticity is an actor's *conscious awareness* of a context and *deliberate* action within that context. At the core of Heidegger is the uniqueness that results in a specific moment, when a specific person with a specific history interacts with a specific set of stimuli. The awareness of the uniqueness of the circumstance is the authentic experience. In psychology, this would mean

rising above one's training and programming to, through a heightened awareness, make a deliberate and conscious choice about one's actions.

Authenticity and Tourism
A Heideggerian approach to tourism (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) would argue that the tourist seeking an authentic experience uses others' stories of similar experiences as only a guide, not as prescriptive directions on what to think/feel/do. A Heideggarian tourist believes that no guidebook can tell them how they, a unique individual at a unique moment, can interact within an experience. This marriage of individual uniqueness and the network of surrounding stimuli to co-create an authentic experience is also a key aspect of Service Dominant Logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), a marketing paradigm based on value co-creation.

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)
SDL builds on and consolidates ideas about value co-creation into one paradigm. SDL embraces an authentic approach, acknowledging the participation of all actors within the value network (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Whereas standardization was a key to service delivery in existing marketing models, standardization is a fiction in an SDL paradigm.

360 Degree Authenticity

A holistic, evaluative approach to determining authenticity would take all approaches in the literature into account for a 360 degree, holistic (and one could admit, Keirkegaardian) view of the authentic. A 360 Degree Authenticity Model (Collins & Murphy, 2010) enables marketers to consider four dimensions of authenticity (Table 1).

Table 1: 360 Degree Authenticity

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?

Marketers lack a tool to evaluate authenticity, commercially and academically. The proposed model combines and embeds the four dimensions of authenticity in the product development and evaluation process. This paper applies the 360 Degree Authenticity model (Collins & Murphy, 2010) on a marketing project promoting the World Social Work Day in Australia.

The Identity of the Social Work Profession

Social Work as a profession traces its origins to charity traditions that arose in response to England's Poor Laws of 1601 and 1834 (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2008). These laws enabled governments to administer to the sick, needy, disabled, and led to the creation of organisations to deal with the problems presented by poverty and ill health. From these activities, two different social work approaches emerged: one focused on changing the individual and the other focused on changing conditions in society.

In Australia, Social Work began in hospitals closely associated with the Australian Association of Almoners, and later with child welfare (Gleeson, 2008). Social Work has expanded into different settings including disability, local government, mental health, prisons,

courts and welfare. This diverse and rapid expansion has led to confusion about Social Work, particularly to those outside the profession. In addition, society sometimes sees social workers as unwelcome messengers, bringing news about unpleasant issues and espousing welfare programs that may prove unpopular (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

An Applied Attempt at Authenticity: Celebrating World Social Work Day

World Social Work Day is an opportunity to develop professional pride in Social Work. Two authors of this paper, a Social Worker and a marketer, worked on a promotional poster campaign with positive messages about the profession. The posters were free and available across Australia for Social Workers and Social Work students to post in their workplaces and community. The messages in the posters served two purposes. One was to explain to the general public the nature of the Social Work profession. The other purpose was to appeal to Social Workers in the field so they would put the posters up in their workplaces and communities. Along with these two objectives, the poster messages had to be endorsed by the professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW).

Seven posters were developed. They were uniform, except that each poster had a different key message about the profession. The key messages were developed through two stages of qualitative surveys. In the first and second stages of the key message development, Social Work students and practitioners answered a short online survey. Five of the seven key messages were developed from responses that were rated the most authentic by survey participants. The research team, based on literature about the profession, developed two key messages that did not appear as themes from the survey.

When selecting and developing the themes, the 360 degree model was applied to each key message (Table 2).

Table 2: Applying the Social Work Poster Project to the 360 Degree Authenticity model

Authenticity	Question
Objective	Does the message have a factual basis according to professional standards?
Constructive	Does the message have meaning within the context in which they are being experienced?
Commercial	Is the message true to itself, consistent with perceptions of the profession in accreditation, education and practice?
Existential	Does the message inspire readers to reflect on their particular experience with the profession, rather than being so prescriptive as to not take the variety of experiences into account?

In the final stage of the project, the marketer designed the posters, had them printed and instituted an online ordering system whereby Social Work practitioners and students could order posters. Each order could consist of a maximum of two posters, and the two posters could not be the same. Posters would then be printed and delivered to the Social Worker by surface mail for free.

Table 3 shows the popularity of each poster. The popularity of each poster was seen to reinforce the authenticity of the phrase amongst the consumer group. If, as the literature suggests, the perception of authenticity created value to the consumer, then the key messages that seemed the most authentic would be the most popular. Orders for the posters came from around Australia; however most of the survey participants and orders came from practitioners in Western Australia.

Modeling 360 Degree Authenticity

The final stage of the project, where consumers ordered the posters, was seen as crucial to evaluating the authenticity of the messages. In an economy of abundance (up to seven posters to choose from), and with limited resources (two posters per order), would messages which were the most authentic vis a vis the 360 degree model also be the ones most selected?

When evaluating each type of authenticity, authors rated each type as either conclusive/positive (P), conclusive/negative (N) or inconclusive (I) based on the questions in Table 2. Objective authenticity was evaluated through the professional requirements of the accrediting body; constructive authenticity through adherence to the literature. Commercial authenticity was measured through consistency with objective and constructive authenticity. Existential authenticity was measured through the reactions of Social Workers at the end stage of the project. Was this how Social Workers holistically viewed themselves within the context of their profession and what were their reactions when experiencing the messages?

Table 3: Evaluating authenticity in the key messages of the poster project (Orders n=66)

| | | | Authenticity Types | | | |
| | | | Evaluated by producer alone | | | Evaluated by producer +consumer interaction |
Poster key message	**Source**	**Orders**	**Objective**	**Constructive**	**Commercial** (Objective + Constructive)	**Existential** (Based on orders)
Working socially, politically and compassionately	Survey	19.6%	P	P	P	P
Collaborate with others on a shared humanity	Survey	19.6%	P	P	P	P
Working with hope	Survey	18.1%	P	P	P	P
Working toward social justice	Literature	21.2%	P	P	P	P
Empowering people	Survey	7.5%	P	P	I	I
We meet inspiring people every day	Survey	12.1%	N	P	N	N
Skills in demand here and everywhere	Literature	1.5%	P	N	N	N

Although this paper is qualitative with a small, relatively homogeneous sample, a few notable conclusions appear.

First, key messages that did not meet the objective or constructive authenticity ("We meet inspiring people…" and "Skills in demand…") were less popular with the consumer group. This was regardless of whether the key message originated with Social Workers themselves or was developed from the current context of the professional by a marketer.

Key messages had to be Conclusive/Positive (P) in all other aspects to be considered (P) for the existential and commercial aspect. This is due to the commercial authenticity requirement for products to be "true to themselves" and the Kierkegaardian requirement for holistic consistency. Messages that had issues with their consistency, or were not true to themselves, were unpopular with consumers.

Some key messages that were popular at the developmental stage ("Empowering people" and "We meet inspiring people…") were less authentic to a wider audience. This is something marketers are familiar with and therefore why in industry, focus groups to test promotional initiatives are common.

Finally, one surprising outcome was that although some key messages were equally authentic, no message had stand out appeal. In other words, all messages, as long as they were authentic, were equally popular. This was the case regardless of the message source (a Social Worker's opinion or Social Work literature as viewed by a marketer).

Findings and Discussion

This exploratory study used a qualitative approach with a small size convenience sample. This study is an early stage in an iterative process of applying the theoretical model. The intention was to examine the model itself and thus the results do not necessarily generalise (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Spiggle, 1994).

The project design limits fully testing the model. One such limitation was the failure to include the perspectives on the Social Work profession from clients and the general community. This makes the results limited certain groups: those practicing the profession, intending to practice and those who work with practitioners.

Other limitations included the concentration of respondents in regional Western Australia. With a wider participating population other perspectives may have emerged.

Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

Marketers commonly use focus groups and other testing mechanisms to measure values during product development and implementation. However, the tools do not focus on all aspects of authenticity. The 360 Degree Authenticity model provides a framework that marketers can apply as a measure for comparative values in all aspects of authenticity.

This initial exploratory study highlighted some of the challenges in using the model in a commercial setting. In this case, the challenge for the researchers lay with conceptualising the poster campaign from a commercially and existentially authentic perspective. In this sense, the use of the tool with the Social Work Day Project was successful as it instigated discussion and consideration of the existential experience of consuming the messages.

The process of developing the posters in conjunction with the 360 degree model required the marketers and social workers to apply SDL. The exercise of attempting to develop these posters within a co-creation paradigm was a new experience for the marketers involved in the project. Methodologies on how to work effectively within an SDL paradigm in applied contexts, and with efficacy measurements specific to the SDL paradigm are areas currently under exploration in Services Marketing.

The Social Work Day Poster Project is an applied example of the struggle for authenticity on a variety of levels and introduces holistic ways to test authenticity—and therefore more authentic.

Acknowledgements

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