

The Brand Authenticity Effect: Situational and Individual-level Moderators

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines under what conditions consumers develop emotional attachment towards authentic brands. It proposes that authentic brands' ability to evoke attachment is contingent upon situational (i.e., need to belong and need to express the authentic self) and consumer individual difference variables (i.e., brand engagement in self-concept and personal authenticity).

Design/methodology/approach – Two experiments empirically test the effects of brand authenticity on emotional brand attachment. Experiment 1 considers the moderating roles of social exclusion and brand engagement in self-concept. Experiment 2 examines the moderating roles of situationally induced feelings of self-inauthenticity and enduring personal authenticity.

Findings – Consumers with a high level of brand engagement in self-concept show greater emotional brand attachment to authentic (vs. less authentic) brands when they feel socially excluded. Consumers with a high level of enduring personal authenticity show greater emotional brand attachment to authentic (vs. less authentic) brands when they experience situations that make them feel inauthentic.

Practical implications – This research has implications for brand communication strategies adopted by brands that are positioned strongly on authenticity.

Originality/value – This research is one of the few to examine the effect of brand authenticity on brand attachment taking into account the moderating role of situational and individual difference variables. The findings contribute to the brand attachment and brand authenticity literatures.

Keywords: Brand authenticity, Emotional brand attachment, Social exclusion, Self-authenticity.

The Brand Authenticity Effect: Situational and Individual-level Moderators

Authentic brands are brands that are perceived as genuine, trustworthy, and meaningful (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Authenticity is increasingly recognized as a desirable brand characteristic—despite the fact that it requires substantial investments in the development of brand values and consistent brand behavior over time (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Because authentic brands serve as symbolic resources (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Morhart *et al.*, 2015) that help consumers find meaning in their lives and define who they are (Leigh *et al.*, 2006), they benefit from a competitive advantage in terms of the creation of strong consumer-brand connections (Beverland, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015), brand trust and growth (Eggers *et al.*, 2012).

Building on the emerging literature on consumers' connections with authentic brands (Morhart *et al.*, 2015) and initial evidence regarding situational factors influencing consumer responses to authentic brands (Beverland *et al.*, 2008), this article examines to what extent the effect of brand authenticity on consumers' emotional brand attachment varies across situations and individuals. Although it is recognized that consumers self-authenticate (i.e., define their identity) through authentic brands and consequently develop emotional brand attachment (e.g., Morhart *et al.*, 2015), this research investigates moderators of such authenticating acts (Arnould and Price, 2000). The central research question is whether situational and individual difference variables that increase consumers' need to self-authenticate through brands strengthen the brand authenticity–emotional brand attachment relation. More specifically, this research focuses on the moderating role of social exclusion and situational self-inauthenticity (situational variables), as well as brand engagement in self-concept and enduring personal authenticity (individual difference variables) in understanding emotional attachment towards authentic brands.

In examining these relations, this research contributes to the literature on brand authenticity in several ways: Going beyond an examination of positive outcomes of brand authenticity (Ilicic and Webster, 2014; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014), this research seeks to shed light on when (i.e., situational factors) and for whom (i.e., individual differences) brand authenticity entails particularly favourable consumer responses. Such an examination of moderators provides a more nuanced understanding of brand authenticity effects and self-authentication strategies.

This research also elucidates the role of brand authenticity in motivation-based consumption. In examining the moderating role of social exclusion and brand engagement in self-concept, this research clarifies to what extent brand authenticity meets consumers' need to connect through brands (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Similarly, in testing the moderating roles of situational inauthenticity and enduring personal authenticity, this research uncovers to what extent relating to an authentic brand addresses consumers' need to feel authentic (Leigh *et al.*, 2006). In doing so, this research seeks to establish that brand authenticity contributes to the fulfillment of important consumer motives (i.e., need to belong, need to be true to oneself).

Finally, in focusing on brand authenticity effects on emotional brand attachment, this research answers a call for more research on the antecedents of brand attachment (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Although previous literature suggested that brand authenticity elicits strong consumer-brand attachment, empirical evidence is limited. Previous work (Morhart *et al.*, 2015) found a significant and positive relation between brand authenticity and emotional brand attachment in a large-scale, correlational study using existing brands. The current research seeks to document the causal relation between brand authenticity and emotional brand attachment by using an experimental approach. It also provides insights regarding situational and individual-level moderators of this relation that have not been examined previously.

This article is structured as follows: Based on the literature on brand authenticity and motivation-based consumption, two experiments test authentic brands' ability to create strong emotional brand attachment by satisfying underlying needs: Study 1 examines to what extent consumers with high brand engagement in self-concept develop stronger emotional brand attachment to an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand) in a context of social exclusion. Study 2 investigates to what extent consumers with high levels of personal authenticity experience stronger emotional brand attachment to an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand) in a context of situationally activated self-inauthenticity. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, theoretical contributions, and managerial implications.

Theoretical Background

Brand Authenticity: Definition, Outcomes, and Moderating Variables

Brand authenticity refers to a brand being perceived as honest, real, and genuine (Alexander, 2009; Gilmore and Pine, 2007). An authentic brand differentiates itself through its sincerity, quality commitment, and connection to heritage (Beverland, 2006; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Authentic brands have the ability to connect with consumers on an emotional level through their symbolic quality (Rosica, 2007; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). A recent conceptualization of consumers' brand authenticity perceptions indicates that an authentic brand is dependable, cares for its consumers, helps them define and construct their identity, and reflects continuity from the past into the future (Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

A consideration of brand authenticity is relevant to marketers because authenticity creates a distinctive brand identity and contributes to brand status and equity (Beverland, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Recent studies show that brand authenticity positively relates

to brand attitude (Illicic and Webster, 2014), purchase intentions (Illicic and Webster, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014) as well as word-of-mouth communication, emotional brand attachment, and brand choice likelihood (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). The literature further suggests that authentic brands play a role in self-authentication behaviors, which occur when consumers reveal or create their true self (Arnould and Price, 2000; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Because authentic brands represent a meaningful resource in identity construction, they become instrumental in consumers' self-authentication behaviors (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010).

It is important to acknowledge that the degree of self-authentication varies across situations and individuals. Gilmore and Pine (2007), for example, posit that the extent of the search for authenticity is contingent upon an individual's life stage. The importance of authenticity increases in "transformation stages" (p. 20) in which individuals examine their identity and seek to uncover their true selves. Findings regarding the differential impact of authenticity cues embedded in brand advertisements also support that consumer responses to brands are context-dependent. Beverland and colleagues (2008) proposed that literal authenticity "was critical to consumers seeking to make quick in situ judgments about the genuineness of a product" and that it "helped consumers gain control over their decisions" (p. 9). The level of self-authentication through brands may also depend on consumer individual difference variables. Recent findings suggest that brand choice likelihood for authentic brands increased for consumers with high levels of self-authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

In sum, although brand authenticity generally influences consumer responses to brands in a positive manner (Illicic and Webster, 2011; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Morhart *et al.*, 2015), situational or individual difference factors likely have an impact on this relation. Consistent with the view that a target that responds to an individual's need creates strong attachments (Hazan and Shaver, 1994; La Guardia *et al.*, 2000), this research proposes that by helping consumers satisfy

important needs (i.e., the need to belong, the need to express one's authentic self), brand authenticity results in higher levels of emotional brand attachment when such needs are situationally activated.

The Need to Belong and Brand Engagement in Self-Concept

The need to belong is a fundamental human motive (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Gardner *et al.*, 2000; Leary *et al.*, 1995). As a basic drive to connect with others, it motivates human beings to form meaningful and enduring relationships, and to maintain acceptable levels of belongingness (Gardner *et al.*, 2000; Loveland *et al.*, 2010). The literature supports the role of authentic brands in helping consumers satisfy the need to belong: The need for connection is an important self-authentication goal that authentic brands and experiences contribute to (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Authentic brands remain relevant through time (Gilmore and Pine, 2007), induce connections across generations (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Gilmore and Pine, 2007), and provide consumers with a sense of continuity and common identification (Napoli *et al.*, 2014).

The attachment literature suggests that attachment to a target increases when it fulfills a salient need (La Guardia *et al.*, 2000). Strong attachments are associated with feelings of connection, affection, love, and passion (Bowlby, 1969; Feeney and Noller, 1996; Fehr and Russell, 1991). Emotional brand attachment is thus defined as the bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand and is characterized by feelings of affection, passion, and connection (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Although consumers interact with many brands, they develop strong attachment with only a few. Due to an authentic brand's ability to satisfy consumers' connection goals (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), we expect that emotional brand attachment to an authentic brand strengthens in situations in which consumers experience a heightened need to belong.

An individual difference variable that likely influences to what extent consumers use brands to meet their need to belong is brand engagement in self-concept (BESC). BESC captures the general strength of consumers' engagement with brands and their inclination to use brands to define their identity (Sprott *et al.*, 2009). Because brands are cognitively more accessible and serve a meaningful relationship function for consumers with high BESC (Sprott *et al.*, 2009), such consumers are more likely to draw on authentic brands to compensate for a perceived lack of authentic interpersonal relationships. In other words, consumers with high (vs. low) BESC likely perceive authentic brands as a viable means to establish a sense of belonging.

In this research, consumers' need to belong is made salient through the manipulation of social exclusion. Social exclusion activates consumers' need to belong and motivates social reconnections attempts (Mead *et al.*, 2011; Loveland *et al.*, 2010). It is expected that consumers with high BESC are particularly sensitive to an authentic brand's potential in restoring their sense of belonging to acceptable levels when they feel excluded. As a result, they will develop greater emotional brand attachment to an authentic (vs. inauthentic) brand. Such an effect is not likely for consumers with a low level of BESC and for situations of social inclusion (i.e., need to belong is not activated).

H1: In a situation of social exclusion, consumers with high brand engagement in self-concept will express higher emotional brand attachment towards an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand).

The Need to Express the Authentic Self and Enduring Personal Authenticity

The search and expression of one's authentic self is a central human motivation (Harter, 2002; Wood *et al.*, 2008). Authentic brands are instrumental in helping consumers express their

authentic self, due to their symbolic nature and their potential for identity construction (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Through the consumption of authentic brands, consumers define their own (and authentic) identity (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), express their morals and principles (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), and find ways to be true to themselves (Arnould and Price, 2000).

Consumers' need to express their true self should be heightened when they experience situations that evoke feelings of inauthenticity. In this research, the need to express one's authentic self is activated by experimental manipulation of feelings of self-inauthenticity. Such feelings are expected to increase consumers' motivation to express their authentic self (Peloza *et al.*, 2013; Thibodeau and Aronson, 1992). In line with the attachment literature (La Guardia *et al.*, 2000), to the extent that authentic brands contribute to meet consumers' heightened need to express their authentic self, they engender higher levels of emotional brand attachment.

The restoration of the authentic self in a situation that induces self-inauthenticity should be particularly pressing for consumers for whom being authentic is particularly relevant. Personal authenticity is an enduring trait which involves being true to oneself in most situations and living in accordance with one's values and beliefs (Wood *et al.*, 2008). A person who is self-authentic should put more emphasis on maintaining self-authenticity in everyday life and engage more in authenticating acts through consumption (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Consumers with high levels of personal authenticity should thus be particularly sensitive towards the ability of authentic brands to satisfy their need to express their true self when feelings of self-inauthenticity arise.

In sum, authentic (vs. non-authentic) brands are expected to provide the greatest benefit in terms of fulfilling the need to express one's authentic self among consumers with high levels of personal authenticity who experience situationally induced feelings of self-inauthenticity. The brand's ability to contribute to need fulfillment should result in increased emotional brand

attachment. This effect should not arise for consumers with low levels of enduring personal authenticity or in a context of situationally induced self-authenticity.

H2: In situations of self-inauthenticity, consumers with higher levels of personal authenticity will express higher emotional brand attachment towards an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand).

Overview of the Method and Pretest

The hypotheses were tested in two experiments in which brand authenticity was manipulated by means of brand advertisements of a fictitious brand of sports apparel. This research context (i.e., brand advertisement including authenticity cues) was based on prior literature, which suggests that consumers use brand-related cues communicated in advertisements to make authenticity judgements (Beverland *et al.*, 2008).¹ A pretest examined the effectiveness of the brand authenticity manipulation.

Brand Authenticity Manipulations

Brand selection. Brand authenticity manipulations consisted of advertisements for a fictitious brand of sports apparel. Sports apparel served as the focal product category in the experiments because it is relevant to many consumers, gender neutral, and has been employed in prior research (Sung and Kim, 2010). Brands in this category are characterized by their identity-related positioning and their ability to create strong attachments among consumers (Ramaswamy, 2008). In line with prior brand authenticity research that has employed fictitious brands (Morhart *et al.*, 2015), use of a fictitious brand allowed for the manipulation of participants' brand authenticity perceptions while eliminating potential confounds arising from prior exposure to brand

communications or direct experience with the brand. It also allowed for the presentation of advertisements that were identical in terms of design, amount, and nature of the information provided.

Stimuli. This research relied on a recent definition and operationalization of brand authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2015) that includes four dimensions: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. These dimensions were translated into high versus low levels of authenticity-related brand characteristics featured in the advertisements. Figure 1 illustrates the brand authenticity manipulations used in this research.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Sample, procedures, and measures. Fifty undergraduate students (45.9% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 23.9$ years) participated in an online pretest in exchange for a moderate amount of course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition (authentic brand, non-authentic brand). Each participant viewed the advertisement for the fictitious sports apparel brand and rated the advertised brand in terms of perceived brand authenticity (15 items capturing the four dimensions, e.g., “A brand with a history”; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Additional measures were included to ascertain that the advertisements did not differ in terms of brand attitude (three items, e.g., unfavourable/favourable; $\alpha = .94$; Nan and Heo, 2007), brand familiarity (not at all familiar/very familiar), and abstractness of the information presented (three items, e.g., general/specific; $\alpha = .87$; Aggarwal and Law, 2005).

Results. The brand featured in the advertisement suggesting higher levels of brand authenticity (hereinafter referred to as authentic brand) was perceived as more authentic on all dimensions than the brand featured in the advertisement indicating lower levels of brand authenticity

(hereinafter referred to as non-authentic brand) (continuity: $M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.81$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 2.82$, $t(48) = 6.06$, $p < .01$; credibility: $M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.80$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 4.04$, $t(48) = 2.02$, $p < .05$; integrity: $M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.52$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.46$, $t(48) = 2.98$, $p < .01$; symbolism: $M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.26$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.32$, $t(48) = 2.31$, $p < .05$). The two brands did not differ in terms of brand attitude, familiarity, and abstractness of the information (all $ps > .18$). The manipulations were thus used to test the hypotheses. Study 1 examines the moderating roles of social exclusion and brand engagement in self-concept (H1), and Study 2 investigates the moderating role of situational inauthenticity and personal authenticity (H2) on emotional brand attachment towards an authentic (non-authentic) brand.

Study 1: Social Exclusion and Brand-Engagement in Self-Concept

Method

Sample, procedures, and measures. One hundred and fourteen adult consumers (61.4% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 51.6$ years) recruited from a North American consumer panel participated in an online study. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition in a 2 (social exclusion condition: exclusion, inclusion) \times 2 (brand: authentic, non-authentic) between-participants design. Participants in the social exclusion condition wrote about a time they felt excluded by others, whereas participants in the social inclusion condition wrote about a time they felt accepted by others (Maner *et al.*, 2007). Following a manipulation check (rejected/accepted, alone/included; Maner *et al.*, 2007), participants saw the brand authenticity manipulation, and indicated their level of emotional brand attachment towards the brand. Emotional brand attachment refers to a strong emotional connection between a consumer and a brand and is composed of three dimensions: affection, passion, and connection. Affection refers to warm

feelings consumers have towards a brand (friendly, affectionate, loved, peaceful; $\alpha = .92$). Passion captures intense feelings that can be felt in relation to a brand (passionate, captivated, delighted; $\alpha = .92$). Connection describes the feeling of being joined with a brand (connected, bonded, attached, $\alpha = .97$; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Participants also completed a mood measure (three items, e.g., upset/joyful; $\alpha = .94$; Wan and Rucker, 2013).

In addition to a brand authenticity manipulation check (not authentic at all/very authentic), several measures were included to allow for statistical control for potential confounds of the brand authenticity manipulation. These measures comprised brand attitude (three items, $\alpha = .96$; Nan and Heo, 2007), brand quality (three items, $\alpha = .95$; Frazier and Lassar, 1996), emotional and informational tone of the advertisement (emotional tone: four items, $\alpha = .96$; informational tone: four items, $\alpha = .91$; Jourdan, 1999), advertisement believability, and appeal. Participants then completed the BESC scale (eight items, $\alpha = .95$; Sprott *et al.*, 2009) and demographic questions (sex, age).

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA with one fixed factor (social exclusion/inclusion condition) and feeling of exclusion (average of rejected/accepted, alone/included) as the dependent variable, confirmed the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation ($F(1,112) = 60.62, p < .001$): Participants in the exclusion condition felt more excluded than participants in the inclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 2.81, M_{\text{inclusion}} = 5.27, t(112) = -7.79, p < .001$). The manipulation affected mood. Participants in the exclusion condition reported a more negative mood than participants in the inclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 4.18, M_{\text{inclusion}} = 5.23, t(112) = -3.43, p < .01$). The brand featured in the advertisement emphasizing authenticity was perceived as more authentic than the brand featured on the advertisement suggesting lower levels of authenticity ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.49, M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.90, t(112) = 1.95, p = .05$).

Control variables. The two advertisements induced similar levels of brand attitude ($p = .21$), brand quality ($p = .50$), informational tone of the ad ($p = .62$), emotional tone of the ad ($p = .64$), believability ($p = .50$), and appeal ($p = .56$).

Discriminant validity tests. The inclusion of potentially related constructs called for a series of discriminant validity tests between (a) emotional brand attachment dimensions (affection, connection, passion) and brand attitude, (b) emotional brand attachment dimensions (affection, connection, passion) and brand quality, (c) brand authenticity and brand attitude, (d) brand authenticity and brand quality, and (e) the three emotional brand attachment dimensions (affection, connection, passion). The confidence intervals around the correlations between the constructs did not include $|\pm 1|$, supporting discriminant validity for all comparisons (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Model comparisons in which the covariance between the constructs was constrained to 1 supported discriminant validity in that the constrained models reduced fit significantly in all cases. When average variance extracted was compared with the squared correlation between each pair of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), the results supported discriminant validity for all construct pairs with the exception of affection and passion ($AVE_{\text{affection}} (.76) < r^2 (.87)$ and $AVE_{\text{passion}} (.86) < r^2 (.87)$) and affection and connection ($AVE_{\text{affection}} (.76) < r^2 (.83)$). Because two of the three discriminant validity criteria were met, these results were judged satisfactory.

Results

Participants were classified in two groups (median split) based on their level of BESC ($M_{\text{low}} = 1.85$, $M_{\text{high}} = 4.66$, $t(112) = -18.56$, $p < .001$).² A MANOVA with three factors (exclusion manipulation: exclusion/inclusion, brand: authentic/non-authentic, BESC: low/high), affection, passion, and connection as the dependent variables, and mood as a covariate, indicated a

significant three-way interaction ($F(3,103) = 3.17, p < .01$), a significant main effect of BESC ($F(3,103) = 19.30, p < .001$), and a significant main effect of mood ($F(3,103) = 6.76, p < .01$).

At the univariate level, the three-way interaction of exclusion manipulation, brand, and BESC was marginally significant with regard to passion ($F(1,105) = 3.65, p = .059$) and connection ($F(1,105) = 3.69, p = .057$), but not affection ($p = .42$). BESC ($ps < .001$) and mood ($ps < .001$) had a significant effect on affection, passion, and connection.

Passion. To examine the three-way interaction between exclusion manipulation, brand, and BESC, passion was first analyzed for consumers with low versus high levels of BESC. For low BESC, an ANOVA with two factors (exclusion manipulation and brand), passion as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed no significant effects ($ps > .10$). For high levels of BESC, an ANOVA with two factors (exclusion manipulation and brand), passion as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1,55) = 4.64, p < .05$) and a significant main effect of mood ($F(1,55) = 11.13, p < .01$). Planned comparisons conducted to test H1 indicate that participants with high levels of BESC in a context of exclusion expressed more passion towards the authentic brand, compared to the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.47, M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.31, t(32) = 2.19, p < .05$). Furthermore, participants with high BESC in a context of inclusion expressed similar levels of passion towards the authentic and the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 3.81, M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 4.45, t(24) = -.97, p = .34$).

Connection. For low levels of BESC, an ANOVA with two factors (exclusion manipulation and brand), connection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed no significant effects ($ps > .09$). For high levels of BESC, an ANOVA with two factors (exclusion manipulation and advertisement), connection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1,55) = 4.10, p < .05$) and a significant main effect of mood ($F(1,55) = 9.18, p < .01$). Planned contrasts show that participants with high levels of

BESC in a context of exclusion expressed marginally more connection towards the authentic brand, compared to the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.15$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.26$, $t(32) = 1.81$, $p = .07$). Furthermore, participants with high levels of BESC in a context of inclusion expressed similar levels of connection towards the authentic and the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 3.37$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 4.25$, $t(24) = -1.16$, $p = .26$).

Discussion

In support of H1, consumers with high levels of brand engagement in self-concept expressed more emotional brand attachment (passion and connection) towards an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand) in a situation of social exclusion. Figure 2 illustrates the findings for consumers with high levels of brand engagement in self-concept.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Study 2: Situational Self-Inauthenticity and Personal Self-Authenticity

Method

Sample, procedures, and measures. One hundred and five adult consumers (61.9% female, average age: 50.5 years) from a North American consumers panel participated in an online study. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (situational self-inauthenticity condition: self-inauthenticity, self-authenticity) \times 2 (brand: authentic, non-authentic) between-participants design. Participants in the situational self-inauthenticity condition wrote about a time when they felt inauthentic (i.e., not true to themselves; Kifer *et al.*, 2013). Participants in the situational self-authenticity condition wrote about a time they felt authentic (i.e., true to

themselves). As a manipulation check, participants indicated how authentic they felt (inauthentic/authentic, not at all like myself/very much like myself). The exposure to the brand pretested advertisement followed. Participants indicated their emotional brand attachment (affection: $\alpha = .92$; passion: $\alpha = .93$; connection: $\alpha = .94$; Thomson *et al.*, 2005) towards the brand featured in the advertisement, and reported their mood ($\alpha = .94$; Wan and Rucker, 2013).

Participants then completed the following manipulation checks and control measures: brand authenticity (not authentic at all/very authentic), brand attitude ($\alpha = .97$; Nan and Heo, 2007), brand quality ($\alpha = .95$; Frazier and Lassar, 1996), emotional and informational tone of the advertisement (both $\alpha = .92$; Jourdan, 1999), advertisement believability, and appeal. Lastly, participants completed the personal authenticity scale (12 items, $\alpha = .88$; Wood *et al.*, 2008), which captures authenticity as an enduring trait, and demographic questions.

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA with one fixed factor (situational self-inauthenticity condition: self-inauthenticity/self-authenticity) and feeling of self-authenticity (average of inauthentic/authentic, not at all like myself/very much like myself) as the dependent variable, confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation ($F(1,103) = 31.23, p < .001$): Participants in the self-inauthenticity condition felt more inauthentic than participants in the self-authenticity condition ($M_{\text{self-inauthenticity}} = 3.90, M_{\text{self-authenticity}} = 5.76, t(103) = -5.59, p < .001$). To ensure that the situationally induced feelings of (in)authenticity did not influence the measure of authenticity as an enduring trait administered later on in the study (i.e., personal authenticity; Wood *et al.*, 2008), levels of personal authenticity were compared across the self-inauthenticity and self-authenticity conditions. Results indicate that personal authenticity did not differ between the conditions ($p = .46$). The manipulation affected mood. Participants in the situational self-inauthenticity condition reported a more negative mood compared to participants in the

situational self-authenticity condition ($M_{\text{self-inauthenticity}} = 4.24$, $M_{\text{self-authenticity}} = 4.88$, $t(103) = -2.27$, $p < .05$). Regarding the brand-related manipulations, the brand presented in the advertisement inducing higher (vs. lower) levels of authenticity was indeed perceived as more authentic ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.38$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.81$, $t(103) = 1.78$, $p = .06$).

Control variables. The two advertisements evoked similar levels of brand attitude ($p = .30$), brand quality ($p = .28$), informational ($p = .79$) and emotional tone of the ad ($p = .51$), as well as believability ($p = .78$), and appeal ($p = .30$).

Discriminant validity tests. Discriminant validity was tested using confidence intervals around covariances between constructs (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988), χ^2 difference tests, and comparisons between average variance extracted and squared correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Results supported discriminant validity for all construct pairs, except for affection and passion, which did not meet the Fornell-Larcker criterion ($AVE_{\text{affection}} (.75) < r^2 (.82)$ and $AVE_{\text{passion}} (.79) < r^2 (.82)$). Overall, measures showed sufficient discriminant validity.

Results

Participants were classified in two groups (median split) based on their level of personal authenticity ($M_{\text{low}} = 4.88$, $M_{\text{high}} = 6.40$, $t(103) = -14.74$, $p < .001$).³ A MANOVA with three factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition: self-inauthenticity/self-authenticity, brand: authentic/non-authentic, personal authenticity: low/high), affection, passion, and connection as the dependent variables, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant three-way interaction ($F(3,94) = 3.07$, $p < .05$) and a significant two-way interaction between brand and personal authenticity ($F(3,94) = 2.98$, $p < .05$).

At the univariate level, the interaction between self-inauthenticity manipulation, advertisement, and personal authenticity was significant on affection ($F(1,96) = 4.36, p < .05$), connection ($F(1,96) = 5.11, p < .05$), and passion ($F(1,96) = 7.95, p < .01$), and the two-way interaction between brand and personal authenticity was significant on connection ($F(1,96) = 5.91, p < .05$). To understand the three-way interaction between situational self-inauthenticity condition, brand, and personal authenticity, levels of affection, passion, and connection were analyzed for consumers with low versus high personal authenticity.

Passion. For consumers with lower levels of personal authenticity, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), passion as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed no significant effects ($ps > .18$). For high levels of personal authenticity, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), passion as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1,48) = 6.84, p < .05$). Planned comparisons show that participants with high levels of personal authenticity in a context of self-inauthenticity expressed more passion towards the authentic brand, compared to the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.00, M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 2.27, t(21) = 2.89, p < .01$). Furthermore, participants with high level of personal authenticity in a context of self-authenticity expressed similar levels of passion towards the authentic and the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 2.55, M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.17, t(28) = -1.07, p = .29$).

Connection. For consumers with low levels of personal authenticity, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), connection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed no significant effects ($ps > .09$). For consumers with high levels of personal authenticity, however, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), connection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1,48) = 6.50, p < .05$), such that

participants with high levels of personal authenticity in a context of situational self-inauthenticity expressed more connection with the authentic brand, compared to the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 3.86$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 1.88$, $t(21) = 3.30$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, participants with high levels of personal authenticity in a context of self-authenticity expressed similar levels of connection with the authentic and the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 2.48$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 2.98$, $t(28) = -.79$, $p = .43$).

Affection. For consumers with low levels of personal authenticity, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), affection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed no significant effects ($ps > .12$). For consumers with high levels of personal authenticity, an ANOVA with two factors (situational self-inauthenticity condition and brand), affection as the dependent variable, and mood as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1,48) = 6.40$, $p < .05$). Planned comparisons indicated that participants with high levels of personal authenticity in a context of situational self-inauthenticity expressed more affection towards the authentic brand, compared to the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.08$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 2.90$, $t(21) = 2.28$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, participants with high personal authenticity in a context of situational self-authenticity expressed similar levels of affection towards the authentic and the non-authentic brand ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 2.96$, $M_{\text{non-authentic}} = 3.82$, $t(28) = -1.64$, $p = .11$).

Discussion

In line with H2, consumers with high levels of personal authenticity expressed more emotional brand attachment (passion, affection, connection) towards an authentic brand (compared to a non-authentic brand) in a situation of self-inauthenticity. These effects did not arise in situations of

self-authenticity and for consumers with lower levels of personal self-authenticity. Figure 3 illustrates the findings for consumers with high levels of personal authenticity.

Insert Figure 3 about here

General Discussion and Implications

Building on the emerging literature to consumer-brand connections (Morhart *et al.*, 2015), this research investigated to what extent situational and individual difference factors influence emotional brand attachment to authentic brands. Two experiments tested whether the influence of brand authenticity on emotional brand attachment increases in a context of social exclusion for consumers with high brand engagement in self-concept (study 1; H1) and in a context of situational self-inauthenticity for consumers with high levels of enduring personal authenticity (study 2; H2).

Results support the predictions. In study 1, consumers with high brand engagement in self-concept expressed more passion and connection towards an authentic brand when they felt socially excluded. In study 2, consumers with high levels of personal authenticity expressed more affection, passion, and connection towards an authentic brand when they experienced feelings of inauthenticity. This suggests that high levels of brand authenticity result in particularly positive responses to the brand in situations in which consumers with high levels of brand engagement in self-concept draw on the brand to overcome feelings of social exclusion, and in situations in which consumers with high levels of personal authenticity rely on the brand to overcome contextually induced feelings of inauthenticity.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the authenticity literature in several ways. First—although research converges onto the conclusions that brand authenticity is valued by consumers (Beverland, 2006; Gilmore and Pine, 2007) and that it entails favourable responses (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014)—a more nuanced view of consumers’ responses toward authentic brands is still lacking. This research identifies moderators of the brand authenticity effect (i.e., situational and individual differences variables) and empirically supports that consumers’ need to self-authenticate through authentic brands is stronger in specific situations and for particular consumers (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Gilmore and Pine, 2007). This research thus contributes to the authenticity literature by providing a better understanding of brand authenticity effects and self-authentication strategies discussed in previous research (Ilicic and Webster, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Relatedly, the finding that specific consumer segments value differently the potential of authentic brands in particular situations supports the constructivist view on authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999)—which argues that authenticity is individually and socially constructed— and therefore contributes to the constructivist authenticity literature.

Second, this research elucidates the role of brand authenticity in motivation-based consumption. The authenticity literature argues that the search for authenticity in consumption is driven by individual goals and motivations (Arnould and Price, 2000; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Golomb, 1995). This research supports this view and shows that authentic brands help consumers satisfy contextually evoked or individual-level motivations. In experimentally activating consumers’ need to belong and express the authentic self, this research is the first to test the influence of specific motivations on consumer responses to authentic brands. It thereby addresses calls for research into understanding of the benefits consumers derive through authentic consumption experiences (Napoli *et al.*’s 2014). In sum, in linking consumers’ need to belong

and need for self-expression to positive responses to authentic brands, this research provides evidence for the role of authenticity in consumers' search for meaning through consumption (Arnould and Price, 2000). Relatedly, this research contributes to the literature about consumers' use of brands for identity construction (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Thomson, 2005) by revealing the importance of authenticity in generating the feeling of being connected to others and true to oneself. Whereas research has demonstrated that brands are tools for constructing one's individual and social identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2005), the current findings reveal that the brand's authenticity plays a role in identity construction.

This research also contributes to the attachment literature. Although emotional brand attachment is theoretically and managerially relevant, research on its antecedents remains scarce (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Thomson *et al.* (2005) specifically called for additional work on the boundary conditions of emotional brand attachment, including "the types of brands and purchase situations most germane to emotional attachment" (p. 89). This research contributes to this quest by establishing that authentic brands are more likely to elicit strong attachments. It also provides insight into the creation of such attachments by highlighting authentic brands' ability to fulfill individual motivations. In doing so, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of how and when emotional brand attachment arises. This contribution is important considering that brand attachment is associated with brand profitability and customer lifetime value (Thomson *et al.*, 2005).

This research extends well documented findings—namely that an individual's level of attachment towards a target depends on the target's ability to fulfill a need (La Guardia *et al.*, 2000)—from the psychology literature into a consumer-brand context. It increases current understanding of relationships between consumers and brands by highlighting the role of brand authenticity in creating emotional bonds between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1988). In sum,

this research adds to current knowledge regarding the factors that create emotional brand attachment.

Managerial Implications

This research indicates that authentic brands that make consumers feel connected and true to themselves are likely to generate superior relationships in the form of strong emotional brand attachment. This suggests that managers of authentic brands can benefit from highlighting how their brand can help satisfy these motivations. This could be implemented in brand communications. First, to emphasize the authentic brand's ability to fulfill consumers' need to belong, brand communication might focus on relational elements linking the authentic brand and its consumers. For example, brand communications might present consumers that are part of a group, or focus on the brand's shared identity through country-of-origin cues (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2007). Coca-Cola and its "Share a Coke" campaign highlights the role of the brand in creating connections between consumers (i.e., Coke should be shared with a friend). In doing so, the brand might appeal to consumers who have a strong need to belong and seize the opportunity to become even more relevant for consumers who feel temporarily excluded.

Second, to emphasize the authentic brand's ability to fulfill consumers' need to express their authentic self, brand communications might accentuate the brand's role as a resource that consumers can use to define who they are. For instance, emphasis on the brand's sincere and authentic values can help create a meaningful brand image consumers can relate to. A successful example of such an approach is Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty," which resonates with consumers looking to re-connect with their authentic self. Such brand communication might be particularly important for individuals who temporarily experience feelings of self-inauthenticity.

Limitations and Future Research

This research found that consumers feeling excluded and inauthentic expressed higher emotional attachment towards an authentic brand than a non-authentic brand. Future research might further explore the mechanism underlying these effects. In study 1, although it was hypothesized that social exclusion activates consumers' need to belong and that this need is central in explaining consumers' attachment towards authentic brands, the activation of the need to belong was not explicitly measured. Future research could measure the need to belong following the exclusion manipulation (as in Loveland *et al.*, 2010) and examine its mediating role.

In study 2, it was proposed that in contexts of situationally induced self-inauthenticity, authentic brands re-connect consumers with their true self. To shed light on this process, future research could examine the mediating role of consumers' self-brand connection with the authentic brand (Escalas and Bettman, 2005) in more detail. As self-brand connection taps into the ability of a brand to connect with consumers' identity, values, and goals, consumers who feel inauthentic and aim to restore an authentic sense of self might experience an increased connection to the brand.

Some limitations related to the research design need to be acknowledged. First, only one product category (sports apparel) was used across the studies. Although this product category was selected based on the literature, future research on the generalizability of the current results to other product and service categories would be beneficial.

On a related note, a potential difference between symbolic and utilitarian product categories (Aaker, 1997; Park *et al.*, 1986) might be theoretically interesting in the exploration of authenticity effects within a motivation-based framework. For example, while symbolic categories allow consumers to connect to others through authentic brand consumption, the

potential of utilitarian product categories to do the same may be worth exploring. Overall, additional evidence is needed across different consumption contexts.

In addition, although the current research used a fictitious brand to manipulate brand authenticity experimentally, future studies might consider real brands that vary in terms of their perceived authenticity. Such an approach would be more similar to previous studies investigating authenticity (Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Despite the concerns in terms of consumers' prior attitude towards the brands, a consideration of real brands and their potential to fulfill individual motivations would increase the external validity of this research.

Finally, extending consumption situations under investigations into real-world contexts is promising. For example, examining authentic brand purchases or consumption quantities in different situations (e.g., exclusion by a salesperson) would be informative. Behavioral measures might also offer concrete managerial insights. Overall, the current research opened further avenues for research into the role of individual motivations and individual difference variables in the consumption of authentic brands.

Footnotes

1. It is important to acknowledge that this manipulation of brand authenticity is based on the constructivist perspective regarding authenticity (e.g., Grayson and Martinec, 2004), which posits that a brand is considered authentic if it successfully positions itself as an authentic brand in consumers' minds. This view implies that perceptions of authenticity (rather than the objective reality of authenticity) are at the core of brand authenticity. Accordingly, authenticity perceptions can be successfully induced by means of fictitious advertisements, as it is the case here (Beverland *et al.*, 2008)—although this approach may be associated with low levels of objective authenticity (and thus higher levels of artificiality).
2. In a moderated regression analysis, the pattern of results for Study 1 was consistent. For ease of explication and illustration of the three-way interaction results for the three dimensions of emotional brand attachment, the presentation of findings is based on median-split data.
3. In a moderated regression analysis, the pattern of results for Study 2 was consistent. For ease of explication and illustration of the three-way interaction results for the three dimensions of emotional brand attachment, the presentation of findings is based on median-split data.

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Figure 1

Studies 1 and 2: Manipulations of brand authenticity

A. Authentic brand



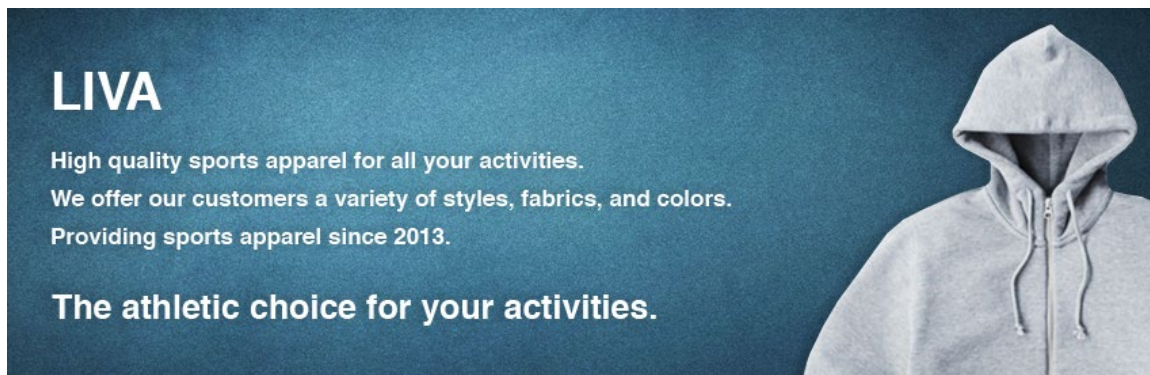
LIVA

High quality sports apparel that reflects who you are.
We are passionate about our products and care about our customers.
Providing sports apparel since 1950.

The authentic choice you can count on.



B. Non-authentic brand



LIVA

High quality sports apparel for all your activities.
We offer our customers a variety of styles, fabrics, and colors.
Providing sports apparel since 2013.

The athletic choice for your activities.


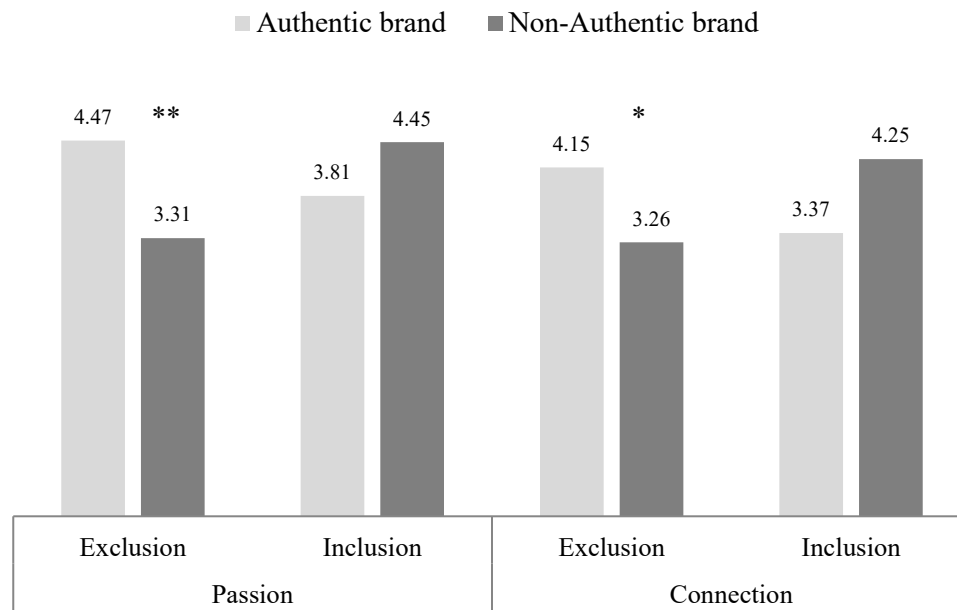


Figure 2

Study 1: Consumers with high brand engagement in self-concept experiencing social exclusion show higher levels of passion and connection with an authentic (vs. inauthentic) brand (H1)

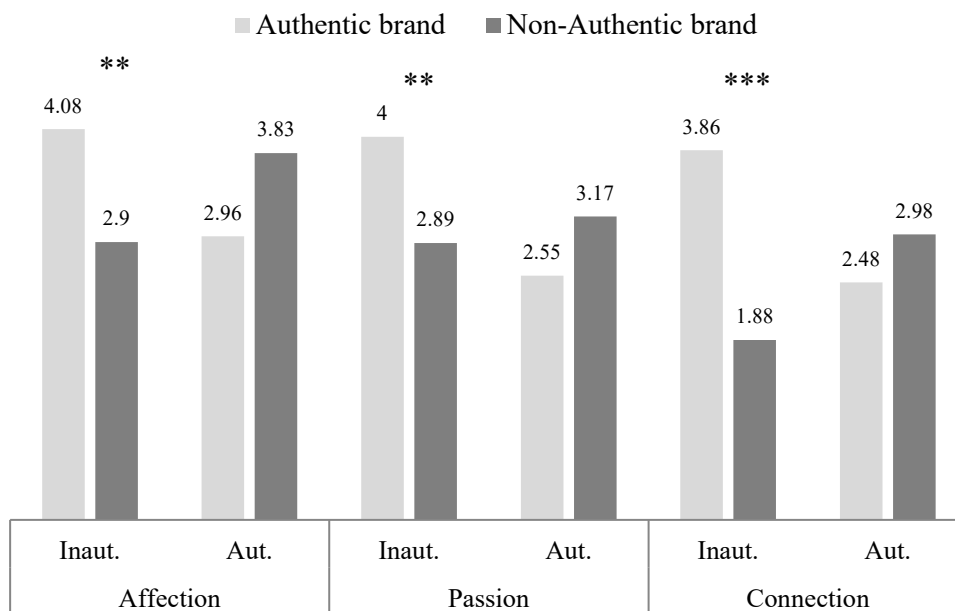


** Difference significant at the .05 level.

* Difference marginally significant (.10 level).

Figure 3

Study 2: Consumers with high personal authenticity experiencing situationally induced self-inauthenticity show higher levels of affection, passion, and connection with an authentic (vs. non-authentic) brand (H2)



** Difference significant at the .05 level.

*** Difference significant at the .01 level.