

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

Jon Littlefield, jlittlefield@daltonstate.edu

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,

Peñaloza 2000, 2001) and authenticity may serve as a marker of status (Schouten & McAlexander 1995, Belk & Costa 2001).

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:

- Arnould, E.J., & Price, L.L. (1993) River Magic: Extraordinary Experience and the Extended Service Encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 20(June). p. 24-45.
- Averill, G. (1989) Haitian Dance Bands, 1915-1970: Class, Race, and Authenticity. *Latin American Music Review*. 10(2). p. 203-235.

- Belk, R.W., & Costa, J.A. (1998) The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 25(December). p. 218-240.
- Belk, R.W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry, J.F., Jr. (1989) The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 16(June). p. 1-38.
- Beverland, Michael B., & Francis J. Farrelly (2010) The Quest for Authenticity in Consumption: Consumers' Purposive Choice of Authentic Cues to Shape Experienced Outcomes. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 36 (February). p. 838-856.
- Bonsu, S.K., & Belk, R.W. (2003) Do Not Go Cheaply into that Good Night: Death-Ritual Consumption in Asante, Ghana. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 30(June). p. 41-55.
- Bradshaw, A., & Holbrook, M.B. (2008) Must We Have Muzak Wherever We Go? A Critical Consideration of the Consumer Culture. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. 11(March). p. 25-43.
- Bradshaw, A., Sherlock, R., & McDonagh, P. (2003) On the Methods of Researching Music in Everyday Life: Assessing the Musician as Producer of Commercialized Music, in *European Advances in Consumer Research*. 6 (ed. Darach Turley and Stephen Brown). Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research. p. 193-198.
- Deighton, J. (1992) The Consumption of Performance. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 19(December). p. 362-372.
- Gilmore, J.H. & Pine, B.J., II (2007) *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Grayson, K., & Shulman, D. (2000) Indexicality and the Verification Function of Irreplaceable Possessions: A Semiotic Analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 27(June). p. 17-30.
- Hartman, G. (2002) *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2008) Towards a Critical Understanding of Music, Emotion and Self-identity. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. 11(December). p. 329-343.
- Hill, R.P. (1991) Homeless Women, Special Possessions, and the Meaning of 'Home': An Ethnographic Case Study. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 18(December). p. 298-310.

Holbrook, M.B. (2008) Music Meanings in Movies: The Case of the Crime-plus-jazz Genre. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. 11(December). p. 307-327.

Holt, D.B. (2002) Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 29(June). p. 70-90.

Kellaris, J.J., & Kent, R.J. (1993) An Exploratory Investigation of Responses Elicited by Music Varying in Tempo, Tonality, and Texture. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 2(4). p. 381-401.

Kerrigan, F., O'Reilly, D., & Lehn, D. (2009) Producing and Consuming Arts: A Marketing Perspective. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. 12(3). p. 203-207.

Kotler, P. (1973/1974) Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool. *Journal of Retailing* 49(Winter). p. 40-64.

Kozinets, R.V. (2002) Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man. *Journal of Consumer Research* 29(June). p. 20-38.

Milliman, R.E. (1986) The Influence of Background Music on the Behavior of Restaurant Patrons. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 13(September). p. 286-289.

Murray, J.B. (2002) The Politics of Consumption: A Re-Inquiry on Thompson and Haytko's (1997) 'Speaking of Fashion.' *Journal of Consumer Research*. 29(December). p. 427-440.

Peñaloza, L. (2000) The Commodification of the American West: Marketers' Production of Cultural Meanings at the Trade Show. *Journal of Marketing* 64(4). p. 82-109.

Peñaloza, L. (2001) Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory and a Stock Show and Rodeo. *Journal of Consumer Research* 28(3). p. 369-398.

Potter, A. (2010) *The Authenticity Hoax: Why the Real Things we Seek Don't Make Us Happy*. New York: Harper Perrenial.

Rose, R.L., & Wood, S.L. (2005) Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television. *Journal of Consumer Research* 32(September). p. 284-296.

Schouten, J.W. & McAlexander, J.H. (1995) Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 22 (June). p. 43-

61.

Scott, L.M. (1990) Understanding Jingles and Needledrop: A Rhetorical Approach to Music in Advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 17(September). p. 223-236.

Suisman, D. (2009) *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thompson, C.J. (1997) Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*. 34(November). p. 438-455.

Thompson, C.J., Pollio, H.R., & Locander, W.B. (1994) The Spoken and the Unspoken: A Hermeneutic Approach to Understanding the Cultural Viewpoints That Underlie Consumers' Expressed Meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 21(December). p. 432-452.

Thompson, C.J., & Tambyah, S.K. (1999) Trying to Be Cosmopolitan. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 26(December). p. 214-241.

Thornton, S. (1996) *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Cultural Capital*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Keywords: *music, musician, authenticity, positioning*

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.

Author Information: Jon Littlefield is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Dalton State College. His research specializes in the application of Consumer Culture theory to recreational and leisure activities.

TRACK: Music, Arts, and Entertainment Marketing