Authenticity in Music Performance: Evidence from the Singer-Songwriter Community

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Abstract

Experiencing music provides a unique lens to study identity. The alienation resulting from increased technological mediation in both music production and consumption might drive consumption (Potter 2010), hence authenticity may be an appealing positioning strategy for marketers. Singer-songwriters, for example, write and perform their own music with minimal technological interference. This represents a direct connection with the musician that we characterize as more historically authentic (Thornton 1996), however this characterization is not universal. In this paper, I seek to gather insight into the myriad expressions of authenticity within the music consumption environment by detailing a study of performance musicians.

Music has been studied within consumer research and marketing from its role in films Holbrook 2008, Suisman 2009), advertising (Scott 1990), and retail atmospherics (Bradshaw & Holbrook 2008, Kellaris & Kent 1993, Kotler 1973/1974, Milliman 1986). Music is also consumed in its live form (Deighton 1992) and we can see the production of live music as a consumption activity (Bradshaw, Sherlock, & McDonagh 2003, Kerrigan, O'Reilly, & Lehn 2009).

Authenticity has been defined as perceived genuineness (Rose & Wood 2005) that may be grounded in a relationship to particularly meaningful past events (Grayson & Shulman 2000). Meaning is often imbued in objects (Grayson & Shulman 2000, Hill 1991) and authenticity arises when these cultural resources are used in the production of self-identity (Beverland & Farrelly 2010, Hesmondhalgh 2008, Holt 2002). Authenticity is perhaps more easily understood by its absence (Hartman 2002, Potter 2010), such as in cases of excessive commercialization (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989, Kozinets 2002), mass production (Rose & Wood 2005), or authenticity that appears “staged” (Murray 2002). Positioning by marketers that is based on authenticity may make consumers doubt the authenticity, however positioning a brand as “faux” may actually increase its perceived authenticity, for instance, Disneyworld (Gilmore & Pine 2007). Some authors have pointed to the ability of a commercial transaction to produce authenticity (Arnould & Price 1993,

Authenticity is sometimes used to show rejection of dominant cultures and classes, such as when Haitian music is used by middle class listeners as a “weapon in the struggle against a Europhile elite” (Averill 1989, p. 219), and this oppositional signaling can even occur after death (Bonsu & Belk 2003). Consumers may even infer authenticity in situations where the original portrayal was characterized by “flatness, routinization, and commodification” (Rose & Wood 2005, p. 295).

The study uses qualitative interpretive methodology, including participant observation and depth interviews with 16 musicians and two non-musician members of the music community. Data were analyzed using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander 1994, Thompson 1997), which resulted in narrative summaries of each informant and a cross-informant coding based on emergent themes.

Three expressions of authenticity emerged in the study. Nostalgic authenticity was grounded in some connection to a previous era, often using equipment of that era to signal authenticity. For example, a nostalgic connection to a historic place or time may result in nostalgic authenticity. Originality authenticity was grounded in the new and creative, suggesting a new construction or contribution. For singer-songwriters, originality authenticity resulted from a new lyric or an inventive chord progression. Finally, iconic authenticity was grounded in the resemblance to a band, musician, or performance. The best performance, from an iconic authenticity perspective mimics the original artist’s album performance. That authenticity is malleable is supported by the potential for these categories to overlap.

Implications of the study for marketing strategy suggest that consumers may use different sources to infer the authentic, suggesting that marketers have multiple paths to achieve this positioning. Marketers may focus on the nostalgia of the brand, company, or product to achieve nostalgic authenticity. Originality suggests the introduction of a new (and unique) product or product category. And iconicity may play a part in the success of me-too brands or counterfeit products.

References:


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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: The increased understanding of consumer’s expectations of authenticity in products and services will allow marketers to achieve a superior competitive position in order to better meet these consumer needs.

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