



## Conference Paper

# Authenticity in Product Development

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## Abstract

We are told that ‘authenticity’ is what today’s customers want. In this study, industrial designers have been interviewed about authenticity. Understanding the concept of authenticity, from a product development and industrial design point of view, is seen as an important way to understand how value, relevant to customers and consumers, may be added to products. This paper concludes that the nebulosity of the concept of authenticity renders it ineffective as a standalone tool for developing new products. Once on the market authenticity can, however, be seen as a factor that may determine the success or failure of a product. Authenticity may possibly not be a guarantee determinant of market success. However, it may be an analytical tool in determining market failure in retrospect. No product developer may ever rely on a given recipe that will always deliver ‘authenticity’ to the market. But if market and customer input is valid and reliable in the early research phase of the development of a product, then designers may be more inclined to use authenticity as an effective design influencer.

**Keywords:** Product authenticity, authentic design, product development

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## 1 Introduction

People increasingly base their assessments of product offerings on how real, or fake, they perceive them. Now, more than ever, the authentic is what customers want. The desire for authenticity exists as strongly in Copenhagen, or Paris as it does in a small countryside village. According to Andrew Potter, finding the authentic in life has become our foremost spiritual quest (Potter, 2010). We regard authenticity as a good thing; it is one of those motherhood words -like community, family, and natural – that are only ever used in a positive sense. In the Oxford Dictionary “authentic” is defined in 3 slightly different ways of concern for products; firstly, as something of undisputed origin, which is not a copy, but is genuine. Secondly as something done in a traditional or original way, or in a way that faithfully resembles an original. Thirdly as something based on facts that is accurate or reliable. In an American survey from 2007, respondents were asked to pick from a list of words that best defined the word authentic. 61% chose “genuine”, 19% opted for “real” (Zogby, 2008). However, confusion arises when we try to describe how ‘real’ and ‘genuine’ is embodied in real products. What counts as authentic, and why is, according to Potter, one of the most pressing questions for producers and consumers. In an overall sense all that exists is real and genuine. But for

Potter, authenticity is a term best understood negatively as what it is not. “We might not know what authenticity is, but for the most part we know what it is not, and we know what we want whatever “authentic” might be” (Potter, 2010, p.38).

Perceptions of authenticity derive from how well offerings are in congruity with the customer’s self-image. Insignificant goods and services will no longer suffice; today’s customers want experiences, memorable and engaging events that enrich their personal life. Hence the business of today is largely about being real, original, sincere, genuine and authentic (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Gilmore & Pine arrange the customer sensibilities into 4 successfully dominant elements: 1. Availability: Purchasing on the basis of accessing a reliable supply, 2. Cost: Purchasing on the basis of obtaining an affordable price, 3. Quality: Purchasing on the basis of excelling in product performance, 4. Authenticity: Purchasing on the basis of conforming to self-image (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In practice, it seems judicious to assume that all four of these elements interplay with each other. Customers will pay a premium for authenticity, but there comes a point when there will be a trade-off between the experience of the authentic and the more readily available, cheaper substitute with sufficient quality.

The research question this paper attempts to clarify is what authenticity is, by investigating how the term is described in literature and by active industrial designers.

## 2 Methodology

Ten middle aged and gender mixed commercially active designers have been interviewed. They were chosen because they represent ten different major design agencies from the south of Sweden. They were firstly consulted via telephone, then through interviews. The discussions were based on their views on authenticity. In addition to general discussion of the term, ten specific questions were asked of the respondents. These were extracted from, and influenced by, the literature review.

These ten questions were: 1. Give two examples of products that you perceive as authentic vs. unauthentic. 2. What does authenticity in product design mean to you? 3. How are authentic and unauthentic products perceived? 4. Do authentic products possess certain common aesthetic or visual properties? 5. Do you think that certain consumers do not appreciate or desire authentic products? 6. Do you think the concept of authenticity to designers may differ from that of consumers? 7. If their concepts of authenticity are different, in which way? 8. Are your ambitions as a designer always relevant to the market? 9. Is authenticity about status? 10. What would be the impact on you if it could be established that authenticity in product design is principally a quest for the middle and upper classes in society?

The industrial designers were interviewed in an environment familiar to them. The respondents were briefed about the research beforehand and the ten questions above were mailed to them in advance. These ten questions were used as a semi-structured

interview guide. Additional questions were also asked as the discussions progressed. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours per interviewee.

### 3 Views on authenticity in design

#### 3.1 Preface

This section is an account of authenticity as described in literature. But this section is also interlaced with the results from the interviews in the form of quotations. In this manner, the results are shown in context of theory.

#### 3.2 The literature and the designers

Contemporary product developers and designers have claimed that authentic products must be free from skeuomorphism and the superfluous in order to be experienced as authentic (Media Loot, 2012, Pocketnow, 2012). Perhaps no designer has proclaimed this notion more outspokenly than Dieter Rams. In his ten principles for good design, his last principle is that good design is nothing but as little design as possible; back to purity, back to simplicity (Rams, 2009). None of the interviewees spoke explicitly about skeuomorphism and the superfluous, but when asked about what visual properties authentic products ought to have, some of them touched on the subject. A choice of material must be supported by reason. As one of the designers expressed it “If a part of a product is made out of leather this must also bring something extra, it must also be the best material for that part, this is about aesthetic authenticity”.

Some designers argue that it takes time to develop authentic products; some of these designers are members of the slow-design movement (Slow Design Movement, 2016). Branches of this movement gravitate towards the alternative and environmental movements which means that they seek an approach to designing products that takes into consideration material and social factors as well as short and long-term impacts of the design, balancing individual, socio-cultural, and environmental needs. In line with this, there is a cradle to cradle movement that focuses on the environmental impact of a product from when it is first invented until it is finally recycled and fully biodegraded (Ohlson, 2012). Authentic products are, according to them, the ones that enhance continuous recycling of materials and renewable energy. Two of the interviewed designers noted environmental aspects as important for how authentic products are perceived. According to one of the interviewees, authentic products are honest products that are made of genuine materials, revealing how they are made, and that are good for the environment. The same interviewees also pointed out that some customers put environmental aspects before all others in their choice of products.

Some of the interviewed designers expressed that authenticity in product design is the outcome of a rigorous design process. The most comprehensive assumption amongst the interviewed industrial designers is that engineers and manufacturers in industry rarely embrace or comprehend the significance of these processes. It seems hard to comprehend them without embracing the 'design thinking' of the industrial designer. This view on authenticity has not been found in the literature. The interviewed designers expressed a common concern about lack of demand for their services and difficulties in getting proper compensation in relation to their efforts and design process thinking. Some reasons given behind this deficit were described as a lack of competence amongst SMEs as design buyers. One designer exemplified this by saying: "Industrial designers put a lot of effort and time into thinking about the product as a whole. But you have to work hard with certain design buyers to get them to realize what is important. Some want to advance and change the world, but most of them just want to sell products and survive."

To argue for their existence, designers must prove that they add value to the end product. To be competitive, their offerings must be experienced as more attractive than those of their competitors on the global market. A part of this is to develop offerings that are experienced as authentic. What one may deduce from the interviews is that the competition from "unauthentic products" from the Asian market is experienced as hardening. According to the interviewees, Asian products are not the result of an industrial design product development process. The outcome has been described as bleached copies of the "real thing". "Unauthentic products may claim to be made of wood in Finland when they, in fact, are made in China of plastic.", "If we look at clothes, then the authentic ones are filled with thought-through details that you experience as you wear them, someone has considered that it must fit someone's body. It has thoroughly gone through different material choices. The producer of unauthentic clothes has not had a single thought about the end user and how the clothes eventually will be used. A company in China does, above all, see to purely economic interests.", "It is related to culture. Here in the Nordic countries we, at large, respect originality. Copies are made in Asia. Authenticity is not a part of their culture as it is here." According to another interviewed designer there are, however, exceptions in China. "There is a hunger among certain Chinese customers to find really authentic products. They even let the price tag hang on the products they buy in order to show status." Two designers expressed that they felt a threat from customers that appreciate unauthentic Asian products that lack extensive development costs, hence are associated with low price. "The great mass does not care at all; they only look at the price. They do not give a damn about originality, they go to places like Ikea, Rusta or Gekås in Ullared". For the masses it is just a desire to consume that has to be fulfilled, and then it is low price that prevails over quality. It is like an absolute need to find the cheapest products". Another designer touches on the subject of pricing when she answers the question if her ambitions as a designer are always relevant to the market. "Sometimes one has much

higher ambitions than the market demands. The customer may not be prepared to pay for what we may add of genuine quality and function." Another designer regards the same phenomenon from a partly opposed angle when he proclaims "If a designer does not have full knowledge about what the target group prioritises in relation to cost, then there is great risk that the product will be experienced as unauthentic."

Jarrett Fuller states that authentic design has to be honest (Fuller, 2013). Fuller argues that authentic design is created for a specific context. It knows where it will be seen and used, by whom, and it knows the purpose it has to serve. It should not try to be something it isn't (Ibid). Two of the interviewed designers confirm this view when asked about what authenticity in product design is. "The product shall stand for what it is, give a clear message and be honest. If it looks like a French industrial lamp, then it shall be a French industrial lamp; do you get it?" Another designer: "The authentic product is honest in what it claims to be. Nothing shall be simulated or claiming to be something it isn't. It is about being convincing and living up to what is promised. In full compliance, Fuller states that if a car looks fast it shall also be fast, etc. Nothing shall be hidden away, but be exposed (Ibid). It all may sound rather straight forward, but the concept of honesty and the genuine can sometimes be a delicate matter to determine. This has been pointed out by the following interviewee. She gave this example from her employment at Ford Cars. "I developed a plastic panel with a wooden look that was undistinguishable from the real thing. It was really advanced and of extremely high quality, but it was not considered as genuine and honest. We had to replace it by a poorer panel covered by a thin layer of real wood that in turn had to be covered in a thick layer of plastic varnish. The result was appalling and it looked less real, was more expensive, but it did contain real wood and was therefore considered as more authentic and genuine. But the real question is if the panel in full plastic wasn't more genuine and honest. That is a really hard question!"

Product authenticity being lost in the name of commercialism and cost cuts is perhaps something most of us can relate to. There is a view that authenticity does not arise from anything that has been devised and structured solely to generate profit; that it does not exist for its own sake (Doninger, 2003). One of the ten interviewees exemplifies this view when she described how she and her colleague turned down a big commission: "We rejected designing a clock for Ikea just because it should be the cheapest on the market." This view was also held by Steve Jobs, founder of Apple. He believed that passion for the product, in itself, and a mission for what products could do to people must be the starting point behind all products that matters. This passion and belief, he proclaimed, was what gave Apple the competitive edge over their competitors that, to a greater degree, produced rip-offs and "me-too products" (Isaacson, 2011, Jobs, 2016). The interviewed designers were all asked the question if their ambitions are always relevant to the market. Some of them proclaimed that they have higher ideological ambitions and personal beliefs than what is requested of them. A designer explains: "There is always a degree of idealism that one strives for in work;

this is why one wants to find out how products really are experienced and why one performs user investigations. Products designed with passion, care and love; that gives resonance for the users that cannot be forged.”

Gilmore and Pine have made an extensive mapping of the concept of authenticity into five genres of how customers perceive authenticity, each one corresponding to a particular form of offering (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Gilmore and Pine’s most basic form of authenticity is perhaps the natural authenticity that concern commodities. Customers perceive things that exist in their natural state as authentic. The pure, the raw, the unaltered or unpolished, the organic and the untamed. We see natural elements such as earth, water, air, wind and fire promoted on numerous products, all in order to appeal to natural authenticity. Products may also be experienced as authentic if they are original. Products that possess originality in their form, function or brand are experienced as more authentic offerings than copies, rip-offs, imitations or “me too” products. “Everyone wants to be original; but in a very certain and specific way. To have greasy hair and a snotty face certainly renders one special and original, but not in the right way. It is all about having the right products around us, to be a part of a group, and be accepted in a group.” This quotation, from one of the interviewees, stresses the importance of being “original” and having the “right” products.

Yet another form of authenticity is the one that may be experienced if a product or service refers to some other context, drawing inspiration from human history, or taps into shared memories and longings. This ‘referential authenticity’ may be evoked from any character, time or location, from a small city to a whole continent. This form of authenticity has not been mentioned by the interviewees.

The final form of authenticity, for Gilmore and Pine, is influential authenticity. According to them, customers also perceive as authentic that which exerts influence on other entities, calling to higher goals and aspirations of a cleaner planet, or a better way to live. Merely providing objective value will not suffice for all customers. Some ask themselves the question –How will this change or otherwise influence me, or others, for the better? A coffee offering may feel more authentic if the paper mug has a panda or Fairtrade logo on it just because this connects to a higher cause of our inner aspirations. Such idealism and environmental aspects were also brought up by several interviewees when asked about characteristics for authentic products.

David Boyle categorizes authenticity in a slightly different fashion (Boyle, 2004). He presents ten different “authenticity elements” of what is “real”: 1. Real means ethical, 2. Real means natural, 3. Real means honest, 4. Real means simple, 5. Real means unspun, 6. Real means sustainable, 7. Real means beautiful, 8. Real means rooted, 9. Real means three-dimensional, 10. Real means human. Most of these points have already been accounted for by other sources, but some are new to us. Firstly, “element” four; simplicity. Here Boyle principally refers to food. Simple recipes, simple traditional ingredients, no obscure chemicals. Authentic honest food is described as less processed, locally produced with a short list of traceable ingredients (Roots, 2014).

Boyle argues that an authentic product is more than just a superficial engagement with a brand. “People increasingly want their experiences to be multi-dimensional, complex and slightly less than perfect, because that is what real life is all about – and what it feels like to interact with a human being.” (Ibid). This leads us to the last of Boyle’s ten points, “Real means human”. “It means rooted in humanity, tolerant and human-scale, rather than based on some factory version of what mass-produced people ought to be like. And if it’s human, it has to be diverse. There is no place in authenticity for single, top-down solutions, because these are just not human” (Ibid).

## 4 Conclusion

It has not been possible to draw any ground-breaking conclusion about authenticity in design either from the literature or from the interviews. What the material has done, however, is to illustrate and exemplify the diverse nature of authenticity. It thus contributes to a greater understanding of how the “authentic” may add value to product offerings. A conclusion that can be drawn from the interviews is that authenticity and quality is not the same thing. Authenticity is a quality that may reside within a product, but this quality seems not to be dependent on the product’s material properties. A Jaguar car can be regarded as highly authentic without being reliable to drive.

There is a clear conception amongst most of the interviewees that what is authentic is defined by the user or the customer. It is also crucial what category of products an authentic product belongs to. The interviewees have given voice to the idea that product genre and personal interest direct in which areas authenticity becomes relevant for the individual consumer. When further analyzing the content of the interviews on a more generic level, one might generally argue that: 1. There is always an extra expectation of delivery towards products that are described as authentic. 2. This expectation can either be transformed into a disappointment or a confirmation of authenticity. 3. Authentic products have a strong link between what they promise and what they deliver. 4. The market always strives for authentic products that deliver additional value towards the consumers. 5. This endeavor is experienced as extra important in businesses that have a long term relation with their customers.

Authenticity is a non-static concept that appears to lie outside the physical product; hence it may not be detected or assessed in the product, but rather in the minds of the consumers. The nebulousness of the concept of authenticity therefore renders it ineffective as a static formula based tool for developing new products. Once the product is on the market authenticity can, however, be seen as a factor that may determine the success or failure of a product. Authenticity may possibly not be a guarantee determinant of market success. However, it may be an analytical tool in determining market failure in retrospect. No designer or product developer may ever rely on a given recipe that will always deliver ‘authenticity’ to the market. But if the market and customer

input is valid and reliable in the early research phase of the product, then designers may be more inclined to use authenticity as an effective design influencer.

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