Chapter 7

Authenticity in the Mirror of Consumer Memories, or Drinking Champagne in Russia

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ABSTRACT

By bringing together a product with a rich cultural history—champagne—and consumers of sparkling wine in Russia, the authors aim to advance the understanding of authenticity. The research objective is to use autobiographical histories to explore how consumers’ memories shape their perception of product authenticity. Ten in-depth interviews collected in Russia inform the study. The findings suggest that the generally accepted view of authenticity—that it relates to a positive engagement with the attributes of products and services—is limited. The authors show that a product such as champagne interacts regularly with the drinkers’ life stages and with key emotional events. When a product interweaves consumers’ personal histories and the history of their nation, that product has the potential to achieve authentic power – regardless of its quality.

INTRODUCTION

I don’t tell my husband: ‘Sasha, please go to the store and buy sparkling wine.’ I will still tell him to buy champagne. When the word disappears from the labels, maybe some woman will send her husband to the store to get some sparkling wine. At this point we have the memory and it will remain. My generation will have difficulty calling this bottle something else other than champagne. (Informant Lyudmila, 51 years old, Russia)

The quote that opens our article is a reflection of the complexity of the global marketplace, in which consumers have to navigate among new and old products, brands and labels. In addition, a contemporary consumer lives in a world of fakes, in which authentic goods have to compete with copies, counterfeits and look-alikes (Boyle,
2003; Wilcox, Kim & Sen, 2009). In this world, the word “authentic” sells products (Atwal & Williams, 2012), though the consumer-perceived meaning of the term has yet to be fully understood (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Our work intends to contribute to this understanding by bringing together concepts of authenticity and consumer autobiographical memories.

BACKGROUND: AUTHENTICITY AND CONSUMER MEMORY RESEARCH

Academic interest in “authenticity,” commonly defined as the quality of being true, real, or genuine, originated in the 1970s (MacCannell, 1973) and two overarching types of authenticity have since been proposed—objective and subjective (Beverland, 2006; Postrel, 2003). Both have come under various labels, such as existential (Wang, 1999), indexical and iconic (Grayson & Martinec 2004), literal, approximate or moral (Beverland, Lindgreen & Vink, 2008), exclusive (Gundlach & Neville, 2012), and staged (MacCannell, 1973). Objective authenticity is defined by the product’s factual characteristics such as a specific place of production, the physical attributes of the goods, or conformity with a pre-existing “classic” style or process used. Subjective authenticity is dependent on consumer perception of the genuine nature of the product or service and relates to the experience they undergo before, during and after consumption (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006).

Current research on authenticity aims to understand which cues communicate authenticity with greatest effect. Starting with objective cues, researchers ask whether these can be amplified in order to add a layer of subjectively perceived authenticity, such as in a study of the way that the champagne houses in France are turned into theaters of staged authenticity by the activity of the intermediaries who interpret the past and the way the wine is made (Kniazeva & Charters, 2011). Exploring subjective cues, the goal is to understand their influence on consumer minds and how they can be managed and even manipulated (Hede & Thyne, 2010; Llamas & Belk, 2011). A recent work examines food products which are evidently inauthentic in objective terms, yet which attempt to make consumers perceive them as authentic through the narratives offered on packaging (Kniazeva 2012).

Findings reported in the field of authenticity research in marketing suggest the prevailing power of emotional versus rational appeals for communicating authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005), the importance of engaging consumer imagination (Kniazeva 2011), and the need to downplay the commercial imperative (Beverland, 2006; Atwal and Williams 2012) in order to strengthen perceived authenticity.

Especially thought provoking are those studies that have uncovered human factors as an element of authenticity. For example, when Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008) discuss what they term a “moral” form of authenticity, the authors talk about the “passionate creators” of the products: if those creators are associated with the brand, it can resonate with consumers’ moral values and strengthen their subjective feeling of authenticity. Kladstrup and Kladstrup (2006) note that a personable tour guide at a champagne house can illuminate the “genuine” nature of a specific champagne which may help in its competition with thousands of other, equally authentic brands. The presence of a human factor may even mislead consumers because populating the product with real people in marketing communication adds a seemingly genuine identity to both products, which are apparently authentic and evidently inauthentic (Kniazeva, 2012).

In this study we also venture into the subjective, human side of authenticity and aim to examine how the human experience enhances the product’s perceived authenticity, but in order to extend existing studies, we take a different approach. Instead of focusing on the personification of the production methods or brand heritage, we center our inquiry
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